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Interview With Yvone Maiton

Y. Okay. You got it?

J. so we'll do a little and then we'll listen to it and see how it sounds and make sure it's recording and then we'll start again.

Y. Okay.

J. Okay. So why don't you identify yourself and tell me who you are and what Union you're in?

Y. Okay. My name is Yvone Maiton and I belong to the International Union of Operating Engineers.

J. and what Local are you in?

Y. Local 30. Um-hum.

J. and how long have you been a member of Local 30?

Y. seven years. It'll be ... It'll be seven years actually in August-September.

J. and does that include your apprenticeship period?

Y. Yes. Right. Um-hum.

Y. doesn't want to stay down?

J. Okay.

Y. (laughs)

J. so now let's try it again.

Y. Okay.

J. so how did you decide to apply for the Union membership or for the Apprentice program?

Y. Actually ... Actually, I didn't decide to do that. What happened was, I was in a program in New York Technical College ... they had a women's program and it wasn't only women but primarily women. It was called Building Maintenance And Repairs and it was a six month program. And then, when we got finished, they asked us each individually what we would like to do. And I said I would like to do something with my hands and with my brain. And so this was available to them and they put me in it. And they got me in contact ... put me in contact with the ..the Union people. And then I went out to the Union hall out in Richmond Hill, Queens, and they sent me on an interview to a couple of places and I got accepted into the job that I'm doing now.

J. So you've been at the same job?

Y. I've been at the same job, not the same facility but at the same job.

J. For the same employer?

Y. Right.

J. So then you started your formal training or apprenticeship

...

Y. Right. It was a three year apprenticeship and I went to .. Actually the school was in the Union hall itself. The Union was holding its own apprenticeship out in Richmond Hill, Queens and I did that ... Most of the time it was twice a week but sometimes it was ... we got behind it would turn into three, sometimes four, especially toward the end of the apprenticeship in the four ... in the third year we did sometimes four times a week we'd have to go from six to nine to school, after work. So .. I would start work most of the time at seven o'clock in the morning. as ... As .. as a matter of fact, I did start at seven in the morning and I worked from seven to three. and then, after work, I would go to school.

J. So I'm curious, Yvone, about the other women who were at the Technical College. Did any of the chose to go ... or did they get steered towards the Operating Engineers?

Y. Not that I ... Not that I know of. I don't remember any of the other women that went to school with me going into this trade. I know one .. I know one women in particular went into more in contracting. that's what she started doing?? doing, like working for the City or--or not for the City, actually. I think it was for some kind of agency doing .. inspecting building,-doing inspection in buildings and that kind of stuff. that's what she did, so she didn't actually go into the trades.

J. and were there any other women in your apprenticeship program with you?

Y. Yes there were. There were one, two, three, four ... there was either four or five of us, and by the third year there was only two. the other two .. The other two or ... the other three, as a matter of fact,-the other three dropped out.

J. Um-hum. Um-hum. So describe the reaction when you got on the job. what would ... What kinds of things went on in terms of

...

Y. Well, it ?? funny, 'cause when I got on the job I came into work and I had just had my brand new short, short hair cut,-- you know?-and I had been preparing for this kind of work by doing, like, weight lifting and that kind of stuff and a lot of running,-- a lot of exercise in getting ready for the job. and I was really

surprised to find that it was ... it required the minimum of physical activity. You know? It wasn't really that physical. And then I went into work and I was really very up. I remember really ... I was so happy to have gotten this job. You know? It meant I was going to be making about three thousand dollars a year more than I had been making even before that.

J. Um-hum.

Y. and ... and I had a kid to take care of so that was very important to me. and so I was really very, very happy. and I walked in and I remember seeing the men and I walked right up to them ... I was such a silly girl! I was .. It's so funny when I think about it now. I ... I went up to them and I said hello,--you know,--and I told them my name and asked them,--you know,--"What's your name?" And I went up to one guy in particular and I did that, and he just stared back at me and didn't even put out his hand. and I just stood there. and all of a sudden it was, like, all the reality just came and smacked me right in the face. This is what it's really going to be about. You know? And that was my first ... my first day at work. (obviously fake sounds roughly mimicking sobs)

J. So what was ... Now, how did it work? Did you work with a journeyman or

Y. Actually, what

J. teach you ?? in charge of your on the job instruction?

Y. Well, we ... I had one immediate supervisor and then he had a supervisor. and on my job usually your boss and your supervisor, they're very much in contact, especially if you work in a plant,--you know?--what they call a heating plant. they're very much there with the ... with the workers in terms of ... like, their office looks down into the plant so they can see everything you're doing and--you know--they'll call you ... You know? It's not like you have a boss sitting over there in some office upstairs. You know? Usually he can just go right into the plant. and he'll come into the plant and he'll be--you know?--He has to look at some of the equipment or he--you know,--as well as ... You ... You could always be assured that at some point during the day, if you work during the day, you'll ... you'll see his face unless he's .. Like, there's ... there's been a few of them that I've heard that--you know--the guys never see them. he sits up in the office and that's it. but what happened with my apprenticeship, most of the time I was working with the other woman apprentice. I did not work with the mechanics hardly at all.

J. So .. But it's that the system that ideally that you work with the mechanics so that you learn ... The mechanic is supposed to be teaching you what he knows?

Y. Of course.

J. Isn't that the whole idea of the apprenticeship?
Y. That's ... That's supposed to be it.

J. theoretically and ??

Y. Yeah, right. That's the way it's supposed to be. but ... and we ended up working with each other I would say three quarters of the time for the entire three years that I was there. She wasn't there at first. At first I was the only woman. And then, about six months later, she came,--the other woman came in.

J. and did any men intervene in this process and tell you ... share their skills with you or their knowledge, or criticize you about what was happening with your situation with the mechanics or ??

Y. Not really. I think that there were, like I think for my .. my .. my three year apprenticeship, while I was an apprentice, I think toward the end of my apprenticeship I met up with one mechanic who was being most willing to share his experiences because he was also being dumped on. He had had a problem with the Union, from what I understand, and they were blackballing him, giving him a hard time. And so they put him to work where I was working and I had .. I had a terrible, terrible boss and he gave him a hard way. and this guy happened to be in the trade for a very long time. He was an engineer, not just a mechanic, and he was good at what he did. You know? And he was the most willing to help myself and the other woman to learn something about what we were doing. that was, like, at the very tail end of our apprenticeship. Most of the time I did not work with the mechanics, or if I did it was sporadically. You know? One day I would work with one guy. another day I'm working with another guy. or I would work with one in the morning and then work by myself, cleaning mopping, sweeping, dusting, painting ...

J. they gave you all ?? work.

Y. A lot of that kind of work so that .. and then when we complained to the Union about it ,they said to us: Well, you know how the guys are. this was really a man's job for such a long time,--you know-they're .. they're having a hard time accepting you. Don't worry about it. You know?

J. Then the Union never came in and tried to act as a force for teaching people about the law or trying to ease the road and ...

Y. No. And on top of that ... on top of which our apprenticeship at the Union school was ... it was nine .. eight-ninths of it was theory. One eighth of it was practice--practical experience. There was no shop. There was virtually no shop. I think we had shop, like, a couple of days in one class and that was it. So it's very difficult, I think, not just for myself and not just for the women, also I think probably for the men to transfer

what you learned theoretically to what your reality is. Because a lot of times what you learn in theory is not in actuality what you do in practice.

J. Yeah. It seems like a hands on .. hands on kind of thing would be a lot more useful.

Y. Definitely! At least I believe that it should have been half of our apprenticeship, at least half.

J. What kinds of problems or what kinds of experiences did you have with the classes? did you find the classroom work,-- theoretical work accessible and difficult?

Y. What do you mean? Oh, was it, like, hard to understand and learn?

J. Yes.

Y. Well, this is going to be difficult for me because I want to be able to be honest in ... in--you know--what's said about putting into the archives. It really makes it difficult for me because I ... I'm making a very big indictment of our Union because I feel ... Number one: they made out the books. They made the book and they took .. I don't know where they got their information. I'm sure that they knew and they--you know--the people that put together these books that information's from other books, from having read, from their own experience, and put these books together. and they were an added expense to all of the expenses that we had when we had to buy ... We had to buy this book. And these books had no indexes in them. there was no index. there was no--you know--at the end of the book where it tells you ... You go through the index to see ... when you want to look for a particular subject? they were nonexistent,--nonexistent. They must have been about, Oh, about five or six books, really think--really, really big, thick volumes,--you know--and no indexes. so how in the hell are you supposed to find something? You know? And as a matter of fact, one of our teachers had said that those books were virtually useless. He said, if you don't have an index in a book, when you want to look up the information then you have to go through the entire volume of books to see what the hell you're looking for. And that's not very encouraging. So that was one of the things. But I think also the other thing is that it was ... it was not very easy because it's not very easy to transfer what you learn in theory to what you learn in practice. and also that a lot of .. a lot of the learning, I felt, was ... Now, I did learn a lot from it. You know? It helped me to understand certain basics about what--I mean--what I was doing. You know? It's not like I didn't learn anything from ... from the theory. You know? So I think that the little bit that I do know I learned because of school, more so than from the practical experience. You know? but a lot of the times what I felt was that the schooling was geared more towards preparing you for test taking: for memorization, test taking, getting your licenses--that ... that kind of stuff, as

opposed to the actual learning . . . then,--you know--quite a bit, I think, it had to deal with--for me anyway as a woman, and I would imagine probably for some of the other women, historically being a student with all these men and a male teacher and... We had one teacher that would always tell us to ask questions. this was actually my very first teacher when I went to this .. to the apprenticeship school. He was a very learned man. He really learned his stuff. You can tell that he knew his stuff. And he was a very pleasant man,--you know--on a personal level. You know? I don't .. I don't really know him 'cause I wasn't--you know--I wasn't really friends with him, but little .. the little bit of time that we did--you know--interact he was very pleasant with me and I found with most of the other students. But he would tell us that we could ask any questions. and then I would see that any time that anyone would ask him a question that he felt was challenging him, he would go berserk, yelling at these guys. I mean, it was incredible!

J. And that was your first experience?

Y. That was my first experience. These guys would say: Well, what about this and how about that? And how come I don't understand this? And he would go off. And virtually the class went quiet;--virtually went quiet.

J. You mentioned that you had a child.

Y. Um-hum.

J. and you're going to work, being there at seven AM, and you're going to school until nine PM, sometimes up to four nights a week. How did you manage this big burden of school work and child care? And also what ... what did your weekends look like? Were you just studying all weekend? How did you get through this?

Y. Okay. What happened was ,when I got into the trade my son was ... my son was thirteen--going on thirteen, not quite thirteen,--twelve going on thirteen. so he needed some supervision but he was also able to be alone. You know? but it was very difficult. I felt a lot of guilt because I would be gone before he was ready to go to school, and some--you know--sometimes,--a lot of times, I wouldn't get home until he was in bed. You know? So that was really very hard for me. You know? But I needed to make a living. I needed to be able to pay the bills and ... and so I just kept going. I mean, I think it was just sheer will. (chuckles) and I think also that my ... partly it was that my son--you know--was almost thirteen years old so a lot of the times he could do ... there were a lot of things that he could do by himself. I think emotionally it was very difficult for both of us, for both him and myself.

J. Um-hum. What about support? Where did you get support for going through all this?

Y. Mostly from other women, in particular ... It wasn't a family thing. I didn't get a lot of support from my family. It was mostly other women. I .. I remember one time I spoke with a woman from United Tradeswomen. I got in ... in contact with them and for me that was a ...

J. At this point they were very active.

Y. At that point they were very active. And it was something that was very important to me. I really needed to be in contact with other women, knowing that I wasn't the only one going through this experience. And so the first time I ever met this woman was over the phone and ... and I started crying: Oh! just wailing away because I just really ... And also, at that time, I didn't have a phone because when I had separated from my lover at that time, I .. I couldn't afford to have a phone so I disconnected it until I was ... I was able to get it later, but at that point I didn't have it. so I was out in the street

J. You were really cut off.

Y. Yeah. I was out in the street talking to her, just wailing away Oh! ... So it was very important for me to have that kind of connection with other women in .. in the trades.

J. And what about attending any of their meetings? Or that must have been hard for you to do that. Did you do any of that?

Y. Yes, I did. I did a lot of that. And ... and as a matter of fact, it .. it ... I had to make a choice. You know? And for me it was that ... It's funny, 'cause I had to make a choice between being involved in something to sustain me spiritually and staying at home and hitting those books all the time, and I chose going out and sustaining myself. And so I did. I got through my apprenticeship. I did pretty okay--you know--in my apprenticeship but .. And I had ... There was one fellow,--I think this was one of the big saving graces for me in school,--who to this day is still my friend. he was in my apprenticeship and he wa an older West Indian man who was not afraid in terms of his skills. He was not afraid of the women and women doing their jobs and learning. And he understood a lot about oppression and that kind of stuff. So if I didn't know something and if I was unsure about something, he didn't act like I should know it,--you know--or what's wrong with you for not understanding that? You know? he would just--you know--just help me or tell me or show me. You know? but it was very difficult because he lived all the way out in Queens and I lived in the Bronx so I wasn't going to be traveling out to Queens after going there five days a week and then--you know--all the schooling. And so we kept in contact a lot by phone,--you know?--and sometimes we would visit. And he ... to this day we're still friends. so that was a really good thing for me. You know?

J. Yeah, important.

Y. Yeah. It was real important.

J. Yvone, I want to switch over to another subject. But before I do, I want you to describe the physical plant that you were working in 'cause most of us have never been inside one of these facilities nevertheless,--you know-let along worked there.

Y. Um-hum.

J. so give me a ..

Y. Okay. We had two very big boilers, forty million BTU is what they call them. They're very, very big boilers. These things are like maybe one, one and a half stories high,--you know--Oh, I don't even ... I couldn't ... I'm very bad in terms of, like, space, width and what have you. but they're very big,--you know,--forty million BTUs, 350 degrees,--you know--under pressure so that if anything .. It never happened. but if anything were to puncture any one of those pipes the steam that would come out, you wouldn't see it until it was like, many a whole .. a whole bunch of feet in front of you. So that if .. if something like that happened, number one, if the plant was closed down it would suck all of the air out of the .. out of the space. and then ?? you wouldn't see the condensation, so you have to be very careful 'cause steam at that pressure could slice your head off,--you know--and you wouldn't even feel it because it moves so fast you know ... you know, people think that you ... that when you see steam that it .. that you can see it. But you don't see it until it starts cooling off and condensing. And by the time it starts cooling off and condensing, you could still get severely burned because 350 degrees is a lot of degrees. Right, very hot. Then they had ...

J. what kind of ... Why were they generating the steam? where was it going on your job? ??

Y. Oh, on that particular job it was going all over into different areas of the airport, when I was working at the airport. You know? It would generate the heat to keep the space warm and it would also generate heat that would be, like, a secondary .. a secondary ... Part of this heat would be to heat water and to keep the water hot. You know? that would be the secondary job of the steam. that's what ... That's what it was for.

J. Um-hum.

Y. And then they also had air conditioners, but it weren't .. wasn't ... they're not air conditioners like you see in .. in home .. apartments, hanging out the windows. these are industrial air conditioners. They're very big machines and they have what they call the cooling tower, which is .. works with the air conditioner. And that was a whole nother separate building next to the heating plant. They have pumps in these ... in the heating plants that move the water throughout the system. You have smaller equipment that you might be repairing, like, for some particular individual that

worked in ... at the facility and they have their own personal air conditioner for that particular space,--you know--and then you would have to work on those kinds. But a pretty big space. It wasn't ... It's not the biggest you can find but it was pretty big and a lot of equipment, a lot of a lot of equipment.

J. So how did you psychologically adapt yourself to this new kind of environment that was very strange, I would assume, as far as you

Y. Um-hum? Um-hum? Well, I tell you, adapting myself to the environment was not such a difficult thing to me in terms of that I had always, from when I was very young, being very much interested in what was happening in the backgrounds of things. So I would .. I lived near the docks in Manhattan and

J. Back when they were real docks?

Y. Yeah, right.

J. with real ships and real workers?

Y. Yeah, right, um-hum, um-hum and trains going through there and trucks and all kinds of stuff . it was really ... at that time. And that was always very exciting to me. I would go ... You know? I was a sort of a tomboy. Whatever that means. but I would go out with the boys and we would go to the docks and we would investigate the .. the trains and the trucks ... that they had back there. So that that was always something very interesting to me,--you know?--very intriguing, was finding out what was in the background of whatever looked really beautiful. You know what I mean? And so I found it very exciting to be there,--you know--and to finally get a chance to see it and to I think that the part for me that was most disappointing was getting there to see it and then being held back from being able to really

J. Really learn.

Y. learn and really get my hands on it. that was the hardest part for me. but the physical space itself became oppressive when .. when I felt the ... the ... the holding back of information. then I didn't want to be there 'cause there were ... You know, usually in these places ... Well, in this particular plant there weren't a lot of windows and they were closed. and you'd be indoors. and sometimes you could be indoors, like, all day,--you know--and there's no real sunlight. You have to walk outside. And then we have a space where you're dealing--you know--you're working with people who are not very are not---who were, for me, not the most friendly people. And I don't think that it was very ... I don't think that it was personal that they were not being friendly. I think it was--you know--their whole ... I think historically, you have to look at the history of apprentices and the .. and also you have to look at the conditions of production workers and people who do construction and maintenance, 'cause I'm in the maintenance

trade,--and their history--you know?--and the alienation that we have from our jobs. and then, when you have a boss like the one that I had, nobody wants to be there. I wasn't the only one. I'm sure they guys didn't want to be there either.

J. How many workers are we talking about on a shift, about?

Y. There were about ... and ... Well, there was a rotating shift but there was a day crew. And in the day crew there should have ben anything ... I think there were like twenty, twenty-five guys. You know? and then they had ... On the rotating shift there would be like two ... two men and that would be it, just two.

J. but in a very large space.

Y. In a very large space, yes. Um-hum.

J. What .. Switching over to the Center for the Union,

Y. Um-hum.

J. What was your first experience with the Union when you decided to do something that we could call organizing in an informal sense? What's the first kind of action that .. activity you got involved in?

Y. Well .. Okay. Well, I'll tell you. There were a couple of things. One of the first things was ... was very informal. The women would get together And there were a few women. They weren't ... We weren't all in the same year apprenticeship,--you know,--but we would get together and we would go to a coffee shop and we would talk. And we'd talk about what was happening on the jobs and what our separate personal experiences were. So that was the first informal thing that ... that we did. The next thing that happened for me was having to bring a suit against my boss who had been really abusing me and the other woman that I worked with. He was extremely abusive. At this point what he had done was he had tried to keep us from being able to take a get to go on to the next level and become full fledged mechanics as opposed to just apprenticeships, which gave .. which gave him a tremendous amount of power over us because he could let us go at any You know? At any moment he could just say: Well, they're not working out or he could do whatever he wanted. We'd lose our jobs. You know?--so he had a tremendous amount of power over us at that point. You know? and who knows? If he had not done this ... I was really glad that he did it because if he had not actually gone out of his way to keep us .. And the way that he did it, 'cause there was three apprentices: two of us were women and one a male, and he had .. he had the least amount of time. and we both had three years and according to our contract, after having been an apprentice for three years, we were entitled to take the test. We had to have our apprentice--our ... We had to finish our apprenticeship, which we had. We had to have our refrigeration license, which both of us had, and we had to have three years of experience, which they two

of us had. And the fellow had half of that and didn't have any of those licenses. Well, we all applied. He was accepted to take the test. and the day before the test, I found out that the test was going to happen and he was going for the test and we haven't even been notified. We haven't even been notified that we can't take it. You know? so we immediately contacted the Union and the Union stopped the whole thing. And ... and thank goodness that he did this. You know? there was a letter in our files that said that we were not ... that we would not be allowed to take the test because we were not prepared. You know? All of a sudden, a letter appeared in the fellow's file also, but in the meantime he had been accepted. You know? but if he had not done that ...

J. so the Union backed you up on that?

Y. Yes. they ... they had to. It was really so blatant, the ... the sexism that was happening was just so blatant.

J. and so you didn't have to do an actual law suit, but you had to just get the Union to ??

Y. Get on their--you know--Ps and Qs and do what they're supposed to be doing. You know? And it was only at that point that they ... that any issue became of the fact that we had not been trained properly. So in my files there is actually a letter that says, number one, that we had not been trained properly, number two, that we were allowed ... we were going to be allowed to take the test and, number three, that there had been overtime that was given out to the male apprentices that was not given out to us and so we were entitled to fifty hours ... fifty-three hours of overtime we could get either in compensation or the money.

J. And did they start doing anything about the training problems?

Y. You know, I don't know, 'cause by that time we had finished with our apprenticeship--you know--so that was out of the question. we didn't ... It was--you know--it wasn't about them--you know--getting them to train us or anything like that at that point. We had finished our apprenticeship. We then .. You know, what was so funny was that a whole bunch of people took the test, and a whole bunch of people who had been apprentices in different .. in different facilities went and took the test . And I knew this one particular fellow who had just finished getting off a ship where he was doing this exact same work, came into .. into New York city, went into the apprenticeship, took ... took the test and came out last on the list. and I came out over him.

Side Two

Y. Oh, great. Anyway, he ... this guy had ... Okay. this fellow

J. ?? you came out where on the test?

Y. Okay. Well, what happened was this fellow had a tremendous amount of experience in this field. He came out at the bottom of the list and I came out at the top of the list with the least amount of experience. So that made me feel like--you know ... I was glad that I made it,--you know?--and I felt like I had earned it just because I had gone had to go through all of this shit. But I was really pissed and I was really angry and I .. I felt like this was a real insult because if they had allowed us to take the test like we were supposed to be allowed to take the test, maybe then I wouldn't have passed it and maybe then I would have had to have for .. for ... Listen! I'm not passing this test because I'm not getting the ... the training. And who knows? Whatever. Maybe it wouldn't have happened because there's .. there was another woman I met who was in this trade who, for five years was taking the test and not passing it for all kinds of reasons that I won't go into right now. but, I mean, it really felt like an insult that this fellow who I know had the experience would come out at the bottom of the list and me, who didn't have the experience, would come out at the top. That really made me know that this was all about ?? this was all about covering their own ass. It had nothing to do with me .. being sure that I would be a good mechanic. You know? And they didn't give a shit. You know? And when I went to my next job they were trying to tell me that I would lose my job because I didn't know how to do my work. and I told them, "I'm not going anywhere. I've worked hard. I've earned my place here and I have a family to take care of. I'm not leaving this job. So forget about it." You know? And if we have to go downtown and go through this all over again I don't mind. I'm willing to go through it. Because, Jane, I'll tell you. You want to know? the reason why we won this .. this whole suit with the Union and with the .. with my supervisor in terms of being able to take the test ,getting back the overtime and getting it written down that we had been inappropriately trained was because I fought for that, not so much the Union. but the Union was there, I felt, from my perspective, for show. You know? And I'm sure that they came in and they thought that they did it. But let me tell you, I made a list of questions that I wanted to ask about what was going on. and when we had the meeting with the top ... the top people at my job around these issues I said that I wanted to speak. and when I got my chance ... I got my chance to speak, they were busy talking about ships on the horizon and philosoph--philosophically speaking about my life and my job and I wasn't going to be bothered with that shit. You know? So when they ... when I finally got a chance to speak, I pulled the list out of my pocket and asked very pointed questions. And they kept ... Like, one of the things with ... around this overtime, and they said: Well, you know, he got ... he got, like, I don't know how many hours of overtime. Like, in three years I made, like, maybe forty hours overtime. In a year and a half he had a hundred and fifty hours overtime. so when I asked them about why they said that the reason was because he wasn't going to school,--you know--'cause he had ?? and he wasn't going to school. And I said: Well, I only go to school on Tuesday and Thursdays so I'd like to know if, for a year and a half, the overtime fell on every Tuesday and Thursday? Oh, well, we don't

know that. and I said: Well, let's get the paper work. Let's get it down here and let's look at it and let's find out why this man was able to make a hundred and fifty hours of overtime in a year and a half and in three years I only have forty hours of overtime? Did it ?? time every Tuesday and Thursday, because I was out of school Mondays, Wednesday and Fridays? I don't understand this. You know? And the same thing happened on a few other occasions--you know--when we were talking with these people. So that I felt that the reason that we were able to win a lot of that stuff was because I asked those very specific questions. When they When they talked about us not being able to take the test, I said: I want to see the contract that we signed that said that we were supposed to be able to take the test after three years. Why is it one way for us and a different way for the fellow? I want to know why? Well, you know, we don't bla, bla, bla. I want to see it in writing. You know? And they were forced, even though they never answered my questions, they were forced to have to recognize that if they did not take me seriously that this would go a lot further than it was going. and plus they also ... My super--my immediate supervisor's supervisor was trying to cover for someone because he had done something seriously wrong. You know? And so that's why we got what we got. and it was a, Oh, horrible experi-- .. It was a good experience but it was a horrible ... It made me really angry to have to go through that. I was really pissed to have to do that.

J. So after that, did that translate into Union activity for you?

Y. so what happened was I went ... Like I said, to the second ?? to work and to become a full fledged mechanic. And there I was working with a much larger group. It was a different kind of set up. I wasn't working in a heating plant. I was working more at a .. at a transportation facility. You know? And the equipment was all over the building. You know? And I was working in more midtown Manhattan. I wasn't working at the airport. and I knew that it would feel a lot better for me working there because I knew I would feel a lot better being able to leave the building and walk into the general community, whereas at the airport I felt very isolated?? there.

J. What kind of transportation?

Y. The Port Authority terminal-bus terminal. And so that the--you know ... A lot of people didn't like that place because of the homeless and all--what have you,--but it gave me more a sense of being where the people were at. You know?--as opposed to being in this really ghetto kind of environment which I .. I found the airport to be. the airport is a lot more airy, a lot more light--you know--that you get because because it's in their own ?? grounds and not too many tall buildings around it. You know? but here it was--you know--being out with the people so when I left work I didn't feel as oppressed as I

J. And the dynamic of your work group, was that different; that allowed you to ?

Y. Oh definitely. I was working at the .. at the .. at the airport I was working around primarily white men, and at this facility I was working around primarily black men,--you know,--and that ... By no means does that translate into not having to deal with shit,--you know?--by no means.

J. (laughs)

Y. You know? But what it did do, it ... it changed the whole dynamic for me. Number one, I wasn't dealing so intensely with the racism--you know--in the same kind of way. These men understood oppression themselves. And these white men, by no means do I think that they don't understand oppression. They are oppressed as workers. You know? But they have this other privilege that they can lean on where these black and Latino--mostly black men--didn't have that privilege. So that was something that was like a relief to not have to deal with that so blatantly and so much. You know? then the other thing was that it was a much larger crew. I worked with people from different trades altogether .. working altogether. I wasn't working in a heating plant. I was working at a at a facility that had different tenants. They handled different kinds of machinery in it, and doesn't have rooms that was only the machinery we were working on. We didn't have boilers here either. And I didn't work with the watch engineers hardly at all because they worked primarily in the ... in the what they call the refrigeration room 'cause you did have air conditioning. and they worked primarily in there so they worked separate from the rest of the crew. Most of the time we didn't see them. And they worked on rotating shifts where we worked steady days only. and what happened here was, like I said, I went to work here and they tried to challenge me for not knowing my mob and I challenged them right back. and then, while I was working there, I realized that we had no shop steward. You know? And so I approached my Union about it and asked them. and we have ... In our Union we have what they call the ... the ... They do their ... They elect their--or appoint rather, not elect--appoint their shop steward so they don't get voted in. the shop stewards are appointed by the Union. And so they wanted to appoint me but I told them no. Let's have an election. And I will take responsibility for making that happen. You know?

J. All along had you been going to Union meetings?

Y. No. I had not been going to Union meetings because I was going to school at the Union hall and so when the Union meetings would come up I would be in the classroom rather than in the meeting.

J. so when you got on the Port Authority job did you start going to Union meetings?

Y. I was at the Port Authority job all along, all .. The whole entire time I was at the Port Authority. But what happened was that I was .. I was in ... in a lot of contact with the Union and the Union representative and agents and what have you because I was there every Tuesday and Thursday, -sometimes Wednesdays and Fridays as well, all the time, every week--every week so I was .. there was a lot of .. of contact with these people. So I was very familiar with the space and with the people and with the whole head--you know--where they were at mentally. So ...

J. Well, did they agree with this election?

Y. Well, they agreed, -he agreed because I did not want to get appointed. I felt like that would not be good for me and would ... it would make my position weak because I had already, right from the outset, had problems with the men, -right from the beginning when I first went to this facility because .. As a matter of fact, when I was an apprentice, the fellows had told me that once I became a mechanic I wasn't going to have to put up with any more of this garbage and that I could then perpetrate this garbage onto the next apprentice, which is exactly what their mentality is. and this is also not the system. I think that historically, --I mean, when we look at the history of apprentices, apprentices have always been shitted on by the mechanics. The next person that became the mechanic was then able to sit on the apprentice: "You carry my tools. You wipe up my shit. You pick up my garbage." You know? "You clean up the .. the .. the things. I get to make the fine work and .. and you ?? and whatever little bit I give you, you be happy with that. And once you become a mechanic, and then you win. Right?" But here I was at this .. at this facility and I .. we had, like, .. like I said, no ... no shop steward and so they ... they said okay and we had this ... And what I did was I put up notices all over saying that there was going to be .. You know? We're gong to hold nominations to put down their--you know--elections and that they should nominate whoever they wanted to. and I put down what the stipulations were in order to be able to be nominated: that you had to be a full fledged Union member, which everybody was not, --you know?--and a dues paying, full fledged Union member, --you know, --and a few other stipulations. I forget what they were and what they are now. And so I .. I did this. and I said, --you know--that the elections will be held however many ... I think it was a month and a half later. Well, lo and behold it came the day for the elections and nobody nominated anybody, --nobody, --myself and another woman. That was it. You know? So I called up the Union on that day and I told them appoint us. Then I wanted to be ... participate. You know? and they appointed us and they sent a letter to our to our bosses, --you know?--and we became the shop stewards.

J. And how do you explain the, first of all, on the one hand, your thinking that you wanted to do this job and that you could do the job with all these guys and second of all, that ... that you didn't get discouraged when there's such a lack of participation that you just said the heck with it, --you know, --and ??

Y

. What do you mean? ??

J. Well, how could you be an effective shop steward when there was so much apathy. I mean, that didn't seem daunting to you that--you know--you had to say this is going to be rough. It was a challenge?

Y. Well, what it was ... was, was that I

J. what was driving you along?

Y. I think at that point (laughs) ... I think at that point I was beginning to see that, first of all, that we didn't have a shop steward and I felt like that would be a good experience for me. I really wanted to be able to get that kind of experience. I think that was the primary force for me behind the whole thing. And also that I could see the unjust--justices that were happening, in particular, to myself, the stuff that was happening to me, and I felt like somebody's got to be standing here for me. You know? If I didn't do it for myself--you know--somebody's got to be saying: No. this is not going to be the way that it is. You can't just do whatever you feel like it whenever you want to. And so I said, well, let me be the person. What the heck. I'll be the ... X

J. Had you had Union experience before that you recognized the whole role of the steward and ?

Y. No.

J. Is that what you learned at the apprentice school? Did they talk about the ideal way that the Union would function in the work place and the role of the stewards? Did they educate you about that?

Y. They did ... they gave us a course on it. I think it was ... it lasted, like, one or two days and it was a couple of hours. So it wasn't like ... to me, what it ... it felt like a real farce because what happens and what I ... what I see about this is that. They're not really wanting to encourage people to take over. You know? It's like they want to be the imperial force for ever and ever and ever. X

J. ?? power.

Y. Yeah, right. and so keep it ...

Y. and keep it amongst them.

Y. And keep it away from them. And if they don't know then they don't become powerful and they don't begin to challenge what we're saying. It's like, I would go to meetings--some ... to some of the Union meetings sometimes and they'd sit there and-you know--

the guy would mumble whatever he was saying. You couldn't understand what he was saying. and then they would say we're going for a vote. all yeas And everybody would yea, and they didn't know what the hell they were yeahing about. And there was never, ever, ever ... I never ever remember anyone saying nea,--never! and then you'd ask somebody: what was that about? They didn't know. they had no idea what they were yeahing. As a matter of fact, one time they yeahed somebody out of the Union and they didn't even know why. They didn't even know ?? who it was got .. They ... they threw him right out of the Union and no one had any idea as to who the person was, what the problem was and why the Union was trying to get rid of them. that is a shame. That is a serious offense---you know?--to another worker. I think that's a horrible thing. You know?

J. So you'd seen all this but you go ahead and you get yourself in the position where you're going to be on the front line of representing the Union

Y. But

J. and fighting for your coworkers.

Y. But on the other hand, being a shop steward--and this is what I learned by being a shop steward,--it put me in a much more powerful position. You know? And something that I was not expecting. That was something I wasn't expecting. But it was so nice! I'll tell you, (chuckles) it was so nice because the kind of power that I got was more in terms of being able to have more control over myself in terms of .. and being taken seriously. there was no way that they could, like, not .. disregard me like I was--you know--a fly on the wall. You know? when something ... and then I and i was very good. I was very good. You know?

J. How did you learn to be good? How ... What .. what .. How

...

Y. because I think the thing that ...

J. How did you train yourself?

Y. I think the thing that made me good is that I believed in what I was doing and I believe in Unions and I believe that we have rights. You know? and .. and I think, for me, the biggest force in terms of ... in terms of taken a stand and in terms of understanding it was actually my experience with the women, with the women in United Tradeswomen, with the other women and the things they were talking about, and also beginning to understand something about Unions and what they were supposed to be about and what they were supposed to be doing. that was ... I .. I actually did not learn most of that from my Union. I learned it from being around the women and being around United Tradeswomen and listening to other women's stories,--you know --and what .. what was the responsibility of a Union. That's how I e learned it. And I really

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believe it. and I still believe in it even though I think that they're a horrible organization. I still very strongly believe in the Union and in Union principles. You know? And .. but it was a very empowering experience to be a shop steward. You know? *

J. Did the other woman become a steward also?

Y. She became a steward but then, shortly thereafter, she left. And she was also working a rotating shift so she was not able to exercise it the same way I was.

J. Um-hum.

Y. And eventually she left and went to another facility and she was not the shop steward there. You know? and they had Actually, she went to the .. to the facility that I had been at, that I had just left, and the shop steward there, who was a man, was the most horrendous, horrific person you ever met. This guy had five hundred hours of overtime while the other workers had a hundred and fifty. I mean, this guy was in the boss's office every day. But he also had very heavy connections in the Union and no one--no one argued with him, no one disputed him, no one questioned ... I mean, the guys didn't like it. They thought it was unfair but they ne--they wouldn't say a word. *

J. Well, I'm interested in hearing about some of the struggles that you had and some of the things that you did to build solidarity, and also learning about how your relations changed with the people that you were representing?

Y. Okay. Now, it's very interesting because what I did first when I became a shop steward was ... this is so funny because we get this letter that says that now I'm officially the shop steward, and all of a sudden now one of the ... the engineers comes up to me and tells me, "Oh well, I wanted to be a shop steward and I would have been the shop steward. I didn't have ... I don't mind doing that." and I looked at him square in his face and I told him, "well, it's too late. (laughs) I'm the shop steward now. and when you had an opportunity to do it, you didn't do it. So tough." You know? and then when I be--once I became a shop steward then it seemed like a lot of the fellows started beginning .. they themselves, like, took the initiative. they said, Oh, we have somebody to protect our rights now. and so they would come to me if they have .. if they had a problem. You know? and what I found ... It was very, very interesting,--you know,--a few things that I found. but one of the things in terms of working with the ... with the fellows, what I found was a lot of times the men that I was working with, number one, they would complain about something and then not want to take a stand on it,--you know,--and so I would be ... and I would end up standing up there by myself,--you know--and sometimes looking kind of foolish. Number two, that they didn't want to put things down in writing,--you know--and so I would--you know--begin the writing process. You know? and ... and then, number three, that they would not tell me the whole story. they

would hold things back. You know? and so if .. by not telling me,---and I finally had to .. had to tel them: If you don't tell me the whole story; the good, the bad, the in between; where you think you're wrong; where you think that you're right; where they're wrong; where they're right;--if you don't tell me everything that when I go up to them I look like an asshole because I don't know what the hell I'[m defending you about. You know? I'm saying one thing and they're telling me: No. this happened. and then you're standing right there and you're saying, well, yeah--you know? Well, why didn't you tell me. excuse me!--you know,--but I don't read your brain. You know? And so I had to tell them and they still would not do it. They still would not do it. They had a resistance. And I think partly it was a resistance to authority,--you know--and their own fears. and partly it was ... Partly, I think, it was also their not wanting to take responsibility for being a worker. You know? Their unclarity,--their political unclarity about what it meant to be a worker, and who was the worker, and who was the boss, and why he was the boss and what makes you the worker. You know what I mean? and so a lot of times--you know--I'd be arguing a point with the boss and I'd half the story--you know--of what was going on. And ... and in the end--in the end .. It was funny because I .. a lot of the guys,--not a lot of them but quite a few of them, they would get an--they would get angry at me because what happened was I would argue a case for them and then I would come up with .. with ... Because I was a shop steward ... It was so interesting. because I was a shop steward, partly, and partly, I think, it was because of my personality and the way that I presented myself because I didn't play games around stuff like this. I was straight up. I didn't .. I didn't take any favors from the bosses. I didn't take any favoritism from the boss. I took my place and a worker and that was fine with me. I didn't want them to give me anything extra unless I was entitled to it because that was in the contract for me to get as a shop steward. Otherwise, I didn't want it. You know? Now, one of the things I could have done was more overtime than most of the other guys, but I said no. this is the .. this is the list. this is the way we're supposed to go. we'll go according to that list. I'm not going to take money out of these peoples' pockets. You know? So .. so what happened was is that because of that a lot of times the ... the supervisors and the bosses, they would--and I think also partly because they ... they kind of, like, liked the fellows,--I mean, some of them--you know? and this one particular fellow that I worked with who was ... he had a horrible case, they ... they liked him,--you know,--and so they were kind of lenient--you know--on him--you know? and some of the other fellows they were kind of lenient on. but then what .. what happened is ... was that they wanted more than that. You know? but they were not willing to cooperate with me and so they would on--you know--that's what they would get. they would get .. whatever they were going to get, that was it. that's what they would get. and so they started blaming me. they started blaming me for their not getting it or they started blaming me because Like, this one fellow had a record that was, like, Swiss cheese. You know? He would hardly ever come to work. You know? He wouldn't call and he would come in .. when

he came in he would come in late. You know? I mean, this was a record that they had been accumulating on him over a period of three years. the guy had fifteen years working for this company but in the last three years he was doing very, very bad,--really very bad. and I'm looking at the records and there's no reason I can argue with them. I can't argue with the records. the facts say you're not coming in. You're not .. You're not .. You're not making a full week any week. You know? You're taking over and above your time allotted for sick days. You're not .. You know? They asked him: "Listen! If you're having a problem go down to the medical, get yourself medical coverage and--you know--paper work and what have you and tell them that you need ... that you need to go into a medical stress program, because they had a mental stress program in place, "and stay out for a few weeks rather than doing this." No, no No. He didn't want to go. He didn't want to .. He would continue to .. Right after they would ? Okay. well, you have one day in the street. we're going to keep you out of work for one day and no pay, the next day he would come in late or he wouldn't come in either. You know? I mean, it was really horrible was the word. this guy was really terrible. and I particularly liked this person and so I would tell him .. I would sit down and talk to him: "What's the problem? What's going on?" Now, in retrospect, I think the problem was probably drugs, I think. I'm not sure, but that's my feeling about it. You know?--looking back, 'cause he was totally irrational and wouldn't talk,--you know,--till one day I finally had to tell him: "Listen! If you were working any place else other than here you'd be in the street. You'd have lost your job a long time ago." You know? We got into a big argument. The fellows knew what this guy's record was about and still they insisted that it was my fault. They also insisted that ... that I, even though I was stand--I'd be standing there--you know--arguing their point for them, and even if they were wrong they wanted me to ... to get whatever it was that they wanted when I couldn't get it,--you know?--and they would blame me. You know? So

J. Did grievances go to the next stage and did you have somebody come from the Union who could take the heat off and ??

Y. Well, what I did .. I did have that at one point, but actually this was a very difficult thing again. And this again is a very strong indictment against my Union. What happened was we got ... there was .. I was the shop steward and then we had one person that was in charge of all the shop stewards,--you know,--and he was a representative of the Union. He actually worked for the company. He did not work for the Union. You know? And so he came down. I got him to come down and .. and speak with the fellows and try to straighten things out, and try to straighten out eve this particular case I was telling you with this .. this fellow,--this particular fellow. but the Union had not come down. and their contention was, you don't come to Union meetings so we're not going to come to you. You know?--which became like a Catch 22 vicious cycle because the fellows would say, Well, they don't come to us so why should we go to them? You know? and now the ... now the Union is way out in .. in Richmond Hill, Queens. that may not seem far

away for some people, but for a lot of people in was. You know? I know that it was for me.

J. Is that where they had the Union meetings?

Y. That's where they had the Union meetings. That's where they had everything there at that .. It used to be in Manhattan but they relocated out there, I think probably because they have a lot more Union members that live in Long Island. You know? And because of the kind of governmental agency that I worked for we were not covered by the NLRB. You know? So anyway, I was able to get this fellow to com down, I think, once or twice,--you know,--but no one from the Union would come,--no one. and like I said, their whole thing was: Well, they don't come to the Union meetings so we're not going to come down there to them. Plus, also, a log of the guys were not full fledged Union members. A lot of them were not full fledged Union members because they didn't trust the Union because the Union had not come through for them. And it became a really horrible Catch 22 situation because I felt like it was incumbent upon the Union to take that first stew,--you know,--to begin to ... that's why they're the organizers. You know? that's why they're the people that get paid the Union dues,--you know--because they're supposed to go out there ... come out there on the sites and encourage the people to continue to want to be Union members. we're now in the middle of negotiations and they're getting ready to sell us right down the drain. they're getting ready to work out some kind of a deal with the Port Authority where they're going to be ab--where the Port Authority is going to be able to contract the work out directly from the Union hall, instead of being ... instead of their ... instead of it being where people could come in and get the job,--anyone can come in and get the job and then become a Union member. In order to get the job with the Port Authority you have to go through ... you have to be in the Union and the U--and then the Union will hire these people out to the Port Authority for X amount of time until the job is done and then they would leave and they would go on to ...

J. Is there any opposition within the ranks ??

Y. We have no rank and file. There's no rank and file movement whatsoever ?? that Union,--none whatsoever.

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