Interview with Ilene Winkler

[July 13, 1990]

I. My name is Ilene Winkler and I'm a member of CWA, Communication Workers, Local 1101, which is the local covering New York Telephone and a little bit of AT&T in Manhattan and the Bronx, what used to be called the Craft Department: all the craft jobs and the clericals associated with them.

J. And why don't you tell me about the work that you've been doing that would be called non-traditional work. How did you get involved in doing that work?

I. Well, I actually got involved the traditional phone company way, which was that other people I knew were doing the work. My boy friend, at the time, was working as a switchman, which is the inside technical job of running the systems ... working on the systems that run the ... the telephone company. And the company started hiring women in the early '70s, and it seemed like a good job so I went down to apply for the job.

J. Was this hiring that was a result of that big settlement that ...

I. Yeah. Yeah.

J. Uh-huh.

I. Yeah. That was one of the first affirmative action programs in the country. So ...

J. So when you went in, you were working as a switch person?

I. Well, I was a switch man. Then they changed the ... they changed the title to Switch and Equipment Technician, a few years later.

J. And so how technical was it, and what kinds of training did you receive?

I. It was six months of school when we started, mostly learning about computers, learning ...

J. To repair them?

I. Actually, we were learning computer theory for the most part. We were learning how to read the schematics. This was a long time ago. I started working in 1974. So we got much more into the guts of the computer and we actually learned the computer language and how transistors worked, and all that kind of stuff, starting with ... with basic electricity and ... and working all the way through computers.

J. So how many other women were in the program with you?

I. There were ... Well, they were running about one class every two weeks, and there would be maybe one or two women in each class out of about twenty people. And they were running ... running through a lot of black and Hispanic men at the same time. And most of us,--not me, fortunately,--but most of us who were not white males flunked out by the end of the class. They were just trying to fill numbers.

J. Were they making any efforts to do retention, to ... any kind of support or reaching ...

I. No, nothing.

J. Nothing.

I. Nothing. They were there ... They hired ... They promoted most of the men. They hired a small number of women, and it was just ... just to fill numbers; just ... just to look good. And some of us managed to

survive it.

J. Did they give an opportunity to operators to move into this non- ...

I. They were supposed to. That was part of the consent decree, but they didn't really. They mostly filled the female slots by hiring, which when we got into the jobs, we discovered was a real problem because a lot of people really resented the fact that we'd been hired--quote--"off the screen ins" for the top paying job in the Local.

J. Was the Union monitoring the consent decree to try to open up, through the pages of the Union newspaper or any kind of meetings with the rank and file to tell people what a good opportunity this was and ...looking at ...

I. No. They were in court trying to stop it. (both laugh) No. They went to court to try to stop the plan.

J. On what grounds?

I. On the grounds that it overrode seniority. But as I learned more about it, I found out that there never really had been a seniority system for promotions in the first place. So it felt to us like they had gone to court to keep women out of the job. The only kind of ... The only way you could get promoted within the Plant Department, at that point, was if you were already in the Plant Department. There was no way ... If you were an operator or a clerical in another department, there was no way you could get into any of these jobs until the consent decree war signed. And so, the Union was in court trying to, basically, stop women from getting into these jobs.

J. So all this very expensive training and upgrading, and let me assume,--let me make a rash assumption that there was a different in pay scale between operator and switching technicians.

I. Yeah, a lot. Um-hum. Right.

J. So all these women stuck on the ... on the phones, where their Union was sort of not trying to help them upgrade and take advantage of this ??

I. Right. Well, at that point, CWA only represented the craft workers in New York State. But that was just ... Everybody else was in company Unions, but that ... it was true nationally.

J. Okay. So ...

I. So we didn't get any support at the beginning at all. It was really ... It was very intimidating. Like the first time I went to a Union meeting, I think I was almost the only woman in the place.

J. When you were receiving training, when did you become a member of the Union?

I. Well, we have agency shops so you have to sign when you get hired, either that you will join the Union or that you will pay the agency shop.

J. So it was the regular thirty days deal in the Union?

I. No. You'd just ... You'd become a Union member right away, but there's a six month probation where if you get fired, the Union can't take it to arbitration. But that's the only distinction.

J. So when did you first go to the Union meetings?

I. Oh, I'm trying to remember. I think about six months after I got hired, the contract expired, and so

there was, I guess, a meeting at that point.

J. And that was the first meeting you attended?

I. That was the first one I went to, and it was like--you know--thousands of men and me.

J. Well, before we talk about the Union, I want to hear more about your getting adapted and acclimated to this new field. Had ... What attracted you to the job besides the opportunity to make the money and do this interesting kind of work? I mean, do you feel that you had ... you were interested in technology before? It wasn't something that was foreign to you? Or what exactly did you ...

I. No. It wasn't anything I was interested in at all. It just seemed like it was a good paying job. I was ... The starting pay for the job was the top pay for the job I was doing before, which was a low level publishing company job. And it just seemed like an interesting place,--you know?, and I don't think I gave it all that much thought.

J. Um-hum. So you ended up there. When you were in training, did you establish relationships with the other women who were going through this training,

I. Yeah.

J. I mean,--even though there were so few of you in the different classes, but you found a way? How did you find a way to meet them and ...

I. Well, we ... They ... They were running the training in a building near Penn Station and we had a common cafeteria. And so the women just started talking to each other. And I found women to go out to lunch with. And I think if it hadn't been for that, I don't think I ever would have survived it because it was a really horrible experience. I used to go home and cry.

J. What about ... I can remember, I took one class one time, in something like draftsmanship or some ... something that was new and foreign and completely dominated by men, and I went to very few classes before I dropped out. It was like a vocational after work program.

I. Um-hum.

J. And what ... what was the level of difficulty of the material and dealing with the tools or the ... the concepts. I mean, how was that for you?

I. It was totally foreign. I'd never had science in my life. I'd had one science class when I was in high school. And when the teacher found out that I could type he had me do all his typing for him and gave me an A. And that was the only science I ever had in my life. (laughs) So I didn't know ... I didn't know the first thing,--you know. And it was ... it was really frightening, and you had to study really hard. Plus I felt that I was surrounded by these idiot men.

J. Um-hum.

I. You know? But the .. the big deal in my class ... Most of them were much younger than me. I was about thirty when I started, and most of them were in their very early twenties. And the big deal was the new issue of Playboy,--you know? It was like ... It was a really awful experience. I'm telling you. If it hadn't been for meeting the other women??, like I said, I don=t think I would have made it.

J. What about ... How much time ... You were only in the classroom now. You weren't ... You weren't working. That was your day. You were in the classroom.

I. Right.

J. And they ... Did they have any ... any special ... Did you feel free to ask questions or ... What kind of extra help could you get? Was there any ... any of that available?

I. No. You couldn't get any extra help. I mean,--you could ask questions, but the instructor couldn't deal with me or with the men who weren't white. He just couldn't deal with any of us, and so, you ... you ... And he was a terrible instructor. The phone company uses foremen for instructors, not ... not well trained instructors. And so you just had to sort of struggle through it on your own. And I just kept saying to myself, if these men can do this, I can do it, and I just forced myself to do it.

J. Did you ... Did you find that even some of the white men ... I mean,--wouldn't it be the case that some men ... it would be a new experience for them also dealing with this,--right?--

I. Yeah.

J. And they would have had difficulties, too. So ...

I. Right. Right. But the discrimination was so blatant that if a white male couldn't do something, the instructor would say: Oh, you got this wrong. Go back and do it again. And if anybody else got it wrong, they would just fail you on the test.

J. So did you set up any support groups beyond the lunches? Did you ... Did you find some people, male or female, to--you know--work through ... out ... on the outside; get some assistance or work through problems together?

I. Well, there was this group of women and we became very, very close. And there was one man in my class who was about my age, and ... and we stayed friends all ... all the way through, for the last sixteen years. And there was my boy friend who tried to be helpful and who wasn't, particularly. (laughs) One of the things that happened to this first group of women is that we all ended up getting either divorced or breaking up the relationships with the men that we were with when we started the jobs because they didn't understand the stress that we were under.

J. Yeah.

I. So it was ... No, there wasn't too much support around.

J. Did you have to spend your weekends and evenings studying? I mean,--was it pretty much your life?

I. Well, they wouldn't let you take the books home. No. They wouldn't let you take the books home.

J. Oh, really?

I. Yeah.

J. Oh, that's terrible. What ... What was the thought behind that, that if you couldn't get in the classroom then you were just a dead duck? Or they didn't want you to pass it on to outsiders so that ...

I. May--Maybe both, although by the time that I got through ... I was class number sixty-three. Everybody's written the answers in the books already. So if that was their plan, it didn't work.

J. So then, did they have some kind of ceremony to graduate you from this experience?

I. No. We had ... We had a class party and we went to one of the singles bars on First Avenue. By that time there was another woman in my class who had been left back from the class before that because she

was absent for a little while. And so, we went out to one of these singles bars and after ... The guys looking at ... at the bar maid who was wearing for almost nothing, for about an hour, we said, "Well, we're going to leave now." (laughs) And that was our graduation party.

J. Oh, charming.

I. Yeah.

J. So now you're on the job site.

E. Uh-huh.

J. Tell me about that.

I. That ... What happened, when I started working, in terms of support was that there was a ... another woman there who was real helpful, who had been there for several months before that. And the ... the black men in particular, who were in the building, who probably had the most to lose by me being hired into this job that they that they were waiting for promotions for, didn't take it that way and were very nice. And so I managed to find people who--you know,-who would teach me things and,--you know,--and it worked out somewhat better. And, I mean,--this probably somewhat of an embarrassing thing to say, but I'm not the only one it happened to. I saw a guy out with someone that I was working with and a lot of us ... I mean,--I guess this isn't a very feminist thing to say, but this is what happened with a lot of us,--

J. ??

I. Yeah,--you know,--is that anybody that ...-you know,--any man that was nice to you sort of looked like Prince Charming, who was going to rescue you,--(laughs) you know. And ... and once that happened, the harassment really died down, because then anybody who was trying to harass you, had a male co-worker to content with also.

J. So this is kind of a switch on ... on the sort of like working girls' officer and the gentlemen?

I. Yeah. I mean it's ... Looking back on it, it's sort of embarrassing. But that was the reality of what happened to an awful lot of us.

J. So how many people were in your work crew and what kind of ... Describe the kind of work you were actually doing.

I. At the beginning, it was a small group of people,--maybe fifteen, twenty people,--responsible for two big million dollar computers. And there was a lot of responsibility; a lot of autonomy. It was really fun. You really got to sort of figure out--you know--really interesting things. And people were really ... really into the job. And the management ... You know,--the systems were new. They were just introducing electronic systems. And the management didn't know all that much. So it was really like you were running the place yourself. And people were really conscientious, and it was real interesting. And that went on for about maybe five years. It was really enjoyable.

J. Were you paired up with sort of a journey level person;--I mean,--somebody who was experienced? Or they just threw you out there and expected you to ...

I. Sometimes. Sometimes they'd tell you to work with somebody who would train you. And if you found a man ... You know,--it would be the men who knew what they were doing, basically.

J. Yeah.

I. And if they were nice, they would train you. And if they weren't, then they wouldn't. And some

women had really horrendous experiences because they couldn't get,--you know,--they couldn't get trained by their coworkers. There was one woman who is Chinese-American, who's actually won a suit pretty recently because the men that she worked with were pretty racist, and would train the white women and wouldn't train her. And Management held her responsible for that situation. And she won a suit against the company recently because of that.

J. So you said that that lasted for five years. I would like to switch into the subject of Union activity.

I. Um-hum.

J. And you had talked about going to your first Union meeting, and thousands of men and ... and you.

I. Yeah.

J. Tell me about your initiation into the Union.

I. Well, the only thing I remember about that meeting was that I got up to walk out and go to the ladies' room and got yelled at and whistled at and--you know--all that kind of stuff.

J. Cat calls?

I. Yeah. The Union, at that point, was in a pretty bad situation because there had been a seven month strike,--1971-72,--that New York was out on alone, that had lost, and so the Union was in pretty bad shape, at that point, 'cause everybody was really intimidated. And so there wasn't very much Union activity going on, really. But the person who had gotten me into the job in the first place, was pretty active, and so I got involved with stuff through him. Then ... This was at the time that CLU was just starting, and ...

J. Had you been in a Union before?

I. I had been ... I had been in AFSCME for a couple of years, but it ... that was for the State, and we didn't have bargaining rights. So sort of yes and no. I didn't really have all that much Union experience, but ...

J. You didn't come from a Union family?

I. Well, my mother had been a teacher, and had been ... or had been briefly a teacher and was very pro-Union. So I had grown up with a sense that Unions were good things. Yeah.

J. So you were saying,--and I interrupted you,--that CLU was just starting.

I. Yeah. Yeah. So I got involved with CLUW. And some of the women that I had made friends with when ... When we started working, we all started going to CLUW meetings for a while, and then we tried to organize a CLUW committee through the Local. But we didn't really know what we were doing. We didn't understand how the Union functioned very well. But they let us do it for a little while. They told us that we could only organize ... that we could only contact the women who were in the non-traditional jobs. They wouldn't let us contact the clerks who there were a lot more of in our Local. So ...

J. Did they give you a rationale for that, or ...

I. No. You know,--we didn't ... I mean,--we were brand new, really. This was ...

J. Yeah.

I. I'd been in ... in the Union about a year and a half, I think, when we did this. And we had a few meetings. And ...

J. How many women started the organizing, and how many women ended up coming to the meetings?

I. A handful of women started. And we had some pretty successful meetings. We were getting like maybe thirty some women to a couple of meetings. And then I think, at that point, the Executive Board got nervous.

J. How did you find the women who ended up trying to get this CLUW chapter ??

I. Well, initially, it was the women I already knew from school.

J. Yeah.

I. And then we started putting up notices in different phone buildings, in the ladies' rooms and stuff,--you know,--and we called a couple of meetings at the Local and we got a real good turn out, including some clerks. And ... And then, I think they realized that it was sort of getting out of their control, so they clamped down on it. And they used some excuse that ... that we had done something that they didn't approve of. I think somebody had contacted the National Union and not gone through channels, really, 'cause I don't think people knew what the channels were so much. And they basically said that they wanted to run the Committee and it kind of fizzled out.

J. What kind of ... Before that point, what kind of issues were people dealing with in the meeting? And what were your plans for activity?

I. It just was a long time ago.

J. A long time ago. (laughs)

I. I think it was representation. Like, the problem in my Local all along has been that ... that women aren't represented in the leadership at all, and women's concerns just don't get dealt with. And of course, at that point, with the women in the non-traditional jobs, we really needed a lot of support and we weren't getting any. The Local President was pretty explicit about thinking that women should not do these kinds of jobs.

J. So what kind of support would, ideally, would you have been looking for from the Union in that position?

I. I think, first of all, introducing us all to each other,--giving us a place where we could find each other,--because the ... the connections and the friendships and everything is really what gets you through, at the beginning, I think. And educating the men to get them to accept us when we had ... We had the problems at the beginning, I think, that the ... the construction trades have … just a tremendous among of pornography posted all over the place, and an atmosphere where ... I mean,--some women did okay,--where a lot of the women were just made to feel incredibly unwelcome. And it was even worse with the outside jobs: the installers, repair, cable splicers,--the people that work in the streets. There's still almost no women in those jobs. So the Union should have done more connections for us and more education than they did.

J. So ... when they decided that they were going to take it over, what ... they officially sent some person in to ... somebody from the staff,--or how did that happen?

I. I think they said that one of the men on the Executive Board had to be at all the meetings, which we resisted,--which was probably a mistake, looking back on it. We should have figured out some way to compromise on that. And then ...

J. 'Cause there were no men on the Executive Board, I take it.

I. Right. Right. Right. There were no women above the level of steward, and very few female stewards, at that point. And ... and then, I think they had to ... they had to ... It boiled down to, they had to

approve what we were doing, and things never got approved, and everything just sort of went away. And we were too new and too inexperienced to do anything about it.

J. So it sort of fizzled out? People get discouraged and got ...

I. Yeah, I think.

J. So then, what ... what happened next, in terms of your Union activity?

I. Well, I ... I became a steward, and I became...

J. How did that happen that you decided to get involved as a steward?

I. Well, there was no steward ...

J. Were you recruited or ...

I. There was no steward in my Department, and our foreman kept trying to really ignore the contract. And So I ended up being the steward because nobody else wanted it. And ...

J. Did you have elections or appointments?

I. I think prob-- ... I don't remember, probably an election.

J. Um-hum.

I. But when you're dealing with a group of fifteen people it--you know--it's not a big deal, one way or the other.

J. So how did you learn to be a steward?

I. I learned from another steward in the building who taught me how to do it, because ...

J. They didn't have steward classes?

I. I think they had ... I think they had them, but I never got to go, and another switching steward taught me. I mean,--I didn't even know how to walk up to a foreman and say I'm giving you a grievance. So I sort of tagged after him for a while, and he showed me how to do all that stuff.

J. And ...

I. That's the way I leaned. It was really ad hoc.

J. By doing.

I. Yeah.

J. And so what ... what changed, in terms of your dynamic with Management and with he other workers? And now was it for you being steward?

I. At that point?

J. Did you like it?

I. Yeah. I mean,--I liked being active in the Union. I'm the kind of person who always likes to speak

up about things, and--you know--insofar as you can find something to do. And when I'd been in the company about two years, there was an election for Convention Delegate and I ran and did quite well, because I think a lot of people just voted--you know--for my name because I was female. The women who ran did real well. That was the last time a Local ever had a Convention Delegate election.

J. What year was this?

I. '76, I think.

J. So how many people were voting in this for ... for you? How many people would you be representing, your whole Local? It was a Local wide election and they got to elect some of the delegates?

I. I think Convention delegates legally have to be elected.

J. And so ... so you were elected?

I. No, I wasn't elected, but I did well.

J. You did well. Uh-huh?

I. Yeah. And then I got ... Somebody that ... that I knew ... There had been, in the early '70s, before I was hired, there had been a lot of rank and file activity in the Local of different caucuses on a lot of different stuff, all of which pretty much fell apart after ... after the '71 strike. And somebody that I had gotten to know,--a person ... a person named David Lynn,--had been a steward in ... in another building and had been decertified by the Executive Board because they got mad at him, basically, because he was an oppositionist. And he and a bunch of other people in his building filed a law suit against the Executive Board through Landrum/Griffin, and I got involved working on that. And we did that from about '76 to '79, when we finally won. And so, there's now a permanent injunction against our Local that no steward can be decertified for reasons of internal politics. So we spent about two and a half years trying to build support and just getting the word out about that case and trying to build support for--you know--for the case. And after ... after we won he case, we got together with some other people who had run against the Executive Board in Union elections, I guess it must have been in 1980, I guess;--I don't know what year it was, in the late '70s,--and we started publishing a newsletter together.

J. Tell me about ... In what ways did you try to get support? In what ways did people demonstrate their support?

I. What are you talking about, about the court case?

J. Yeah.

I. We did a lot of leafleting, and the ... Our Local covers, Oh, sixty some work places. And so, what we would do was we got a list of the building and we would go out at night in teams, and we would drive around and we would go into all the buildings and we would just leave leaflets about the case in locker rooms, and--you know--go,--you know,--just going by this list of addresses that we'd managed to put together. And out of that we just started getting to know people who were getting upset with the way that the Union was functioning, because things were getting pretty bureaucratic by then. The Executive Board that had been elected right after the '71 a strike had been elected with a lot of support because they were the people that had really tried to win that strike. But once they got into office, they started changing bylaws and cutting down meetings, and really cutting way back on the membership involvement in the name of stability,--of trying to introduce some stability into the Local. But by the late '70s, a lot of people were getting real fed up and so we started trying to put an opposition together. And I think from the beginning we put a real emphasis on the fact that the Local was not representing women, and it was not representing the black members or the Latino members, of which there are very, very few. But there's a lot of ... of black people in our Local who weren't getting any representation. And we tried to raise issues of Union democracy and educate people about their

rights. And so we started putting out this newsletter in 1979 that we've been putting out since then, which is called The Bell Wringer.

J. And how do you ... how do you decide what issues you're going to write about? And how do you distribute it? And how do you know if people are actually reading it and responding to it?

I. Yeah. Well, we do a better version of running around at night, dropping off anonymous leaflets,--you know,--which is ... We have ... We have a list of people who get bundles who distribute it in their buildings. And the people who are actively involved in putting out the paper actually will stand in front of phone buildings and hand it out. And we have a print run of about forty-five hundred right now. But the way that we decide what's going to be in the paper is that we have a meeting. There's about ten people who really work on this to the extent of coming to meetings and actually producing the paper, and we just brain storm and write down lists of what people think should be in it. And then people volunteer for articles. It's very informal.

J. Does Bell Wringer ever open up their meetings to the membership at large so that people who might want to come and participate in saying what's going on in the Union or what the paper should be addressing,-what are the concerns ... Do you ever open up the meetings?

I. Yeah. Well, the meetings are open and we always say that in the paper. Anybody who wants to come is welcome. And lately we've actually started holding public meetings where we'll--you know--put up a notice at different work place saying we're having a meeting. Now we're actually having an election coming up, so now we're actually going to be going around holding election meetings. But the paper's always been open to anybody that wants to write anything, including anybody that wants to attack us,--you know,--express any different kinds of viewpoint. It's always open.

J. So it's a real democracy.

I. Hopefully. We try. (laughs)

J. Yeah. So have there been like a core group? What's the stability, in terms of ...

I. Yeah. There's been a real tiny core group that's ... that's worked on it over the years. Not all the people that were involved originally, because some of them aren't with the company any more.

Side Two

I. ... for a long time. I mean,--a ?? a tiny group.

J. And what do you see as the changes, in terms of the membership's response to the Union and is there ... Does it go in cycles? Or it basically revolves around the contract.

I. Well, we've had tremendous changes in the industry, especially since 1984. I mean,--until then, things were pretty stable, and ... and we had ... In the 1970s we had ?? a cost of living clause and ?? were quite high, so people--you know ... you felt like you were making a lot of money, even though you were chasing inflation. And I don't think,--you know,--the Union was probably doing an okay job for the people, even though there wasn't very much democracy or an internal life. But in 1984, when the Bell System was broken up, everything changed. Some of our members went to AT&T, and most of them have been laid off. They went to a department of AT&T called ATTIS,--AT&T Information Systems,--where they installed and maintained business telephone equipment. And that division had laid people off with almost twenty years' seniority right now. Most of them have come back to New York Tel, but not all. And the conditions within New York Tel have really gotten horrendous. There's basically no opportunity for anybody to get upgrades, which is what we call promotions. There hasn't been for several years because the company hires two year teams now. I mean,--they don't even hire off the street new hires like me anymore. They hire, in most jobs like installation and repair, they'll hire people for two years and then lay them off. And there's no chance for promotions.

J. Well, has the Union taken that on as an issue? I mean ...

I. We ... We had put together a law suit on racial and sexual discrimination on the few promotions that people were getting. And we were all set to file last year when the Supreme Court issued their ruling that, basically, you can't file these kinds of suits any more. So we just had to put it on hold. But--you know,--you know,--if the Civil Rights Act gets passed, then ... then we'll be able to file it. But basically, the Union hasn't done much. They'd been pressured into providing testing manuals, and that'll mean a little bit of help for people who take promotional tests because the company has very discriminatory tests in which they ... they expect you to be able to pass a test that has very little to do with the job under really pressure conditions,--which I didn't have to do when I got hired,--because the government wouldn't let them do it, at that point. But that's all they've done is provide some testing material. And I think peoples' jobs ... The jobs are so unsatisfying now, and there's so much pressure on people, and the company is automating so many jobs, that I think people are really ... We really need a Union now, maybe a lot more than we did a few years ago, in terms of ... of defending ourselves. And we don't have very much of a Union presence any more. And I think that the strike that we just had in 1989, when we were out for seventeen weeks to ... to **fight for** ??? benefits that we already have, people are pretty disgusted right now.

J. When you say that you don't have a Union presence, what do you mean? Where ... Where is the Union? Like what's happening with the steward structure and ... You know,--I'm interested in specifics about where ... where is the Union?

I. Uh-huh. Well, there's very little internal life or coordination or anything like that, in our Local. And what I'm saying, I don't think, is really applicable to CWA as a whole. It's really our Local which has specific problems. But we ... we didn't have a membership meeting during the entire strike, for example. And people feel very isolated ... they feel very isolated from this leadership which has been in for almost twenty years now and is pretty divorced from the membership. So if you happen to be in a building that has a good Chief Steward or an active steward structure,--just because the people have decided to have taken it on themselves to do then--that it's not as bad. But in a lot of places, there's hardly any Union presence. I was on a ... I was on a job temporarily after the strike for four months in a different building, and I never met my steward the whole time. (pause) Actually, I should tell you about the job that I was doing because I got to do four months of installation and repair as a punishment job, after the strike.

J. What happened to ... Are ... Are you still functioning as a steward? Are you still ...

I. Yeah.

J. So ... But they can move you anyway away from the people you're ...

I. They had never done this before. They did it after the strike in retaliation, because one of the things the company wanted to get during the '89 strike was the ability to transfer whoever they wanted, whenever they wanted, which our contract does not allow. And they did not win that. But then they proceeded to behave as if they had anyway. And in ... in the switching Department covering most of Manhattan, the manager of my department just decided to get rid of all the stewards. And so, pretty much all of us were transferred to installation and repair jobs as a punishment. And some people were sent hours away from home. I was lucky. I was sent pretty near my house. So people who'd always had, like, sit down jobs were all of a sudden being sent out to climb poles, and it was really horrible. It was real harassment.

J. So what kind of response did the Local take, in terms of fighting that?

I. Well, they filed Labor Board charges. They ... I don't think they did what they really should have done. I mean,--if I had ... If I'd been in charge, I think what I would have done was ... was gone out and met with all the people and tried to ... to get some more kind of coordinated action to protect people. Because some people were put in situations where they were really forced to retire. And we had many cases of people with heart conditions being sent out to climb poles and ... which really was pretty frightening. But we had so many people fired during the strike that I think the Union was completely tied up with trying to get them their jobs

back,--you know,--and there wasn't too much energy left over for us.

J. How many people were fired about?

I. There were about ... I don't remember.

J. Fired on what grounds ??

I. People fired for strike activity. There were a couple of hundred people altogether fired or given long suspensions, and a lot of them have come back, but a lot still haven't,--you know. And that really just took all the Union's attention for months after the strike.

J. So, in ... in your role as organizer in the Union,

I. Well, it's an unofficial role.

J. Yeah, unofficial organizer ...

I. Actually, I wanted to talk a little bit about what it was like to walk into installation and repair as a .... as a woman,--you know,--

J. Yeah.

I. 'cause it was a real interesting ... It was real interesting to me to start all over again as the only woman on a job, sixteen years after.

J. And how did you know how to do this job?

I. I didn't. I didn't. they gave us four days of training on the theory that since we were already technicians, we could figure it out, which was ridiculous. I mean,--we ended up practicing on the customers. But I walked into this situation where I was the only woman all over again. I said: Oh, I can't do this again,--you know. I mean,--I did this ... I did this in 1974. I can't do it again. But the fact that I walked in there as a known Union activist ... I was a little timid about handing out The Bell Ringer with people I didn't know, but I got a wonderful response. And the fact that I ... I came in with the ability to explain things in the contract to people and,--you know,--and--you know--with all this Union experience, meant that people ... And of course, I was older, but it meant that people related to me very differently. And it was a really nice experience,--you know,--because I found that I was able to ... to really get along well with the men that I was working with, because I don=t think they felt so threatened and ... and ... I don't think it was necessarily because they'd changed so much,--although they probably had changed somewhat,--you know,--but I didn’t look as much of a threat. I looked like I could also be a help,--

J. Um-hum.

I. you know. So it ... it was nice to see.

J. So they were ... they were interested in playing a role in the Union, at least in terms of talking about their contract. But what was ... what was their level of involvement with the Union in ...

I. Well, nobody has any real level of involvement with this Union. Everything's strictly local, at this point. The building that I had been working in prior to the strike, the stewards had gotten together and decided that we wanted to have monthly meetings because we didn't like the lack of coordination and the lack of organization. So we had started holding meetings. But that was at our initiative,--you know. Mostly, people just sort of float around with no particular Union involvement.

J. Do you get a good response to the meetings?

I. Yeah.

J. Yeah. So it fills a felt need.

I. Um-hum. Yeah. At this ... At this point, this Local is sort of a do it yourself project. I mean,--there's no direction or organization coming through the center.

J. What's happening with the election that you said is coming up?

I. Yeah. Well, this will be the third time the Bell Wringer is running a slate, and it's ... We're the only people that have ever run women for Union office and ... and run a really racially integrated slate. I mean,-about half our slate is black. And I don't know what's going to happen,--you know. The President is retiring. I think we have a good chance this year, but we're just starting to campaign.

J. So you use the Bell Wringer to get the issues out, to raise questions and provide information.

I. Um-hum. Yeah.

J. And you ... you have the meetings. How else are you campaigning in the Local?

I. With ... Well, we're going to be going to different buildings to have meetings. Next week, we're doing an audit of the Union finances. I'm going to be running for Treasurer, so I'm going to be doing that.

J. Who's we?

I. Me and an-- .. and another member of the Bell Wringer, and an accountant. We ... We just ran a raffle and raised about twelve hundred dollars to pay for the accountant. So ...

J. So on what grounds do you... Because you're running for office? Because you're a Union member? On what grounds do you have the right to do that?

I. On the grounds that we're Union members. We wrote them a letter .... We did this for the first time three years ago. We got a lawyer to write a letter saying that we wanted to do this, and eventually they gave in. It took a couple of months to set up, and they brought a lawyer who I guess was paid for out of Union dues to protect the books,--you know.

J. Yeah.

I. But they ... they let us see a fair amount of it,--you know. I mean,--they delayed and they stalled and they argued with us. But we got to see pretty much what we wanted to see.

J. So the raffle ... To raise twelve hundred dollars, you have to sell a lot of raffle tickets.

I. Yeah.

J. And you told people what it was for, the raffle, and so you had a good response to that?

I. Right. Yeah.

J. People ...

I. And while ... while we were running the raffle, people ... We had to pay back all the dues that we missed during the strike, even though we weren't working. There's ... Part of the back to work agreement that we did not see before we voted on it,--we didn't see this part of it,--authorized the Company to take back

seventeen weeks' dues. So the raffle prize was seventeen weeks' dues. So,--you know--we ... we were doing this raffle of win back your Union dues, so that we could get an accountant to see how these dues were actually being sent. So we're going to do that next week.

J. So what positions do you have people running for?

I. The top Executive Board positions: resident, Vice-President, Secretary/Treasurer, the two Manhattan regional Vice-Presidents and one or two Business Agent slots. There's thirteen positions altogether.

J. And how many women?

I. Three women. There's seven people running ... Seven or eight people running. We're not sure yet. Three women.

J. And you're running for?

I. I'm running for Treasurer.

J. So it makes sense that you would be the person who would be involved in looking at the books...

I. The books. Right! (laughs) Right.

J. Very logical.

I. Right.

J. So what ... This leadership has been in place for twenty years?

I. Pretty much, yeah,--close to it.

J. So even though there's a lot of ... It sounds like the real slough of despond, people still keep electing them? How ... How often are the ...

I. The elections are every three years. The ... The first time we ran, we got about a quarter of the vote. The last time we ran,--which was three years ago,--we got about a third. But the total number of votes went down a lot, which is a really good sign. It,--you know--shows that people are becoming apathetic or disgusted or aren't too sure how the vote's being counted, since it's a mail ballot. And it's run by the Local, not by an outside agency ?? In fact, we're going to start a campaign this year to try to get an outside agency to run the election. I don't know if we'll be successful.

J. Are you going to .. How ... Are you going to have fliers and ... to ... How are you going to encourage people to participate in this election and overcome their apathy?

I. Well, Well, two ways. We'll do our own campaigning. We try to get more people involved in that. And we're try ... We're putting together a list right now of all the people that ... that we know are sympathetic and have either come to a meeting or ... or given us money, or something like that and try to get a lot of them involved. And the second way is through doing a campaign to get an honest election. That's what we're calling it. And there's some other people running also. So we're trying to work with them and work out a common campaign to ... to get the American Arbitration Agency in. And we figure this ... campaigning for this will ... will, first of all, get people oriented to the fact that there is an election, and try to get more people involved in ... in petitioning to ... to get an honest election.

J. So what in particular is ... in being a woman in playing a leadership role in your Local on this unofficial level?--

I. Yeah.

J. Sort of official/unofficial level? How ... How ... What are your strengths as a woman, if any;--survival,--a biased question?

I. (laughs) I think that for those of us who've been through all the ... that we've been through,--you know,-through all these years, you really toughen up. And you ... you ... you ... You just learn to take a lot of the stuff. Actually, when we started ... when we started running for office, I didn't feel like I had any strengths. I felt really intimated by the whole situation. And the thing that got me past that was going to Cornell. I went to the Cornell Trade Union Women's program for one semester. And I went to the Northeast Women's Summer School that year. I guess that's sort of going back to the way I started in the Company, which is that you have to find other women,--you know,--and you can get your support and your strength from other women. And those were really wonderful experiences,--you know?

J. What did you study at the Cornell program?

I. I studied Collective Bargaining and a class that, I guess, was about organizing. And I learned ... I really learned a tremendous amount from it, because from the time I was in this Local, it was this real confrontational situation,--you know,--where you always ... You were fighting with the leadership. You were fighting with the men. You were fighting with the management,--you know. Every place you turned, you were fighting with people. And it was real hard to organize around anything positive. And I think I learned at Cornell how to do that much more that I could learn that on my own experience,--you know;--how to try to bring people together who had disagreements about things, and how to find common ground to work together. And I really learned that through ... through the Women's program. And at the Northeast Women's Summer School ... I had gone there thinking, Oh,--you know,--I'm running against my leadership,--you know. Nobody else is going to understand me, and I'm real different from everybody else. And it wasn't like that at all. It was like ... As a woman trade Unionist, no matter what situation you're in, you have the same problems,--you know. Whether you're a leader or whether you're--you know--a frustrated steward, you still have the same problems of how to organize,--you know. It was a real enriching experience.

J. How many women attended the Summer School that you went to?

I. Oh, ?? a couple of hundred, I guess.

J. Yeah.

I. Yeah.

J. Why did you ... I'm just curious. Why did you only go to Cornell for the one semester? Why didn't you continue through the whole certificate program?

I. Well, I had come in at the end of the year. And by the time it started again in September, we were in the midst of this election. And the two courses I was mostly interested in actually turned out to be the ones that I took.

J. What about CLUW? Have you--you know--maintained any connection to CLUW? Or ...

I. No.

J. What about the ... the broader trade union movement and women in it? Have you found any way to replenish yourself through that approach?

I. In the ... In the late ... mid-'70s, I guess it was, I was involved with United Tradeswomen for a while, which was mostly women from the construction trades who were just getting started. And that was another kind of support system. Then I became involved with the Association For Union Democracy recently,

with the Women's Project. There ... There've been ... We've ... Actually, we've had other attempts to organize Women's Committees in my Local. I don't know if you want ... We should get into that later. There have been various attempts to organize ran and file networks in New York City that people from The Bell Wringer have participated in, none of which has really lasted. But I think we've ... we've learned a lot from them, especially from TDU people. And ... And I maintain a connection with Labor Notes also, and I've been to a lot of the Labor Notes conferences and run workshops at them.

J. Was that with ??

I. Yeah. Yeah, now we should ?? reverse.

J. Okay.

I. So ... So you were asking whether I've maintained connections with the broader labor movement. I tried to maintain connections with ... with other opposition people, as ... as far as we've been able to do that. But every time that we've tried to organize--you know--like a rank and file network or something, it's really gotten involved with ... with sort of sectarian politics in New York City and has never managed to make it. So we haven't been able to do that. I've been, in the last couple of years, gotten more involved in ... in some other kinds of labor stuff through working in Labor For Jesse Jackson and the labor part of the Dinkins campaign, and some ... some other kinds of ... of stuff with Labor Committee Against Apartheid and ... and stuff like that. And I have a lot of friends who are members or officers in District Council 37, so I've attended a lot of their programs and gotten much more of a sense of what you can do with a more active Union--you know?

J. Their programs? The educational programs or ...

I. Some of their educational programs, yeah.

J. So what about ... You mentioned that you tried to set up some other women's committee or women's activities in your Local. And what's been happening with that?

I. Yeah. We went through another whole attempt in the mid-'80s to set up a women's committee, which, unfortunately, ended up having a similar history although it got dragged out over a longer period of time. Some women who were splicers, felt ... got suspended. They felt that they'd been set up by their management, and they started looking around for other women to help. And so a bunch of women started meeting in the women's bathroom of one of the phone buildings 'cause it was the only place they could find to meet. And I got involved with that. And people went to the Executive Board and asked them for help, and asked to send out a questionnaire and to try to get women more involved. And it was the same ... same thing all over again with the same leadership,--you know. It was okay as far as they could control it, and this and this. And if it looked like it was going to be independent,--you know,--they got real, real nervous. But we ... we kept meeting for a while, and we actually, again, were having some real good meetings up at the Local office and turning out a lot of women who were particularly interested in getting promotions, at that point, because when we started,--you know,--we were sort of considered freaks, those of us who had the non-traditional jobs. But by the time we'd been there a while and the clerical saw how much money we were making and how much better we were treated than they were, they started putting in for the jobs also. But it was the,--you know,--it was the same kind of thing, where it had to be controlled by the men. And the Local did actually have a women's conference, while all this fight was going on over whether we were going to have a women's committee, and they ... This conference ... The conference was originally scheduled the day that we had a hurricane in September. It was ... I forget which year;--a few years ago. And then it was postponed a couple of months that they ... It was a good turn out, and it was really interesting.

J. What program?

I. It was a bunch of outside speakers. Nobody actually from the Local. But at that point, we were engaged in this real bitter fight with them over the ... over whether or not we were going to have a real women's committee, because they had finally ... They had finally agreed to allow us to ... They'd finally agreed to

recognize this rank and file committee that had been meeting for months. And right after they did that, they turned around and set up an appointed committee instead, with ... with women that were chosen by different men, basically was what it was. And so that committee started getting sent to conferences, and that committee was officially running this women's conference, although, in fact, it was the men on the Executive Board that were pulling the strings on everything. And a couple of months before the women's conference, Bell Wringer found out that ... CWA had started having women's conferences,--regional conferences and national conferences,--and the little ... this little hand picked group was getting to go to all these conferences and not reporting back to anybody,--you know,--just sort of treating it like a junket. So we had a fundraising party to send rank and filers to ... to one of the conferences, which was real successful and a real good part and raised a lot of money, and sent a bunch of women to a conference in Boston which--you know--then reported back to people about what had happened, so it was real nice. By the time this women's conference came around, the ... the feelings were real bitter about--you know--the conflicts over ... between women who had gotten onto this appointed committee and the fact that the people who put all the work into the ... the rank and file committee had really been betrayed, in a sense, by the whole situation. And so we started a petition to get women to sign a statement to say that they wanted an open rank and file women's committee, and we got about a hundred people to ... hundred women to sign that. And we handed it out at the women's conference and tried to get a motion on the floor saying that, instead of having an appointed committee of four or five people, they should have an open committee, which just caused a ruckus. And they finally said, well, they wouldn't take a vote because it wasn't a delegated conference, but they would ... they would deal with it afterwards. And then, of course, they never did. And then we had a contract coming up and it sort of fizzled out again. So I think everybody who's been involved in this sort of came to the conclusion by--you know--by, I guess this was 1986,--'85-'86, when all this was going on, that there was really no future in trying to do this, and that the Local really had to be changed before we were going to get any kind of women's committee. The only rank and file committee that they've ever set up was a Veteran's Committee.

J. And are they active? And what's their agenda like? I mean,--is ...

I. What? The Veteran's Committee?

J. Yeah.

I. They go to the Veterans' parades and they do a lot of ... They've done raffles for POW/MIA, and they've had open houses after the veterans' parades and--you know--that kind of stuff.

J. Um-hum.

I. And we said, Well, look,--you know,--that's fine,--you know,--but do it for the women too,

J. Um-hum.

I. And set up what CWA calls Equity Committees to deal with racial discrimination,--you know. Do it,--you know ... Do it around all of the issues. And they won't. The only one they'll do it around is veterans.

J. What, in your mind, are the issues that the female membership are facing, in terms of being Union members and workers?

I. Well, as workers there's the issue of promotions,--you know,--

J. Um-hum.

I. Which is now getting more serious because of all the temporary hiring that's going on into the crafts. There's real serious problems of shifts and child care and time off, and that kind of stuff. The phone company works a long day. We work ... Our day shift in most jobs is eight to five. And people live scattered all over the New York/New Jersey area, so people have really serious problems if they have kids: being able to get the kids to school or into child care in the morning and then--you know--the long day, getting home late at

night. And in most departments, management has been like incredibly inflexible.

J. This new contract that you have, doesn't that have some child care provisions?

I. It has ... It has family leave provisions, which I've had to use myself because of a situation with my mother, which is really a God send that we have it; that we don't have to beg for the time off. But that's ... that's unpaid leave to take care of somebody in the family who's sick. What we didn't get was anything around flex time or flexible schedules, which is probably more of an immediate need for most people. AT&T, in their contract, got some see money for child care, which is going to be run out of Washington. I think they got five million dollars to investigate the child care options and money to set up child care referral programs and elder care referral programs. We have an aging work force in a lot of ways, so we have a lot of problems coming up with elder care, I think also. So,--you know--it's not going to be just child care. People get sandwiched ...--you know. And the phone company tends to hire and keep very stable people, so it tends to be the people in the family who are going to get stuck with all the problems,--you know. So people are being stretched real thin on all this stuff. And the company is, like, they don't want to know about it. If it's a man who's having problems, they'll be much more sympathetic. But if it's a woman, they think you should take care of this yourself. So that's ... that's some of the big problems. And in the clerical ... Well, the women in the non-traditional jobs have problems of discrimination in training, and in some places, harassment, and things like that. The clerical, who, of course, are the ... the majority of women in the company, have really bad problems of harassment and stress, and the Union doesn't have a handle, I don=t think, on how to handle it,--you know, and it ends ... If you don't ... If you don't have a well organized Union response to this stuff, it tends to manifest itself in a whole lot of alco-- ...

Tape Two

I. A lot of what a lot of stewards are doing in the Company right now is sort of just trying to ... to protect people who are falling apart from the stress on the job.

J. I know that CWA National and your District Office has a big Health And Safety Department.

I. Right.

J. And I ... I know that there's at least one expert there who does workshops on stress,--work place stress.

I. Um-hum. Yeah.

J. I've attended one of those sessions.

I. Uh-huh.

J. So how does that translate into the Local being able to take advantage of the District's programs?

I. It hasn't in our Local. We haven't had any of those kind of programs, and we really need them. And another big problem we have with the clerical is carpel tunnel syndrome and repetitive motion injuries and stuff like that, because the Company's been automating so much that most of the jobs are computerized now, which involves--you know--all the ... all the physical problems that go with date entry jobs. And we ... we did, in the last contract, we won some provisions on eye glasses for VDT operators because CWA was really active in getting Suffolk County to pass a law protecting VDT operators, at which point the phone company threatened to move all their jobs out of Suffolk County. The phone company was the largest private employer in Suffolk County, so fortunately, the Union was able to win some statewide provisions in the last contract which, I guess, will protect jobs in Suffolk County and extend the benefits to the rest of us. So we have ... We now can get eye glasses and eye exams, but ...

J. What about breaks?

I. Optical screening. Well, we get breaks anyway. The problem with these jobs is that there's nothing else to do in most of them except work on the VDT, so I don't know how feasible it is to switch off different jobs. It's becoming less and less feasible as the jobs get more automated.

J. So is ... These are the main issues facing women on the work force ... in the work force. But what about in the Union?

I. In the Union, well, of course the question becomes how's the Union going to deal with all these issues,--you know,--and getting the Union to ... to ... to do something about the issues. And so far, the Union hasn't,--you know. And there are ... there are still no women on ... on the Executive Bard of our Local. Overall, I think women are under represented--you know--in CWA, like every other Union. Even where women are a majority of the work force, we don't have ... We have a couple of female Chief Stewards now, but we don't have any structured way for clerical to be represented. We don't have specific clerical units with ... There are no women clerical Chief Stewards. So the problems of women as women still aren't getting dealt with, I don't think. There's a question of ... Well, there's a question now, increasingly, of whether the Local is representing anybody very well. But it certainly is not representing the women, hardly at all. The last Union meeting we had just degenerated into a drunken brawl, so, of course, that's not an atmosphere in which women can function,--you know? (laughs)

J. What's the percentage of women in your Local?

I. I don't know because they won't tell us, but it's probably somewhere about twenty, twenty-five percent,--mostly clerical.

J. Um-hum. I don't understand how the structure works so that there's no Chief Stewards. If they ... of most--you know--women are lumped together in thee clerical pools,

I. Uh-huh.

J. Then how can it be that they don't have their own representation?

I. Because ... Let's say, for example, the women in a repair bureau,--the clerks in a repair bureau--I shouldn't say the women,--will be part of the same Union division as the repairmen and the installers and the testers, most of whom are men. And so, they will altogether have their own Chief Steward, and--you know--usually that ... that will end up being a man. And, of course, it's a more industrial way to organizes it's better. I mean,--you don't want to decide up a room into--you know--three or four Chief Stewards' jurisdictions. But it's ended up with the women just sort of getting swallowed up,--you know?

J. Right. And their problems just don't get addressed?

I. Right. Right.

J. So moving on to advice for other women and the lessons that you've learned over the years since you've been in this work, what kind of advice would you give to women who are trying to get involved in their Union and trying to represent the problems of women?

I. I feel funny giving advice,--you know,--(laughs) 'cause I don't feel like I've--you know ... I feel like I'm still in the ... the position of ... of trying to get advice. But I ... I guess I can try to sum up

J. Let's, ?? you're on the front lines, and bring us the bulletins.

I. Yeah,--that ... that we've learned. (laughs) I think, in terms of breaking into a job,--you know--as women getting into a non-traditional job, I think that you have to ... you have to find the other women, however you do that, whether it's putting up a notice in the bathrooms or ... or--you know,--I mean,--assuming you're in

a place that has bathrooms. I don't think I'm qualified to give advice to women on construction sites. But in the places like the phone company where there actually are locations and a stable employer, I think the real essential is to find other women and to ...--you know,--so that you can hang together, at the beginning. And that means, for those of us who have been around for a while, that we have to look for the younger women and the newer women, and--you know,--the responsibility is on us, I guess, to ... to find them. I think the mistake I made, at the beginning, was being very impatient and not having any sense of how long anything was going to take, and--you know--trying to organize a committee before we understood how the Union functioned, and--you know,--essentially not doing our homework, I guess. Not that the results were that much better when we did do our homework, but we probably could have gotten further at the beginning, if we'd had a better sense of what we were doing, and a better idea of ... of how to ...how a Union functions. And I guess ... I would recommend to other women to go to Cornell and go to these programs, and learn what they have to offer, 'cause it really helped me so much,--you know.

J. Or ... or go to the AUD and have a ?? at the Women's Project.

I. Right. Right. Right. Well, at the ... at the point that I was starting out, AUD didn't have the Women's Project. But you're right. The AUD Women's Project also. Just learn whatever you can learn from anybody who's been there longer. I think, as ... as a white woman, I think I was ... I was lucky that, from the beginning, I ... I met other women who were black or Latina, or whatever, and so we haven't has as much of a problem as we might have, overcoming racial divisions, 'cause there's tremendous racial divisions in our Local. And ... and I think it's real essential, when you start organizing, to make sure that you rise above that, and that you have a multiracial group from the beginning, because if you don't, you're ... you're going to stay with an all white or all black, or whatever,--I mean,--unless you're trying to organize an all black group. But it's real important not--you know--not to ... to get stuck in the racial divisions that ... that plague the labor movement. We were real lucky in .. in our Local, in the sense that that didn't happen, because I think we all sort of made common cause with each other, in the beginning, because we all felt so left out and we all needed each other so much. And the black men were so helpful to all the women,--you know,--that ... that we were lucky we got past a lot of that. (pause) I'm trying to think ...

J. In terms of dealing with the apathy of the membership, what would your words of advice be to ... ways to organize in the work force to overcome that.

I. Um-hum. Well, this is one of the things that I learned from the schools that I went to that I think was real helpful, was not to look at it as apathy but to look at it in terms that people have different priorities; that what looks like apathy to me might be tremendous PTA involvement to somebody else,--you know?

J. Yeah. Um-hum. Um-hum.

I. And that as ...

J. So you're approaching it from a positive,

I. Yeah.

J. Instead of looking at this member that you feel complete--sort of indifference towards or antipathy ...

I. Right. You know ... Yeah. What they ... What they taught us, when I went to the Northeast Women's School, was that you think Union activity is a priority, and your coworkers don't. And you have to figure out why that is,--you know--and not assume that there's something wrong with them,--you know. And you have to learn how to make your ... how to convince them that your priority should be their priority.

J. So how do you do that?

I. You ... Well, I think it has to begin on the shop floor. I think you have to show people that ... that they matter,--you know;--that there's a way for them to get involved, and that ... that if they get involved,

something will change, because most people are too busy to bang their heads against the wall, definitely,--you know,--(both laugh) especially if they have children.

J. Well put! Yeah.

I. And so, I think that what you have to do is you have to find ways to pull people together,--you know. And women aren't necessarily taught to do that at work. And management's usually real good at dividing people, particularly in office situations, I think. You have to find ways to pull people together and win little victories.

J. So what are some of the specifics of ways that you pull people together on the shop floor?

I. Well, I know this was supposed to be about non-traditional jobs,

J. Well, that's ...

I. But a lot of the,--you know,--a lot of the experience that I've had with organizing women has actually been in more of an office setting in the last few years, because since 1979, my job got automated and I've been working at a desk. And it's ... it's still a mostly male job,--you know,--but it's non-traditional only from that point of ... You know,-- it's ... It's a person sitting at a desk. And we have a whole big clerical unit next to us.

J. What are you doing at the desk?

I. Watching VDTs, monitoring ... The systems that I used to actually physically work on, I'm now in another building just monitoring them from a distance, which is real frustrating and boring. But ...

J. So you monitor them. And then ... And then what do you do, just endlessly ...

I. And then we tell other people how to do the fixing. This was originally a system to save jobs,--to save money on jobs and cut down the number of jobs. And it hasn't. It's just created a lot of job dissatisfaction. But we ... we have a clerical unit next to us that has always been extremely difficult to organize, because there's been a lot of conflict in the Department. And what we've tried to do is to look for things that the people have in common,--you know? And occasionally we'll be lucky and management will do something really disgusting, like changing everybody's shift. And,--you know,--they ... Right after the strike, they put everybody on a standard shift and then tried to force them to work overtime to get the work done that they would have done if they'd been on the shifts they were on in the first place. And everybody rebelled and refused to work overtime,--you know? We were real proud of them because it had taken a long time to pull this shop together. We ... We had a situation once, a few years ago, where a clerical shop kept complaining about the temperature. And finally, people just freaked out, and everybody said: I'm getting sick. They didn't even plan it. It just sort of happened. Everybody said: I'm getting sick. I have to go to medical,--you know,--and management said no. And I got up and ... and I got involved in it, and we finally got everybody's right to go to medical. And ... I mean,--unfortunately, it's real little stuff like that when people have a sense that they can accomplish something,--you know;--that ... whatever it is. In our case, lots of times, it's overtime boycotts or slowing down, if you can get people to slow down,--or filing lots of grievances. Or the Union will use tactics like everybody has to see their personnel records the same week, or--you know,--everybody canceled their savings bonds, or something like that,--something where ... During the ... the strike ... pre-strike mobilization, they were doing a lot of everybody wear red T-shirts kind of stuff, which people kind of laughed at and said was Mickey Mouse. But when you all showed up wearing your red T-shirt, it made people feel real good,--you know--(laughs)--you know? And ... and to find common actions,--you know;--find what's important to people, and then find some kind of a common way that they can respond to it. And, of course, each work place is different,--you know? With us, lots of times it's overtime boycotts. Recently we had a situation where a whole department just showed up an hour late, hung out on the street,--a department of installation and repair people. They just stayed out on the street and came in at nine and got docked for the hours' pay. But by that time, management was sort of hysterical 'cause they didn't know whether they were

going to get any work done that day. And they got straightened out whatever problem they had. So what was ... So the point of this is to find ways to pull people together,--you know;--find small victories that you can win. I think ... Valuing people is real important,--you know,--making .... I hate to say, making people feel like their in-put is valued, but valuing peoples' input,--you know,--and encouraging people to get active. I think that a lot of what gets Unions into the situation that they're in is that the Union leadership starts looking at their jobs as their ... as if they have a right to the jobs. And if you do that, then you just keep closing off the opportunities, I think, that ... As ... As I get older, I start feeling like one of the more important things I can do is train other people,--you know,-especially train other women,--you know,--and teach them how to do whatever it is I've learned how to do, in terms of putting out a paper or ... Last year, when Herman Benson was the head of the Association For Union Democracy retired. And what he said at ... at the celebration to introduce his replacement, he said one thing he had learned in all these years is that he's biodegradable, (laughs) and that it's important to train somebody else to replace him before he has to be replaced,--you know? I thought that was real important, I think. I mean,--the point of a Union is supposed to be to pull the strengths of people together and to unify people. And you can't do that unless you're willing and really committed to training new people and involving new people, and not seeing them as a threat to whatever little status and perks you've managed to achieve for yourself. It's like whether you're ... It's whether you're rising with everybody or whether you're rising by stepping on other people, in a sense. You know what I mean?

J. Yeah. So, in terms of women in non-traditional jobs in New York City, what are your thoughts about ... Many of the women I've interviewed have said that this group United Tradeswomen, was real important to them, at one point or another, when they were new to this work. And it seems that there's ... there's still is a real ... I mean,--there's a crying need for some kind of ways for women to communicate with each other, who are in these jobs where they're real isolated and outnumbered by men in the Unions.

I. Uh-huh.

J. And do you have any comments about that or ...

I. I think ... Yeah. What I ... I think, what I felt from United Tradeswomen ... It was a lot of fun and it was really nice to meet the women on the construction sites. I think construction women need their own group. I think they have problems that are really so overwhelming and so different from the rest of the ... the rest of the work force that they really need a group themselves. Because in the telephone industry, the majority of the employees are female. It's just a question of where they are,--you know,--and ... and finding each other. And the Union is a lot more open. Even with all the problems in my Local, the Union is a lot more open to women's involvement on the national level. So it's real different. But I think it's real essential for there to be a support group for women, particularly in construction or--you know--jobs like that. You know,--just to be a place where you can go and meet other women and learn,--you know--learn how to put up with being a go fer,--you know,--and when you're being exploited, and when it's just part of the job,--you know,--because you don't have any way to judge that,--you know. And you don't even have ... You don't even have ... know how to use the tools. When I was working in installation and repair this year, I realized I didn't know how to use he tools,--you know. And because I was able to get along with the men as well as I could, they sort of thought it was funny and shoed me how. But if ... if I was twenty-one, they wouldn't have showed me how to do it,--you know. It would have been real different, and I probably would have ended up losing the job.

J. Yeah. I know New York Tradeswomen is trying to set up a big sister program, which seems to me to make a lot of sense.

I. Uh-huh. It's a wonderful idea.

J. And I know that they were talking about a tool exchange, where women who had been in the trades for a longer period of time and were now looking to buy more expensive tools, were going to turn in their too--you know. There would be a trade off.

I. Yeah. Uh-huh. That's a great idea.

J. And it makes a lot of sense.

I. Yeah. Right.

J. So in terms of ... I'm interested in the question of support. You've been doing this work for a long time, and how do you replenish yourself. And how do you ... where do you get support when you need support, that you don't get burned out.

I. I get it from the other people in The Bell Wringer. Even though there's so few of us, we ... we really are like a family,--you know. And it hasn't been all successes. There have been some real setbacks and some times that we've really screwed up. And we've helped ... we've really helped each other through it, and we've gotten real close, personally. And it's really made the difference,--you know? So I think it's ... I mean,--I guess ... I guess if you're going to sum up sort of the lessons of organize is that you have to organize. You can't do anything by yourself,--you know? (laughs)

J. Yeah.

I. You have to find ... You have to find other women that you can function with, and you have to find out which men you can work with. I think that ... I ... I said, when I first started talking about the way that a lot of the first women survived on the job was that they started dating men at work. Now, that's obviously not something that you want to recommend to people. (laughs) And if you're not ... if you're a lesbian, it's obviously not a perspective that you're going to get very far with. But ... 'cause there aren't that many other women around that--you know,--when you're just starting out, who are going to be a mentor in that--you know--in that kind of sense. And,--I mean,--that's a stupid perspective anyway. But you have to find the ... the men that you can be political allies with. Very often, that's the ... that's the men who are not white because they're less likely to be part of the ... the power structure, and more likely to understand what you're going through. But there's probably some white men also, who--you know--who are willing to help. What ... What we found, when we were sort of fighting our way through, at the very beginning, is that a lot of the men were very threatened by the thought of their wives doing this kind of work. They thought ... They saw it as a real threat to--you know,--to their position in the family or to their role as bread winners. Or,--you know,--they thought their wives were going to go running out the door with the first pay check. But when you talked to them about their daughters, it made a little more sense,--you know? Wouldn't you want your daughter to be able to have a decent job and be able to support herself, and--you know,--not necessarily be running around in he sewers splicing cable, but to be able to work on a computer,--you know,--and that kind of stuff. And we are starting to see some daughters come into the job now,--you know. And I think it was a way to kind of appeal to some of the men,--you know. I mean,--you have to find men you can work with also. I think I probably got pushed into being into too confrontational a position, at the beginning. And if I was a calmer person, I might have been able to get through it a little easier.

J. This is interesting because a number of the women have said that.

I. Really?

J. And I ... I wonder how much it is,--you know,--the really difficult circumstances that you faced up front, and now--you know-you're able to say, Well,--you know,--looking back and in hindsight ...

I. Uh-huh. You might be right.

J. But it's ... it's interesting to see

I. Uh-huh. It might be.

J. If it would have--you know--you would have been able to accomplish what you accomplished if ...

I. I think there were some women who had it easier because they just had more easy going natures and

... Or maybe they'd had a lot of brothers,--you know,--and maybe they knew how to talk to the guys they were working with a little easier. But I think you're right. Maybe with hindsight, you ... you ...you forget the real anger and hostility that everybody went through.

J. Yeah. Well, can you think of any other pieces of advice or pieces of the puzzle that we left out that you would like to add to the record?

I. Just ... I think I would like to see the Unions and CLUW,--you know,--and the official structures just deal more with ... with women's problems than they are. But, of course, we're living in a time where it's real difficult for the Unions to deal--you know--aggressively with anything because, like, so much of bargaining in the last few years--you know,--really in the whole 1980s,--has been defensive,--you know. And so much of what we're dealing with is ... is job loss that it's been real hard to win anything positive. And when you ... when you do win anything positive, like AT&T, the Union was able to win these provisions on child care, it was unfortunately in the context of losing tens of thousands of jobs, so it was ...

J. It doesn't seem like a victory.

I. Yeah. (laughs) It's only a victory if you keep your job,--you know. And everybody's been sort of--you know--obsessed with: Are we going to keep our jobs? Are we going to keep our health benefits? Are we going to have ... You know,--if we go on strike, are we going to be able to get back into the place at all, or are we going to have a Union,--you know? I mean,--we're talking about this in the context of the Greyhound strike going on forever, and the Eastern strike going on--you know,--for ever and ever. And,--you know,--so in a sense, there's a whole context that we didn't even talk about, about the real threat to the whole labor movement,--you know. So ...

J. The whole question of dealing with a monopoly, which ...not that it's a monopoly,

I. Yeah. Right.

J. But it's near to a monopoly. It might as well be, for all intents and purposes.

I. Right. Yeah. And dealing with ...

J. Then the whole question of replacements in a strike.

I. Right. Replacements during a strike.

J. That wasn't an issue in ...

I. It ... It was not ... They never hired permanent replacements. But they hired a lot of temporaries and they brought in professional strike breaking firms. And they were hiring young people through temporary agencies to do the ... the clerical and operator jobs. And it was pretty frightening,--you know. You'd ... I mean,--even with all the time I've spent being a Union activist, I would panic,--you know. Like every other day during the strike, I'd panic and say, Oh my God! I'm never going to get my job back,--you know? Why did we do this--you know? So it's a ... It's a real difficult context. And I think we,--you know,--we're facing the task of really trying to rebuild and entire labor movement, not just trying to deal with ... with women's problems,--you know,--and trying to get more for women in a context where,--you know--it's not even clear there's going to be any construction jobs in New York in the next few years. And so what's that going to ... how's that going to impact on women--you know? So there's tremendous, tremendous tasks of rebuilding for everybody. I just hope that we see it. (laughs)

J. Hope that we're up to it.

I. Yeah, right. Right.

J. Well, I want to thank you for your interview

I. You're welcome.

J. And for sharing your experiences.

I. Yeah. It's good to try to think about it,--you know,--and try to evaluate it.

J. Thanks.

I. Okay.