

Interview with Nathan Spero

The 1960s and 70s: Pt. 2

J. I can't recall that period as much, because I wasn't paying that much attention to Labor, at that point. But it seems to me that now, the issue of officers salaries has gotten to be a much bigger deal, and the UE policy is sort of a standard, or something to aspire to. Because there is so much more attention now paid to the salaries that Union officers get. But was there much attention paid to that question in your mind back then?

N. Sure. That was one of the things we used in negotiating. We would get the salaries of these officers ... people had to match, and the laws had to follow ... labor management reports. and we would list, all our salaries and the salaries of the Presidents in other Unions. And they were much higher and the expenses were much different. They say, at some point, in the sixties as well, in the late 60s, not only in General Electric, in Westinghouse, we began to have coordinated bargaining with the other Unions. Let's say for example Sylvania Company--which was part of General Telephone Electronics; there were quite a number of--Joe ??--we had a plan national letter, was ???????. The UAW also had--I was picked by my officers to represent them at the first meetings if that kind. I remember leading a delegation into a Sylvania conference, of about 6 or 7 Unions with about 10 or 15 plants. In Boston, J. ???, who was an important organizer for the Industrial Union Department, acted as Chair, and we sort of walked in, and we weren't sure how we would be greeted, but Carl and Alan spoke up and welcomed us. So we knew we were being accepted, and that was the way it happened, we were being accepted in many other areas where several Unions, including ours represented their company.

J. I wanted to ask you about a pamphlet I found, that was produced in 1964, and it's--you probably remember--it's "How to Improve Your Figure Without Going on a Diet". And it had a silhouette of a very shapely female form. And it was a booklet that had to do with equal pay for equal work. And in it, there were calculations on the amount of money that bosses earn from the inequality that exists between male and female wages and the money that they earn by keeping women's wages down. Did you work on that booklet?

N. Yes, I did. We, you know, we simply compared men's wages and women's wages, multiplied by the number of male workers at the man's wage and the number of female workers, and generally speaking, we came up with calculations.

J. Eight billion dollars.

N. Yeah, I was thinking of 15 billion, I suppose.

J. Yeah? Inflation.

N. Yeah.

J. But that's a great booklet. And in it they talked--you talked--about a program for women's wages and how to fight for them and all the different ideas.

N. One of them--see we found that in General Electric, that the laborer, which was the lowest rate in the Plant, for example, was more than that of a salary employee--a typist, who had to go to high

school and gain a skill--being able to type and all that sort of stuff. So, that in the Plant themselves, there were jobs below the common labor rate, and historically, the company said the common labor rate is a rate, minimally related to people, who are raising a family. But women were being paid below that. So, one of our major demands was that there would be no rate below the common labor rate for men or women in the plant. And then we went on that on that minimum rate, one took into account special skills that women needed, background and education, to raise the rates above common labor. So that was one of our pieces of propaganda. But actually it wasn't just material issues. It formed the basis for our contract negotiations. And we were able to, as a result of that, get special increases, for women, to set aside a 5 cent an hour increase in the general wage increase since the proportion of men to women was like 2 to 1, and a nickel an hour, for everybody, would be applied to women's wages, would mean as much as a 15 or 20 cent an hour increase over and above a general wage increase.

J. Now, was that a difficult thing to sell to the membership? I mean, in terms of the--

N. Well, we did sell much of it--that I think came to accept it. Whereas, at the IUE conference there were differences, and men complained--of special attention being given to women; special demands for women's rates. Because they did not have our program of education. Another thing we did was we pointed out that the lowest rate in the plant helped determined the wage structure for the entire plant. And if you raised that, the boss will put pressure on jobs above that. So, men and women stood to gain from that program. And the final point we made was this: that we had low women's rates went and installed new jobs for men would use that minimum rate of women as a comparison point. So that new jobs were being underrated as well. These were all compelling arguments that women and men did agree to and did understand.

J. Well, I like this--what was talked about as part of the program--the goal that the least skilled women's pay should be no less than the least skilled man's. And that sounds very radical, in terms of a demand for the women's movement.

N. We made it a little more definite: that the least skilled women's wage should be no lower than a common labor wage for men. Which is similar to that. But we picked a specific job, a specific rate to aim at.

J. Yeah. And that's a good distinction. I was looking at the literature in the Convention Proceedings in 1964 and it has a historical review of the UE and they had a lot of pictures--they showed "1964--the UE supported the March on Washington." And that was a really an important point for the Civil Rights Movement. And they had a UE sign that had a slogan: "No U.S. Dough to help Jim Crow Grow." And do you want to talk a bit about the UE participation in the Civil Rights Movement?

N. That march--I was made responsible by the Union to organize our contingents to the March. Now, A. Philip Randolph was the President of the Pullman Porters. He was the major figure in organizing it, and he was, tended to be hostile to so-called "red Unions". So we wondered how he would accept this. So, we sent a letter to A. Phillips Randolph telling him that the March was a great idea and enclosing a check for five hundred dollars. And we received a very cordial response from Randolph inviting us to participate in the March. Until we arranged throughout the country to have bus loads of people come down, and we did participate fully in that March. And as I say I was responsible for informing people, keeping in touch with them, calling them up and finding out what they were doing.

J. And did you get a good response throughout the Union?

N. Throughout the Union from all over the country, we had participation.

J. Like you say, the benefit of doing--having a part of your program all along. To be talking about race and discrimination--and the fruits of it show.

N. Absolutely.

J. I was interested to read that the UE also supported in 1965, with 64-65 the whole support for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. And it must have been one of the few Unions that did that.

N. Yes. One of our lawyers, Bob Lewis, actually went down to Mississippi and helped them legally and, I'm trying to think whether at that time we had,--what's her name -- Fannie Lou Hamer-- speaking at our convention and talk about the problems. So when we ran stories in the Union news--about the fight of blacks for representation. We did participate in all of these moments, and did it in a sincere, positive way. We contributed, we had people join in marches, we had leadership. It was part of our Union program.

J. Now, in 1966 the UE was once again in negotiations with General Electric, and that, at that time, they used a tactic to have the workers vote, take their strike on company time--or to hear reports from the negotiating committee on company time; and it would shut down the plants or different department. And that was a strategy that worked pretty well. But the IUE and the AFL they--the government intervened--to get the IUE to settle--and they went along with it--the cabinet intervention. So that was a difference in the reaction of the two different Unions. Do you remember that?

N. Yes, very similar, you know, to what happened in France just recently. Where the Unions fought against government policies that could hurt them. And, the reaction of Sweeney, where he just spoke to a convention of executives and told them to be more understanding of the needs of workers. It's the same sort of philosophy, in the time you refer to. The other Unions--the IUE and others--tried to rely on the support of the government. And if the government didn't support them, they collapsed. Whereas we, in a sense, were pariahs in the government. We had to organize the membership to fight. And strangely, in many cases, we did somewhat better. One of the areas, especially, were management rights. Now, management rights clauses are very, very important because it gives management the right to change production--speed it up--change conditions of work. Many important aspects of working that management could change. We had to negotiate management right clauses, but we limited them to certain special areas, and prevented the companies from using them in arbitration, and in other ways to change important conditions. So, as they say, the differences were, we depended on our strength,-- whatever it was--and they depended on outside assistance.

J. I was looking at the UE Convention resolutions in 1964, '65-'66 they passed resolutions in the Convention against the Vietnam War. And this was a hot period in terms of the debate about Vietnam. George Meany and the American Labor Movement, mostly, supporting Vietnam, so that that was sort of acting against any kind of collaboration between the IUE and the UE in terms of negotiations.

N. Yes, we did take a principled position on that long before