

Local Organizing Handles on the WTO

by Holly Pruett

Helen Waller is a third-generation farmer from Circle, Montana. In the 1980s she helped to organize the National Family Farm Coalition and served as its first president. Helen has also served as the chairperson of the Northern Plains Resource Council, a 27 year old, grassroots, Montana citizens group dedicated to land stewardship and preserving a sustainable system of family agriculture and the rural communities that depend on it.

Debra Harry is Northern Paiute, from Pyramid Lake, Nevada. She serves as the Executive Director of the Indigenous Peoples Council on Biocolonialism and is on the board of the Council for Responsible Genetics in Cambridge, MA. She received a three-year Kellogg Foundation leadership fellowship in 1994 to study the field of human genetic research and its implications for indigenous peoples.

Western States Center invited four leaders and organizers who were on the scene in Seattle to discuss how progressive groups in the Western States region are finding local organizing handles for the global issues represented by the World Trade Organization.

Q: What was your experience of November 30, 1999?

Nancy Haque: I worked against the WTO harder than I've ever worked on anything, and I organize a lot of demonstrations. But being part of the WTO was completely different. Personally, it was one of the most important days of my life. November 30, 1999 was this tremendous victory. I felt incredibly proud to be a part of it.

Barbara Dudley: As a member of the older generation there, it really was the first time since 1980 that I felt some optimism that we were actually going to be able to turn the juggernaut around. And it was because the young people were leading. The energy that was coming from the street into the forums and discussion groups was fabulous.

Helen Waller: I was just a little apprehensive before I left, not knowing exactly what to expect, but it was well worth going. One of the greatest highlights for me was to meet with production level farmers from all around the world. It was very encouraging and very heartening to see people from all around the world speaking with that one voice that says, "Food should not be treated as other commodities to buy and sell for the express purpose of profit."

Debra Harry: It was very exciting to see the numbers of people on the streets of Seattle with the common message that "Enough is enough. We have basic rights as human beings and this commercial-

ization needs to stop." To have been successful in completely upsetting the ministerial meeting was a sweet moment for us. But what we've done is delay; the question is not going to go away. At the same time we have a more aware public, which has been a part of the problem in the past.

Q: How can local "Davids" fight a global Goliath?

Nancy Haque: Sweatshop activism is a good example. Students are doing these sit-ins to get sweatshops out of their schools and thinking about the wages of people who work on their campus and the people who sweep the floors. It's an incredibly powerful shift in how people think about working people's issues and bring it home.



Helen Waller addresses anti-WTO rally

Western Organization of Resource Councils

Helen Waller: For the Resource Councils, grassroots organizing – continuing to keep our membership growing and strong and informed, educating ourselves and educating others – is the basis for every decision that we make. We have to put together the power to move things. If we look at what goes on locally, we can only be drawn to place the blame within our political system. We have to look at campaign finance reform because the reason that these things are happening on a global basis is because of politicians in Washington and their cozy relationship to multi-national corporations. Things can only be done if you have a membership-based educated group of people that can put pressure where it belongs.

Debra Harry: The first priority for tribal groups is one of self-defense to stop bio-piracy from taking place at the local level. The idea of a loss of national sovereignty, which is what a lot of countries are complaining about with WTO, is the issue that we have been struggling with for centuries since our first contact with Western civilization:

maintaining our rights to make decisions about our lives and about our future as people. So that's what the rest of the world is starting to wake up to now. Hey, what's it really like to be powerless? That's going to be the common bond that will bring us together in the long term. A lot of tribal groups are establishing local ordinances as part of their right to self-government that says there will be no patents allowed over life within our territories. Tribes have an opportunity to assert law based on a different principle, a principle of collective ownership. So we actually have a chance to demonstrate a model of collective resource management and protection that makes sense for the rest of the world.

Barbara Dudley: Another thing that that is quite doable is to go state by state in this country, as they have in India, declaring genetic engineering-free zones. We could pass something in Oregon, for example, that said we're not going to have genetically engineered crops grown here. And yes, that is WTO illegal and that's exactly the point. We also need to be working very hard to promote local agriculture in a way that calls attention to the need for food security right here in our own states.

Q: How strong are the "Teamsters and Turtles" and other alliances showcased in Seattle?

Nancy Haque: The alliance is very strong and very real. But it's really important to build those relationships before embarking on a project together when it's more theoretical and not real. It does mean something when an environmentalist goes and stands on the Teamsters picket line. That's how relationships get built — talking one-on-one, on the line.

Barbara Dudley: People are more open-minded and forgiving of each other than I've seen them in 30 years. This is a moment where we have a chance to make these lasting coalitions. But in my personal opinion, the thing that divides us most deeply is not



Fasso Luis Ramos

Nancy Haque and Barbara Dudley savor the memories

politics, but culture. The youth culture, the labor movement culture versus the earth first culture... Can we learn how to live with each other in a way that gets us to where we understand we have something to share politically? If the coalitions are going to be lasting coalitions, it's not going to be easy.

Debra Harry: There's definitely a lot of hope and promise to be built on. The common denominator that has brought all these groups together is oppression. To truly break a dynamic of oppression requires all of us to work in partnership on a basis of equality. The old patterns of paternalism, of speaking for other groups, need to change in order for there to be solid coalition building in the future.

Helen Waller: We are a prime example in our own organization that we don't have to agree on everything. If we agree on the principles of an issue that we believe deeply in, we can move on together. We don't have to waste time talking about the things we don't agree on. When the steelworkers were on strike, members of Northern Plains Resource Council went to Michigan and bought hamburger for people who couldn't afford meat at that time. Those are the kinds of things that bring us together in solidarity.

Q: What did the WTO protest show us about leadership?

Nancy Haque: It was really a victory for young people because we're the ones that shut it down. This new generation of activists has undergone trial by teargas. I was in jail for five days after the WTO; I was 25 and one of the oldest people in my cellblock.

Barbara Dudley has spent thirty years in key staff positions with a wide variety of social justice organizations including Assistant Director for Strategic Campaigns, AFL-CIO; Executive Director of Greenpeace USA; Executive Director of the Veatch Program; and President and Executive Director of the National Lawyers Guild.

Nancy Haque is an organizer with Portland Jobs with Justice. She works on international solidarity issues and global economic issues including the fight against sweatshops and the WTO. She has also worked on the Portland Living Wage campaign.

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If we want to do this for our lifetimes, we want to be sustained in every part of our lives. That was part of the reason why it was such a beautiful action; creating art and making murals and bringing puppets and music and drums, and dancing and just having fun.

Barbara Dudley: One of the things that I'm acutely conscious of is the danger of paternalism and maternalism and the need to allow new leadership, young leadership to come to the fore. In Seattle there was a little bit from some of my age peers of, "Wait, I've been working on this issue for 20 years. Who do these kids think they are?" We each have an obligation at a certain age to get out of the way and to be as useful as we can to a new generation of leadership.

Helen Waller: Although we have leadership in various organizations, we have not pulled together the mechanism for helping us to network in a way that says, "This is the issue, we are together and we're going to move forward."

Debra Harry: Local leadership might not be the most visible, they might not have the most access to media and to the spotlight, but that's where you're going to see real solutions being developed and implemented. For instance, I'm thinking about the Amazonian tribe that recently overturned a multinational patent. The people in Chiapas are trying to stop bio-piracy of plant genetics and also trying to stop Monsanto from growing genetically engineered crops in Mexico. The people in a region in Brazil have actually gotten local legislation to ban these crops and they're doing the best they can to enforce that.

Q: Last thoughts?

Debra Harry: It's really important for all of us to keep our eyes on the prize. What are some gains and wins that we can all work on together? Of course we're going to have different approaches because we have different worldviews that are represented at the table. But it's exciting times because we have campaigns emerging like "No Patents on Life" that we can all get behind.

Helen Waller: WTO advocates are trying to trick us into pitting country against country, or peoples against peoples. These are powerful, global entities that want to make people subservient to them and to maximize their profits. We need to understand that people around the world are all in the same boat as they're dealing with these giant corporations. Seattle was a tremendous win and showed our ability to set our differences aside.

Barbara Dudley: The internet gives us an incredible opportunity for international alliances that we never had before. We can be supportive of each other's movements on a global scale. We can build a global civil society now which was never really possible before.

Nancy Haque: It doesn't take long as an organizer to get pretty discouraged and feel like you have to go after these winnable victories which are often quite small. What Seattle did was help me remember to have this big, huge vision of what we can do and how we can win.



Jobs with Justice

Audiotaping of this interview was provided by the Flying Focus Video Collective, a non-profit group of activists using video as a tool for social change.

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Nancy Haque locked down at the WTO protests.