

Interview with Ilene Winkler

J.L. This is Jane Latour on December 17th, 2004, interviewing Ilene Winkler.

So Ilene, it's been a long time since we spoke. Thank you for agreeing to do this. So we're going to ... First, we're going to fill in some gaps and then we're going to talk about some new business.

I.W. Okay.

J.L. So tell me about,--you know--where you were born and your parents and ??

I.W. I was born in Providence, Rhode Island, 1943.

J.L. Speak a little louder.

I.W. Okay. My father ... Both my parents were born on the Lower East Side. My father's family moved to Rhode Island when he was a baby. He grew up there. He was a doctor. He was the first one in his family to get any kind of education. And then he got a scholarship to Brown [University] and then he wanted to be an engineer. They told him Jews couldn't do that, so they told him to become a doctor and that's what he did. And my mother grew up in Brooklyn mostly, Atlantic City a little bit, and they met upstate New York at an adult resort. And then she moved to Providence when they got married, so that's where I grew up.

J.L. And you had said that your Mom was a teacher?

I.W. Well, she went to school to be a teacher but she never worked ...

J.L. Um-hum. Okay.

I.W. ... but she subbed a little bit.

J.L. Um-hum. And you said that she was pro-union.

I.W. Yeah.

J.L. And ... and was your Dad ... I mean, did you grow up in a liberal household?

I.W. No! (laughs) My mother ... My mother's sister was very active with the Communist Party for a while and in the '30's and so my mother kind of had this liberalism, having grown up in New York. But my father was extremely conservative and so he would never let her do anything politically or anything. So no, not at all.

J.L. Um-hum. Yeah.

I.W. But because he was Jewish he was very into sort of anti-Nazi stuff in the '40's and '50's so he subscribed to "The Nation" because they had very good coverage of all the Nazi hunting. And so I read the whole thing and that's ... I think that's where I learned a lot of Left politics growing up, 'cause it wasn't--you know,--it wasn't around Providence all that much.

J.L. Yeah. Tell me about your education.

I.W. I went to public school. I went to a high school called Classical High School that was a college prep public school; went to Bryn Mawr College; got a degree from there; started Columbia graduate school in history and lasted about two months, and now I'm getting a Master's at NYU.

J.L. In public history?

I.W. No. It's actually ... the Master's will be in Liberal Studies, 'cause that's the program I could get into, but all the courses were in public history.

J.L. Okay.

I.W. Pretty much. Yeah.

J.L. And since you brought that up at this point, what's your goal? What do you want to do with it?

I.W. I want to become an oral historian, and here I am at the other end of the microphone.

J.L. Yeah. Well, that's 'cause you've lived an interesting life. Tell me about jobs that you had prior to going to work for the phone company. You said that you worked for a publishing company?

I.W. Yeah.

J.L. What was the name ...

I.W. I mean, you don't care about the junk jobs. Right?

J.L. No. But just in terms of the publishing company, what was the name?

I.W. I worked for Gossett and Dunlap. Well, before that I worked for the State of New York in a poverty program. I don't know if I ever mentioned that.

J.L. No.

I.W. That was in the mid-'60-s.

J.L. Um-hum. Good work, low pay?

I.W. No. They ... Actually, it was ... it was ... it was high pay. They kept giving us more and more money because AFSCME had organized it very briefly before the Taylor Law. And they kept upgrading the job and upgrading the pay and by the time I left we were making, like, ten thousand a year and we were putting kids in jobs that paid \$32 a week. It was kind of ridiculous.

J.L. So you left because ...

I.W. I left to do ... I left to work for the Peace And Freedom Party full time and I did kind of movement stuff for a couple of years. I met people at that job, actually. Kim Moody was one of the people.

J.L. Oh!

I.W. So I got involved with them.

J.L. Okay. And then ... then you went to work for the publishing company?

I.W. And then I went ... then I was working temps and I fell into this publishing job for a couple of years.

J.L. And that was Gossett and Dunlap.

I.W. Gossett and Dunlap.

J.L. And your job was? You said it was a low level ...

I.W. It was copy editing.

J.L. Copy editing.

I.W. Copy editing, proofreading.

J.L. So now, you ... we're just going to be filling in blanks so this is skipping from subject to subject. But Bell Wringer,--it's W-R-I-N-G-E-R.

I.W. Right.

J.L. So what's the significance of that?

I.W. Well, some people used to call it Bell Winkler,--

J.L. Oh!

I.W. Right?--cute. I think ... I'm trying to remember. I think we got the name because Local 1150, there was a group that had something called the Bell Buster and I think we kind of played off of them.

J.L. Hmm. Okay. So now, you seem to have ... I've ... I've been going through the files and I came up with all these fliers and activities you've been involved with. You were part of the Labor Support Network in New York and you ... you spoke about some of this, the Labor Notes conferences, and you seem to have a left perspective. But rather than me characterizing your politics, how would you characterize them?

I.W. How would I characterize them? Socialist, democratic from below, a lot of emphasis on ... on unions and working class. And then ... Well, the first things I got involved in when I was in college were civil rights activities.

J.L. You were in college what year?

I.W. In '61 to '65 so I was ... My ... One of my close friends was involved with CORE so I used to go on picket lines and do stuff like that. And sometimes we would be white testers,--you know--for blacks trying to get into places and stuff like that. And then ... and then I got involved in anti-war stuff when I came to New York, and then the Women's Movement in the early '70's.

J.L. And so now, you mentioned ... Well, do you want to say anything about women's stuff that you were involved with in the early '70s? What was happening in New York City?

I.W. Well, some of it was internal left stuff of women--you know--kind of figuring out that they ... that we had been playing this really--you know--very restricted role in ... in organizations and so a lot of it was ... was that. And then ... My interest was always labor women so I did some support work, which is kind of gone in my mind what it was, and then got involved with CLUW and ...

J.L. Well, I had this question later on, but I wanted to ask you about CLUW. But let's talk about CLUW, since you brought it up. You joined CLUW. CLUW was formed, I think, in '74.

I.W. Yeah. And I actually went to the founding conference.

J.L. You did? And what was that like: exciting? Where was it, Chicago?

I.W. It was in Chicago, which was exciting to get there 'cause the runways were frozen but ... It was very weird. I think, looking back on it, that the young lefty women like myself did not play a good role in poli-- ... I think we did not appreciate the struggles of the older women. You know? I think ... this is a middle-age perspective looking back on it. But I think there was ... because it was formed in '74, you had this combination of trade union women who'd really been fighting their whole lives to get to the point of forming something like CLUW and a bunch of young lefties who were, first of all, bickering with each other,--you know-'cause it was the mid-70s, and ...

J.L. And also feeling excluded.

I.W. Feeling excluded and also not ... and also being pretty disrespectful of the older women for not being radical enough.

J.L. And I think also not understanding the AFL structure, not only the structure but the way that the AFL worked?

I.W. Yeah, not understanding any of it. That's one of the things that I think really was not helpful about the left in the '70s was ... was the behavior in CLUW.

J.L. So how long were you active with CLUW and what kind of things did you do?

I.W. I was active for a few years. In New York,--New York was much better than those national conferences--I worked in a project where we tried to compile education on maternity benefits,--you know-'cause this was the point when the whole struggle was going on over ... over women being able to ...

J.L. Right; to get maternity benefits.

I.W. ... to get pregnancy disability and to get maternity benefits and to get the right to keep working. So we ... we had a project where we compiled a lot of information on that. And I think that was, in a way, the genesis of this ... the stuff that **Nancy's** _____ doing in California,--you know?--'cause I remember her from then. That's kind of what put this in her mind. We did model contract clauses. I'm trying to remember. That's what I remember mostly about it, was ... was that project that I was involved with that I thought was real interesting. And I joined CLUW many years later again.

J.L. Now, you mentioned that you attended a Northeast Trade Union Summer School for Women Workers.

I.W. Um-hum.

J.L. And did you ever go more than once or you went once? Or ...

I.W. No. I went the once. It was the first ... It was the year that we had decided we were going to run a slate in the union election and no women had ever run before and we were terrified. And ...

J.L. So you wanted to get some ...

I.W. So I figured--you know--let me get some experience and stuff, and it was a wonderful experience 'cause I went there feeling like I would be ostracized 'cause I was running in an opposition slate and I didn't get that feeling at all. People were great.

J.L. Where was it?

I.W. Where was it? Rutgers, I think,

J.L. In New Brunswick.

I.W. Yeah.

J.L. And excuse me, so they had, like, basic courses. And are ... are there any women who participated that you know, that you could name, that you could remember?

I.W. There was ... Nothing that's coming to addled brain right now.

J.L. Um-hum. So what ... what year was that?

I.W. Probably '80--some time in the mid-'80s. But it was great 'cause they had a dorm for CWA,--you know,--a floor and another floor for a different union, and so you got to spend the week with ... with women from your union, which was really fun,--you know?---which was real nice experience.

J.L. It sounds good.

I.W. Yeah. But I don't remember much of the details except for getting into a fight with somebody about smoking. (laughs)

J.L. A premature anti-smoker. So, United Tradeswomen ... In 1980, you were a featured speaker at a panel. It was called "Blue Collar Women: Organizing To Survive" and you spoke along with Connie Reyes and Vicki Garvin. And even though you spoke in your interview about women in construction needing their own organization,--and that's a whole other discussion and I ... I understand what you're saying--can you talk about some of the benefits gained from women seeing themselves together in these new fields that women were trying to conquer in blue-collar jobs?

I.W. You mean like United Trades--

J.L. Some of the benefits,

I.W. Yeah.

J.L. ... 'cause you participated in that.

I.W. Yeah.

J.L. And so what were some of the benefits of that?

I.W. I think the solidarity,--you know?--and having other women to talk to about what it was you were going through was just so important. I don't think I ever would have survived the phone company if I had not found three or four other women to go to lunch with,--you know--at the beginning when I was in school. 'Cause when I was in six month school this whole bunch of us used to go have lunch together. I don't think I ever would have survived it if I had had to do it by myself, I think it was invaluable.

J.L. It's interesting because by 1980 you were already kind of a veteran for this...

I.W. Yeah. Right.

J.L. ... and so you were ... you were somebody who could say,--you know--I've ... I've done this, I've survived, so it made sense to have you as a speaker.

I.W. Yeah, although ...

J.L. Do you remember anything about that panel? Was it just ...

I.W. No, real blurred.

J.L. It was at Rutherford ... on Rutherford Place at the Friends Meeting House.

I.W. There were things I don't remember. I had six months of chemo and there are things that have fallen out of my head so that's one of them.

J.L. Well, I have a wonderful flier with your name on it and ... and I've heard about it from other women so I just thought ...

I.W. Really?

J.L. Yeah.

I.W. I remember it's the same ??

J.L. Memorable. In fact, I'm going to be interviewing Connie Reyes soon so ... Okay. So now also, another flier that I found ...

I.W. You know, but ...

J.L. Go ahead.

I.W. United Tradeswomen for telephone women ... for women who were not in construction you always felt kind of like you had shown up with ... wearing ruffles,--you know--because you weren't macho enough, like everybody else. You know?

J.L. Yeah. They've admitted, hindsight, that they were--you know--they were kind of the poster girls for women going into non-traditional, but they were very macho and they ...

I.W. Yeah. But they needed to be. They needed to ...

J.L. They needed to be to survive.

I.W. Yeah.

J.L. Yeah.

I.W. No. I didn't resent them for it. You know?

J.L. Right. Yeah, right.

I.W. I think they were ... right. They needed ... their situation was so totally different they needed it. You know? It was the rest of us that ... that felt kind of funny. But ...

J.L. That's ... that's funny 'cause usually they're the ones that feel funny, odd.

I.W. Really.

J.L. But so there were benefits, though, distinct benefits to United Tradeswomen?

I.W. Oh yeah. Yeah. It was great even for me,--you know--and I wasn't in the kind of horrible situation that they were.

J.L. Um-hum. Okay. So you also participated in Labor Notes activities?

I.W. Yeah. I still do.

J.L. ... and you did a fund raising party. The fourth conference, which was in Detroit, and you ... you and Ken Nash organized a fundraiser at 1199. And you ... you talked in your interview, you spoke about doing some workshops at Labor Notes.

I.W. Yeah. That was the fundraiser that I think was the same night as the Mets won the World Series or something like that.

J.L. So ... But you ... you've been involved with Labor Notes ??

I.W. Yeah. I still am. I ... I edited part of the new "Troublemakers' Handbook" that's coming out ??

J.L. Yeah. Okay. So do you remember anything about the workshops that you've done? Have you specifically geared them towards women?

I.W. I honestly don't remember.

J.L. Okay. You know, I remember the first AUD conference I ever attended and you were one of the speakers and that's the day I met you.

I.W. Really?

J.L. So I remember that. Okay. So when ... when last we spoke you were just about to run for Treasurer and you were just getting ready to audit the books for [Local] 1101.

I.W. Boy, this was a long time ago.

J.L. Yeah. And so ...

I.W. What year ... when was that, '87?

J.L. You know ...

I.W. Was that the first time or the second time?

J.L. It was the first time and you were ... so your slogan was "It's time for a change," and your slate ... you had seven people on the slate. You had ... It's pretty impressive. You had three women, two white men and two black women,

I.W. And two black men.

J.L. I mean, two black men.

I.W. Um-hum.

J.L. So ...

I.W. We had

J.L. Talk about what happened after that election. That ... what kind of results did you get the first ??

I.W. We got, I think, about a third of the vote. We published a lot of information about the way the local was spending money. We discovered a lot of ... a lot of sort of slush-fundy kind of expense, a lot of bar bills, a lot of money being spent on cars and parking spaces and stuff like that. The ... And we had, like ... It was the first time women had ever run. Doris Edwards was the first black woman who had ever run. I think we made a big difference in talking about the fact that the local didn't represent everybody, and what the ... what the Executive Board was not doing, but we never managed to get past that,--you know,--I think, in terms of building a broader coalition that could have won. But the ... the Bell Wringer as a group and as a newspaper lasted for several years and, I think, made a tremendous difference in giving people information and giving them a forum where they could speak, and giving them an alternative sense of unionism. But we never did win any elections.

J.L. So how many times did you run slates?

I.W. I think we ran twice. I was trying to remember. It was either two or three times but I think it was twice.

J.L. Um-hum. And what was that experience like for you?

I.W. Oh, it was fun.

J.L. Yeah?

I.W. It was really great. I mean, it was very terrifying at the beginning. But it was really fun to go out and speak to people. You know? We got all over the place. And I think it taught them to supplement ...

J.L. And you had to stand up there and articulate your positions and ...

I.W. Well, we had to arrange our own meetings because it wasn't the kind of local where you could ...

J.L. They were going to give you ...

I.W. They weren't going to give you a forum. And in fact, when they reported the results in the paper, they never even printed our names. They would call us Candidate A and Candidate B, or opponent or something like that so they wouldn't even have to risk putting our names in after we lost. But it was very ...

J.L. So you would have meetings in bars and ...

I.W. No. We'd have meetings at lunch hour at different work locations.

J.L. Oh, okay. Um-hum.

I.W. We had ... We had a big fundraiser once at the Newspaper Guild office that was a lot of fun. We wouldn't have too much in bars. I mean, the phone company it's better to have lunch time meetings if you can do it because the ... they all have space,--you know,--that ... either a cafeteria or something that used to be a cafeteria so you could get a better group that way. So we would just kind of--you know--stand up there and speak. And sometimes they would send people to heckle and sometimes they wouldn't, but they ... they tried to get us fired for taking up petitions,--you know,--not on ...--you know,--not on lunch hour and things like that so we had to be very, very careful. And the way that they used to do elections was a little shaky. You never knew exactly where the ballots were coming from.

J.L. Yeah. Well, you talked about trying to get the American Arbitration Association involved. Did anything ever come of that?

I.W. They did it the second time. The second time they did the election and they told us that they had never seen such a strange election. You know? They were kind of telling people that, hey, maybe you should do something about appealing this because it ... it clearly looked like it was not on the up and up.

J.L. So the second election, can you remember the results about what that represented?

I.W. What ... what happened in the second election,--this was really what ... what I think led to the group dissolving, is that a third slate ran that was mostly white:

J.L. Uh-huh.

I.W. Chief Stewards. They only had one black person running and he ran against ours for the same position. I mean, they were clearly designed to sabotage us, I think, not to ... to really win. And we tried really, really hard to work on a joint slate with them and they wouldn't. I think they were a stalking horse for somebody on the Board that was thinking about running himself. And we ended up coming in third, which was a real devastating blow, which meant we didn't even have standing to appeal.

J.L. So then you said that that had an impact on the group overall.

I.W. Yeah. We just kind of fizzled.

J.L. After all that time.

I.W. Yeah. Doris [Edwards] retired and then gradually other people started retiring. One thing that we did, though, that I think was really lasting is we did ... based on the experiences that I've had in CLUW I wrote up a whole fact sheet on how pregnancy disability was supposed to work and how people could get paid if they were out sick during their pregnancy, which was normally not the case at that time, and I think I helped a lot of women. You know?

J.L. Yeah.

I.W. That ... that was one lasting effect and now that's really not an issue any more.

J.L. Yeah. Although I've found, working with women from the Post Office, that anything like rights about FMLA or ... people just don't understand how it works and it's hard to get that information out about ...

I.W. Right. They still don't and we did a lot of education on that. But at least now in the phone company you ... if you get sick during pregnancy you can get paid for it, which you couldn't until we started this campaign. They just disregarded the whole thing.

J.L. So you ... you had mentioned that--and, of course, with the history it's pretty clear,--but the tremendous racial divisions within your local, within the Company. Do you want to say anything about that? I know you paid ... paid a lot of ... I've been through the files at NYU for your local.

I.W. Yeah.

J.L. And I know you paid a lot of attention to that in the Bell Wringer and ...

I.W. Yeah. When we started ... when I started working there it was just the beginning of the affirmative action program and the ... the crafts were ... were--the top crafts were all white men. The next level down was more mixed, more African-American and some Hispanic men. And then there were these huge job categories that were all black women and it was very ...

J.L. Such as? The clerks? The operators? The what?

I.W. Yeah. Yeah, clerks,

J.L. Yeah.

I.W. Operators, and then all these things that got ... that got called miscellaneous in our contract, which is probably the majority of women in 1101. And so it was a really bad situation. And the Executive Board has always been, with ... with just a couple of exceptions, all white men. It's changed now. There's a lot more women in the inside crafts, not the stuff on the street, and there's a lot ... and the ... the Installation and Repair and Splicing Force is a lot more mixed than it used to be. You see a lot more young black men doing the job than you used to. Those jobs have ... Women have not made much of a dent in them.

J.L. On any of the score ... of those ...

I.W. On the ... the inside crafts there's lots and lots and lots of women. We have been able to get figures but not on the outside. But racially at the beginning it was really a bad situation. And there's still nobody black on the board. There was one person, he retired, he got replaced by another Irish guy.

J.L. Um-hum. Okay. So let's talk a bit about organizing as women. And you had spoken about the Women's Committee and the work you had done and the original Women's Committee and then the union appointed some women.

I.W. Um-hum.

J.L. And there was a conference that ...

I.W. Yeah.

J.L. You did a fundraiser to send women to and ...

I.W. Right.

J.L. So ... so you want to talk about the Women's Committee, sort of a brief history of ...

I.W. Well, there's different women's committees. There was a ... there was a Women's Committee that started out in the bathroom of the Second Avenue Phone Building. I think that's probably the one we were talking about,--that started out because of an incident of some women getting suspended for something that they thought was real unfair. And ... and somebody invited me to join it. We met in the ... in the Women's Lounge, the bathroom essentially, for a while and then sent somebody up to the Executive Board to ask for recognition as a Committee. And then what they did instead was they appointed that woman and a few other women to the committee and the rest of us just got left out in the cold.

J.L. So that Committee was unsuccessful in reaching out to women in a broad way and ...

I.W. that clearly wasn't ... Well, I'll talk about this later,--an appointed Committee--'cause I ended up on an appointed Women's Committee,--appointed committees are very restricted in what they can do. They did have ...

J.L. How do they get restricted?

I.W. Well, 'cause they ... this is a local that doesn't have committees. It only occasionally has a women's committee when ... when they start thinking that women are getting a little restless about not being represented. So they tell you what you can do. They give you no budget. They give you no time off. They give you no support staff and so it's very hard for you to do anything. What that first committee did is that they had this conference at a hotel at LaGuardia Airport and we picketed it. We got about a hundred women--about a hundred women to sign a leaflet saying that we thought it should be an open, democratic Women's Committee that anybody could join and we caused a big fuss at the conference and that Committee didn't last too much longer than that. But I don't think that's what you're asking about. I think you're asking about a ... a conference in Boston. Right?

J.L. Yeah. There was a ... a CWA Women's Conference in Boston.

I.W. Yeah. Right.

J.L. Was that sponsored by the International or the regional?

I.W. It was probably sponsored by District 1, which is regional and we ... there have been a few of these things, and I had paid my own way once to go to one in Albany. And then they had this one in Boston and again,--you know--they sent the hand selected people. And we held a fundraiser at one of the bars on Murray Street that we ... we said in The Bell Wringer that ... Actually, I don't remember if it was The Bell Wringer or just a sort of ad hoc collection of women that did it, but it was The Bell Wringer inspiration. And we said we were going to have this fundraiser and anybody who wanted to go to the conference who helped with the fundraiser would get some of the money. And so we had this big, successful fundraiser and we sent a bunch of women up to this conference, which was really cool. You know?

J.L. Yeah, it was. Yeah. And so out of these conferences what ... did anything translate into action or programs or ...

I.W. No, not really.

J.L. No. But they were ...

I.W. Just consciousness-raising and fun.

J.L. Fun and consciousness-raising. I had occasion to go through the records out in Austin, Texas of CWA ...

I.W. Really!

J.L. ... when I was working at ... as a CWA archivist for NYU they sent me out there. I was so amazed to see the small amount of material about women in the files.

I.W. Um-hum. Um-hum.

J.L. Which is kind of shocking to think that we went through this period of the women's movement with so little ...

I.W. Yep.

J.L. It was ... it was very disappointing. Okay. So you had talked about ...

I.W. But I have to talk about the actual appointed Women's Committee that I ended up on before we leave,

J.L. Okay. That's right.

I.W. Because it was completely the opposite experience. It was so weird.

J.L. Okay. Let's talk about that. So how did that come about?

I.W. After The Bell Wringer dissolved it was just kind of a couple of years of frustration. And then there was a split on the Executive Board and my Chief Steward started baiting me about whether I was supporting the opposition, which I wasn't because I couldn't stand the guy. And somehow out of that they decided

that I was a potential friend because I wasn't, at that moment, a potential enemy and I got invited--just out of the blue I got invited to go to a Political Action conference that the local was having in Rye, New York, or something like that. It was so weird. You know? I ... I spent a weekend with people that I normally--you know--would ... they never would have allowed me in the same room with them. But I figured I would go and see what was going on. And out of that they had just decided to set up another one of these appointed Women's Committees and they asked me if I wanted to be on it. And so I ended up on this committee for about six years until I retired. And it was such a strange experience because I was doing all the things that I had been out leaf-letting against. And I'm not exactly sure why I did it.

J.L. What ... what kinds of issues were they addressing? What kind of work? What ...

I.W. Well, what they ...

J.L. What are some specifics?

I.W. Well, the first thing that they wanted us to do was a project about breast cancer awareness. This Committee started out with six people and then it gradually grew to sixteen. And then they got mad at us and it went back to six again. Yes, isn't it? Well, actually it turned out to be really helpful 'cause when I got breast cancer I got these contacts.

J. L. Which was what year?

I.W. 2000. So that really--you know--I mean, that was wonderful that--you know--as it turned out. So we did ... we ... we participated in the Share Walkathon and we did some education in the different buildings and stuff. And there was also a project going on around the same time that some of the women were involved in, and getting some people signed up for the Bone Marrow Registry so it was a very different kind of activity.

J.L. Yeah.

I.W. ... than the opposition stuff.

J.L. Um-hum. But worthwhile.

I.W. Well, yes. In some ways I think it was very worthwhile because our options were so limited at that point of what we could do, and I got to learn a lot about the union from a completely different light. You know? I got to ...

Side Two

J.L. So, Ilene, talking on Side Two of the same tape and tell me about your ... you were talking about the Women's Committee and ...

I.W. Yeah, the Women's Committee I was on as opposed to the Women's Committee I was out protesting against.

J.L. Right. Yeah.

I.W. We did actually a lot of stuff. We did several dinners on women's history. We did a project on the history of women in the local with Debra's [Bernhardt] help and the help of Cornell and that's actually what got me

interested in going to graduate school. We interviewed mostly women in the non-traditional jobs, the women who had been, like, the first Installers or first Splicers and that stuff and then we did an eight page brochure on it.

J.L. Do you have a copy of that?

I.W. Yeah. I'll send you one.

J.L. Okay.

I.W. Only, of course, since it was done under the union auspices ?? be critical of anything. But--you know ... But it was really fun.

J.L. Yeah.

I.W. And we have photographs and,--you know--and I think people really liked it. We did tutoring for ... at that point there was a program going on where women could get upgrades. It was a program called Next Step that involved going to college one day a week and a lot of women were coming into the local who had no technical background because they passed the ... the entrance test for this program and so we did tutoring for them.

J.L. Um-hum.

I.W. We taught them basic electricity and ... and-you know--and stuff like that so they ... they could get through the ... at least through the test and through the beginning of the program.

J.L. Did many women take advantage of that?

I.W. Yes, a lot of women because you couldn't get a normal upgrade, as it's called, and so a lot of women had been stuck in the business office, in particular, for many, many years. And because this program was so strangely designed and the union had insisted that it be open to everybody, not just craft, a lot of women were able to come in at this pay that was above regular top craft into this college program with absolutely no background which caused tremendous tension, as you could imagine. Like somebody walks in with twenty-seven years, doesn't know what she's doing, takes Christmas vacation and then needs to be trained on the job and she's making more money than everybody else is so it was very rough. So I think we did a lot to help women going into that program. And I ... I did it for a while. I dropped out. What else did we do?

J.L. How well attended were your dinners?

I.W. Well, at the beginning they were great. They were really crowded. There'd be, like, a hundred, a hundred fifty people. By the last one they were not well attended at all because there had been conflicts over the Committee. A lot of women had been kicked off the Committee by ... when there was a change in Local President so there was a lot of resentment at that point and it was kind of fizzling out. So the last one was bad. But up to that point they were great. You know? They were really a lot of fun. And I got to go to a couple of conferences. You know? Here I was,--you know--in the '80s protesting against them picking who goes to conferences and then in the '90's I'm going to conferences. But that's what I was doing.

J.L. Okay. You had talked about the various issues for women and you outlined a lot of different issues: safety and health, promotions, flex time,

child care. What ... do you ... You know, having spent your life at the phone company or a large part,--you know ... How many years?

I.W. Twenty-eight.

J.L. Twenty-eight.

I.W. Yeah.

J.L. So you see real progress--progress? How would you characterize the progress?

I.W. Well, ...

J.L. In terms of women's working lives?

I.W. Within the union I don't know that there's been any progress at all.

J.L. In terms of the labor ?? or ...

I.W. I hate this ...

J.L. In representing women's issues consciousness?

I.W. Yeah, in terms of the union because there is at the moment no Women's Committee. I don't know if there are any women Chief Stewards. This current administration seems to be totally uninterested in developing this at all. And ...

J.L. That would be a pool of about how many, if we ...

I.W. There's thousands of women.

J.L. Thousands.

I.W. Yeah. There's a lot ...

J.L. But, I mean, in terms of Chief Stewards how many would that be?

I.W. There are about sixty.

J.L. Sixty.

I.W. Yeah. I think women are ... there have been ... Due to women that I was on the Women's Committee with, there are a couple of Chief--women Chief Stewards. There were some successful fights to upgrade the pay of women who had been doing jobs that in the '70s were done by top craft guys and then the jobs got automated and downgraded and there were successful fights to get equal pay back for those women, finally settled by the ... the 2000 contract. So there's a lot of women making a lot more money than when we first started. So in that sense there's been progress. But within the union at this point it's really hard to say because the young people are pretty alienated from the union and so my generation has retired. And it's particularly acute with the women, because the women who retired, who were really strong secondary leadership have not been replaced.

J.L. Child care is such a big issue for women workers. I mean, it's a family issue but it really falls on the women.

I.W. Yeah.

J.L. And I know that the CWA got some funding for some child care program, a pilot or what? Has anything come of that in Local 1101?

I.W. Not that I ... not that I know of. There is money ... under the contract there's money for people who make under a certain amount of money to get some help with child care. But in terms of actual setting up child care facilities, nothing that I'm aware of, nothing at all.

J.L. No surveys, no ... nothing.

I.W. No, not that I'm know of. Now, I haven't been there for three years but I never heard anybody mention it. I think there is a certain amount of flexibility now that didn't exist say, twenty, thirty years ago in terms of people's home responsibilities. You know? When we started it was horrible. I think it's somewhat more flexible now, but I don't think there's been a lot of progress at all.

J.L. You mean flexible in terms of flex time or flexible in terms of support for women from their families or ...

I.W. No, in terms of people needing emergency leave.

J.L. Uh-huh. Okay.

I.W. You know? I saw in my job a little more flexibility as time went on, -you know?--a little more understanding of ... of family issues.

J.L. And that's real crucial.

I.W. And FMLA made a big difference when ... although the union had to go through a huge struggle to get the company to actually follow the law.

J.L. But they did. They pursued it?

I.W. Yeah. Yeah. But they pursued it more in terms of the absence plan than in terms of family issues.

J.L. And as you pointed out in your last interview,--and it's so true; it's become even ... people have become more conscious of the whole sandwich generation and elder care and ... yeah, so important. So in terms of ... Let's turn to the issue, my favorite issue, at the phone company which is sexual harassment of women in the non-trad jobs. And it seems to me that based on work I did with the Association for Union Democracy, when I was there in 2000--2000-2001, we had a committee for a short while with women from CWA who seemed to have gross problems.

I.W. Yep.

J.L. And there was a lot of issues of foremen and foremen who were working as instructors, which is the system there for them to be the teachers, and men who were out and out, totally hostile to women.

I.W. Right.

J.L. And then the company settling these longstanding grievances against women and enforcing an agreement that women couldn't talk about them.

I.W. Right.

J.L. And there is a whole history of settlements ...

I.W. And then ... and then the women would get transferred.

J.L. And could you speak about that kind of history of what ...

I.W. Yeah. Well, of course, by definition you don't necessarily know about it. Right?

J.L. Right. But, I mean,

...

I.W. But, and this was one of the things that ... that ...

J.L. It was interesting to me how fiercely people seemed committed to organizing and to meeting and to doing something and it quickly collapsed. I mean, we did some work.

I.W. Really?

J.L. And then it just sort of like, everybody lost ...

I.W. Why?

J.L. I ... I never knew; everybody lost will. And I don't know what had happened. I don't know if people were threatened. I don't know ...

I.W. We were never able ... the Women's Committee, when I was on it, we tried to deal with this but we got stymied by the union and it was one of the things that, I think, led to the committee being dissolved. I think that there's a lot of ... Let me see how to put this without--you know--to be fair. I think on a certain level there's a commitment from the union that everybody should be treated properly, but when it comes down to fighting the grievances they haven't done it. And they haven't done it in some of these garages. I mean, this is a problem that's really most acute, I think, with the splicing garages and the places where there's a tiny number of women.

J.L. Um-hum. What are the splicing garages?

I.W. You know, the big garages where people drive the big trucks out of.

J.L. Um-hum. The trucks that you hardly ever see a woman ... women driving.

I.W. Yeah. Right. Right.

J.L. On Labor Day this year I saw two women in my neighborhood in a Verizon truck.

I.W. Uh-huh.

J.L. So I went to talk to them, of course.

I.W. Were they on forced overtime or ... or ...

J.L. I didn't ask them that.

I.W. (laughs) Yeah. But there's very few women doing it. And there ... there was one situation that kept coming up over and over and over again of a third level manager, who's pretty high,--I mean, that's a high level manager,--who just ran the place like ...like a tyranny. And ...

J.L. A garage?

I.W. Yeah.

J.L. Yeah.

I.W. And he would drive out every single woman that managed to get an upgrade into that garage. Nobody lasted. And we couldn't do anything about it. The union would not confront him because he was so vicious that at one point I think, when people tried to confront him about something,--I don't even remember if it was this,--he went and he got the LM-2 showing how much money the Chief Steward and a bunch of guys were making and he put it out in ... in the craft lounge. I mean, he made it very clear that he was going to retaliate viciously if anybody challenged his power.

J.L. And the company? What about the Company?

I.W. This is a company guy. That's what I'm saying.

J.L. Yeah, I know. But, I mean, the Company is supposed to have a sexual harassment policy. The company is supposed to act on it. The Company is liable.

I.W. Right. Well, that's why you get to the ...

J.L. The Company never ...

I.W. No. That's why you get the private settlements,--you know?--because somebody will end up out on a Disability, having a nervous breakdown, and then somehow,--you know--she'll get a lawyer or the company will settle it and ... But nobody would discipline these people. Now, I don't know if this particular guy is still there but ... but this is what would happen. And when we would try to do something public about it we would be told: don't do that. It's in the grievance procedure. Don't do that. You'll jeopardize the settlement. And the women would be out having nervous breakdowns so that they couldn't do anything. It was terrible! It was really a bad situation.

J.L. And it seems to me that it probably still is.

I.W. Yeah. I would suspect.

J.L. 'Cause I ?? [has] anything changed?

I.W. Yeah. I would be really surprised. It was awful. Now, in the inside crafts I don't think it was as bad a situation. I mean, you would ... you would get problems but you would also start getting the kind of problems of craftswoman dates the foreman, then they break up and then,--you know--everybody's trying ... Oh God. (laughs) Oh my God, why,--you know,--how do I do this.

J.L. Um-hum. Yes.

I.W. How do I protect this woman? I mean, you get several of those. But ... but the,--you know--the serious real sexual harassment we didn't get as bad.

J.L. But inside there's more ... there's more women.

I.W. there's more women and ... and ...

J.L. So it makes a difference when ...

I.W. And the lights are on. You can see what's going on more. You know?

J.L. So one of the big issues for the phone company ... I mean, we see this merger now with Sprint and some other--

I.W. Nextel.

J.L. Nextel,--that's wireless. But the technology changes are immense and the implications for the union and the jobs.

I.W. ?? really bad.

J.L. so I have a ... Really, really bad. So do you want to talk a little bit about that, about how that's impacting the ability to ... of the Union to have a ...

I.W. I think it's impacting in a couple of ways, one of which is that over the years our contracts were very strong, saying that they had to offer early retirement before they could lay off. So the whole generation of people that came in that actually organized this union and went on strike for seven months in '71 and were union activists before everything became so rigid and bureaucratized, that whole generation is leaving now and it's not clear that it's being replaced by people who have the same kind of commitment to the union. So that's, like, in 1101 I know that that's a really serious issue for a lot of people is what's going to happen with these younger people because they came into a union where the same people have basically been in office since the '70s and they're older than these kids' parents now,--you know?--that kind of ... their grandparents age really. So that's an issue. But it has meant that it's ... the technological change, and ... and not only the technological change but the legal changes that split up who does what work really threatens the power of the union and all-you know,-in very serious ways because we used to control the job all the way to the customer's phone so the installation and Repair and Operators and people had a lot of power. We don't do that any more. We only take ... We don't provide ... provide dial tone to the phone. The job is split up to a million different kinds of companies. So it's not clear that we can have the same impact. And in 2-2000, the last ... last year, the last contract,--they didn't strike. It was the first time they ever worked without a

contract. Now, I think they got a pretty good contract 'cause the Company wasn't prepared for that, but who knows what's going to happen next time. You know? I mean, health ... health benefits are a big huge issue for--you know--for a ... for an industry ...

J.L. So the last contract was 2003?

I.W. '03, and they're in a five year contract right now. You know? But we're in these ... one of these kind of classic situations of an industrial union with a big huge pension liability and retiree health care liability and a shrinking work force so, as a retiree, this is pretty scary.

J.L. I've always been struck by ... It seems that--you know--when you see the workers out on strike from CWA, 1101, it seems pretty impressive when you get seven thousand people at a rally ...

E.W. Yeah.

J.L. 'Cause the people seem to have consciousness.

I.W. Um-hum.

J.L. Which is sort of ?? You know?

I.W. Yeah. And there's always been a tradition of, 'no contract, no work,' which--you know--now is different. But, yeah, when they call ... and they've developed--the District developed this thing a long time ago about wearing red on Thursdays which people originally thought was really stupid, but it's ver--it's really impressive. It's really, really impressive to see thousands of people wearing red T-shirts. It shows a level of union consciousness that's really good.

J.L. There were thousands of workers at the September Labor Day rally, September 1st, I think it was, when the Republicans were in town.

E.W. Oh yeah. Right.

J.L. Yeah. ?? rent demonstration I saw.

I.W. Yeah. Oh, I have pictures. I have great pictures of, like,--you know--marching to Wall Street and--you know--all these pictures that people would wear the T-shirts were loads of fun.

J.L. So you retired in what year?

I.W. 2001, the end of 2001.

J.L. And what ... what led to your decision to retire?

I.W. Well, I had been out on disability for about ten months when I had breast cancer. And when I went back it was very, very rough. My health wasn't all that good. I really had a lot of trouble with it. And then ... and then September 11th was a whole other thing 'cause we were down there. My office, at that point, was sort of a critical center and so we worked just incredibly

long hours for a couple of months. And in the midst of that, in the midst of all this mandatory overtime, they sent out an announcement saying that we were surplus-ed and then--by mistake, and then they had to pull it back.

J.L. Yeah. They were doing that big lay off right after, ?? eight hundred ...

I.W. But then ... No. It wasn't ?? hundred--this wasn't the lay off.

J.L. No?

I.W. This was before. This was when they were starting to downsize. And so the ... the end of 2001 they sent out a real announcement that we were surplus-ed and they made a really good retirement offer. And I had had such a rough time after I came back to work, after being sick, that I just said okay, it's time.

J.L. This is the time. But explain to me the difference between surplus and lay off.

I.W. Well, the surplus is what they have to go through first before they can lay off.

J.L. Okay.

I.W. When they declare a surplus then they have to offer the early retirement first. And then, if they don't get enough people, then they can lay off.

J.L. Okay. I see.

I.W. The reason that they laid people off after that was that they had used up, basically, everybody that was willing to leave. And they gave us such a good buy out that the first year you were out was roughly equivalent to your base pay, if you had been there for a long time. Plus, we got money to go back to school so that's what I did.

J.L. That's great.

I.W. Yeah.

J.L. So ... so what was your retirement date?

I.W. December 29th, 2001.

J.L. Wow.

I.W. Yeah.

J.L. So ... and you retired ... what was your title when you retired?

I.W. Central Office Technician. I started out being Switchman.

J.L. Right. And so now you're in school and you're getting your Master's.

I.W. Yeah.

J.L. And I know that you've been active with SHARE.

I.W. Yeah.

J.L. And I wondered if you wanted to say something about that. I mean, that's a wonderful organization that helps other women with cancer.

I.W. Um-hum.

J.L. And so what's that involvement mean to you?

I.W. Well, I trained as a hotline counselor and so I ... I work up there as a volunteer Wednesday mornings answering hotline calls from women who ... Usually it's women who just found out that they have cancer. And so we talk to them and we match them up with people who have a similar diagnosis or have been through similar chemo or something. And I also go to a ... an exercise ... sort of exercise support kind of thing on ... once a week. So I've gotten more involved with the breast cancer community and I'm planning ... And SHARE also does a lot of educationals and so I've been trying to learn that. And I'm planning to start, once school is out, getting involved with the advocacy conferences and stuff and I think we're going to be concentrating ... all the breast cancer organizations are starting to concentrate much more on issues of access to health care so we're going to be working on that.

J.L. Okay.

I.W. Yeah.

J.L. Are you active with ... You're in school so that's very consuming in terms of time and energy. But are there any other organizing things that you're doing that you want to talk about?

I.W. Well, I did the work with Labor Notes, editing "The Troublemakers' Handbook" and I ... Yeah.

J.L. Um-hum. You were in the first one.

I.W. Yeah.

J.L. Yeah. So are you in this

I.W. No. I'm not in this one.

J.L. Not this one.

I.W. Not this one, just ... just as a thank you. And I've been doing stuff for school ... I've been trying to do stuff sort of documenting my generation of labor activists. I've done a lot of work on doing interviews with CWA people on the '71 strike and I just finished a project on women-women and activism in 1101.

J.L. Oh.

I.W. Yeah, which is cool. And I'm doing a lot of work on the CETA program 'cause there was organizing going on in New York ... There's a lot of conflicts between DC 37 and CETA workers and a lot of organizing around that so I'm doing that. That's what I hope to do somehow, I'm not sure how, this ...

J.L. Retrieving this lost history of activism.

I.W. Yeah. Yeah. Right, which is the same thing you're doing. Right.

J.L. Which is wonderful. I high--I heartily approve. Anything else that you want to talk about? You want to reflect on your long term commitment to this union and this organizing path that you chose?

I.W. I would love to stay active with the union. I've been talking to people ... There is a paper retiree organization but it doesn't really do anything and we've been talking--trying to convince them that we should be doing more. People are going to have to do more about Social Security now.

J.L. This is where their history resides and the people who have a great commitment, and this is a resource that should be kept.

I.W. Right. Yeah. And if I could do more of that I would like to. But the other thing is that we need to ... the Retirees are young. You know? There have been so many early retirements that ... that I would love to be able to do something with the CWA Retirees. I don't know if it will be possible.

J.L. Well, I want to thank you. Good luck.

I.W. You're welcome.

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