

Interview With Nathan Spero

The 1970s and 80s Pt. 1

J. Okay, it's July 24th. Jane Latour interviewing Nathan Spero.

Nathan, tonight we're going to talk about the end of the 7--the middle of the '70s and the 1980s. And in 1975, you wrote the report for the Convention proceedings for the United Electrical Workers. Do you want to talk about the process of what you did every year in terms of the Convention proceedings?

N. I was both an editor, or the editor, I should say, and also the writer of some of the sessions. And what I would do would be to get a report from the Legal Department, from the Organizational Department, from our Publicity Department, from our Fair Practices Department etc. of the activities that had been carried on in the past year. And I would go through and edit them, add information and change the material. And so the final product was really mine. But if you look at each of these proceedings carefully, you won't find my name in it.

J. But you're the ... the author. I was interested in the policy, UE policy, in 1975-76. It (Proceedings) tells a lot about the kinds of things the UE was fighting for. It's talking about uniting the electrical industry, organizing the unorganized, the fight against inflation and unemployment, organizing office workers in the UE plants, and also, the oil spill,--I mean, the oil crisis;--not the oil spill, the oil crisis, and unity of the employed and unemployed. It sounds like the UE still held onto its effort to be progressive, in terms of trade union activity.

N. Yes, it did. What we did was, in preparation for the Convention, ask Locals to have meetings--full meetings--and send in resolutions that they thought to be important for the national Union to adopt. And the Locals did that. And some of them--especially Locals with leadership people who were important people in the UE--would draft resolutions on all of these phases you spoke of,

J. Um-hum.

N. and would send it in. And we'd make a book of that and have it available at the Convention. My job at the Convention, again, was to bring together the reso--some of the resolutions where Locals covered the same subject. We might have several resolutions on collective bargaining; several resolutions, say, on the Vietnam War. I would put them together and make one resolution of them, and come down to the Resolutions Committee that was appointed by the Convention,--the Convention itself would appoint a Resolutions Committee. And at that point, I was no longer the acting Chair, but someone that the Convention had elected was the acting Chair. But I was that person whose second hand ... I would be responsible for seeing that the re-drafting was done properly; that important points were covered, important areas were covered. And I did that from, let's say, from about '72--1972--to the year I retired in 1983.

J. Was it an exciting process, sometimes?

N. It was exciting because delegates had differences of opinion. And, for example, one of the resolutions on involving members in organizing, there were two resolutions. One resolution said,--you know,--utilize the older people, that are experienced to lead these organizational drives. And then, another

group had put in - use the younger people and their enthusiasm and drive and creativity. And there was a fight (about) which one to emphasize. And so, the sort of thing that we ?? we don't have to eliminate either. We'd just say, we'd just use the enthusiasm, somewhat, of the younger people and the experience of the older people.

J. Hmm.

N. So that sort of stuff that we had to ... I had to chair and work out.

J. Um-hum.

N. As I say, did I save the 1972 memo.

J. You did.

N. I did it much earlier. It might be much earlier.

J. Uh-huh.

N. What happened was that our Union was split, and people that used to be in the leadership were no longer in the leadership. And some of our leaders had died. And so, somehow, I got propelled into undertaking these things.

J. This ... This Convention was special ... a special year, 1975?

N. Yeah. It was forty years of the UE.

J. Um-hum.

N. The Convention was organized in Buffalo in 1935. And so, for that, we met with the officers and decided to make it a special kind of proceedings: to have an insert on important photographs, and to write the articles in a historic fashion that indicated how things had changed over the years, instead of the usual Convention proceedings, which just went one year back, usually.

J. Um-hum. Speaking about organizing, I have a ... a draft of something that Mark Levy wrote in 1979, and it's a reading list for his Organizing Committee. It's District Four, New York/New Jersey of the UE. And I guess he was the person who was coordinating that organizing drive in that district?

N. I'm trying to remember whether ... He was an organizer, yes.

J. Um-hum. He was an organizer.

N. And he continues to be an organizer at the present time, and I think the major organizer, for the Interns and Doctors (Council).

J. Yeah, the CIR: Committee of Interns And Residents. But ...

N. So ... I don't think ... It's just I can't remember who the ... our major organizer in that area was, at

the time.

J. Um-hum.

N. He was just one of the ...

J. Yeah. Well, okay. He was just one of the organizers. And Hugh Harley was the Director.

N. I don't think he was an International Rep either. I think he was just an organizer.

J. Um-hum, an organizer. But he has here a whole reading list for his ... for the people working on the Organizing Committee to read.

N. He did good things. I'm ??

J. No. No, I'm not saying ... I'm just saying that it was ... trying to get the organizing people familiar with the history of the UE,

N. What were the ...

J. which seems like a good idea.

N. What things did he have in the reading?

J. Well, the two things that I was particularly interested in, something by Harry ... Henry Kraus: "Here Is Your Union, The Story of UE Local 430",

N. Yes.

J. the 1950s pamphlet.

N. Right.

J. He talks about that, and he says it gives a flavor of how the Union was at the time.

N. Right. 430 was a group of shops in the electrical radio industry in Manhattan. And the industry had boomed. But after the War they moved out. They moved to other places, and so most of 430 disappeared. But it was a rank and file Local.

J. Um-hum.

N. And the membership was involved, and it was a damned good organization.

J. Well, the other thing he had them read is a publication by NACLA,--the North American Committee On Latin America--wrote on "Electronics, The Global Industry" in 1977. And in this he talks about how that publication deals with the electronics industry. And he says that even though the base of the UE is in the heavier industries, machine power tool generation etc. of the electrical manufacturing industries, and our fight is to hold on or grow in tho-- ... in those areas, the whole lighter side of electronics remains

virtually unorganized. So still at that point, 1977, the UE was in heavy electrical manufacturing.

N. Yes. We had (coughs) ... We had Westinghouse 107 was a steam turbine plant in Chester, which is right outside of Philadelphia.

J. Um-hum.

N. It's a big plant, and it was a militant organization,--a wonderful group. It's not there anymore. But that was heavy industry. And ... well, we had the GE locomotive plant in Erie. It was a huge plant. GE managed to su-- ... su-- supplant General Motors which originally had dominated the locomotive industry. So that was another huge part of our membership,

J. Um-hum.

N. those two Locals. We did have some electronic plants, but those were the two largest of the ones that we held onto. Remember, we lost Schenectady in the '50s.

J. Right, 301.

N. 301, yeah.

J. I was interested to see this work that you did on the 1940s recession and the growth of unemployment and the downturn. And one of the ways that you recommended dealing with that, in terms of a Union position, was a shorter work week, and organizing around that issue. And I see that you did some work with Henry Foner on this.

N. Yes.

J. How did that come about?

N. Well, there was a group of progressive locals in the auto-- ... in the automobile industry and ?? in our Union that felt that now was the time to press for the shorter work week. And Henry Foner especially was important in getting the support of Locals ... of these Locals. We met in Detroit at the Cadillac Local of the UAW and we had several hundred delegates. And he chaired the meeting and I gave this report. But unfortunately, as you know, nothing came of it. And we didn't ... We were not successful, not in the slightest. Just a minute. (Break)

J. So you wanted to speak a bit about the resolutions at the conferences,--at the Conventions.

N. Generally speaking, in many ways we took different positions than the rest of the trade unions. For example, in quality circles, in which the company wanted union people to get together with the foremen and work out better ways of doing problems, we were opposed to it because what we saw was happening was that the company was using it as a device to undermine the Union, trying to set up their own organization.

J. Um-hum.

N. And you know that right now in Congress, something similar is ... is being discussed by the Republican Congress ??

J. Right, bringing back company unions.

N. Giving a company the right to set up its own committees.

J. Um-hum.

N. And we think that that ... that marks the death knell of the trade union movement, if you allow it to continue. Then, on the Vietnam War, we were in the vanguard of fighting against it,

J. Um-hum.

N. and passed resolutions condemning it. And ...

J. You were part of the Labor Alliance against it also. Right?--with the UAW and ...