

Interview With Nathan Spero

The 1970s and 80s Pt. 2

J. How much of the sentiment and the feeling of what got passed at the Conventions was passed on to the rank and file? How did that process work?

N. Well, when the Convention was over, one of the first jobs we undertook was to print up the resolutions and get them out to the Locals. And from time to time, the officers toured the country speaking to the membership on the problems that faced unions and what they had to do about it. And occasionally, we had demonstrations in Washington,--

J. Um-hum.

N. lobbying sessions in Washington. We went to see Congressmen. We did a lot of that.

J. Well, for example, this resolution in here, 75, that called for organizing the white collar workers in the blue collar plants. How much of that actually happened? Did some of that take place, 'cause ...

N. Some of it took place. For example, in the Erie Local,--the locomotive Local with General Electric, we organized the white collar workers there as well as the (production workers?), with a separate Local ... a separate unit for white collar workers that was very active in the Union. And we organized workers at Antioch College,

J. Um-hum.

N. and ... It isn't as easy to organize white collar work as it is to negotiate ... to organize production workers. But we did do some of that. And furthermore, in our educational material, we pointed out how unfair companies were to their white collar workers. When you consider that typists at General Electric had to be a graduate of high school and had to be able to spell, and had to have a certain speed, would be getting lower pay than a laborer,--the lowest paid job in the factory. So we pointed out that white collar workers had to organize to overcome that disparity in pay.

J. Some of these campaigns that took place were largely blue collar workers. And I know that UE organized a shop in ... in South Dakota, and there was ... that ... Wasn't that shop the subject of a boycott,--a long term boycott?

N. There was a ... The shop in South Dakota was

J. Lyton?

N. Lyton Industries. They were making microwave ovens.

J. Um-hum.

N. And there were Native Americans, really, Native Americans working in the plant who were active in the organizational drive. And eventually we did organize the plant and I think it's still there, though Lyton has moved a lot of its microwave production capacity elsewhere.

J. The '70s and '80s were a time of a lot of shrinkage, as they say in electronics, of plants,--GE and Westinghouse even--moving some of their operations south and out of the country.

N. Yes. That's true. General Electric ... Westinghouse, for example, opened up large plants in the south. I'm trying to ... I was down, and the Medfred (?) workers who were interested in organizing that plant... It was in the Carolinas, and I'll furnish the name later.

J. Um-hum.

N. But I met ... The interesting thing ... This was before the civil rights movement, before the 1960s Civil Rights legislation. And I attended meeting with them in the south, and black workers and white workers attended the meetings

J. Together ...

N. together and discussed how to ... what they could do. What Westinghouse did was try to make it a social club sort of thing and had had a ... a club of some sort. People could join and have activities and that sort of stuff. But the place where the company couldn't match the northern point was in terms of wages, real benefits, though ... We hadn't organized it by the time I retired, but we did have efforts going.

J. Hmm. And how many people worked there, about?

N. About a thousand people.

J. ?? So what other events stand out for you from the early '80s?

N. Late '70s and the early '80s ... Well, in the '70s, I ... I think you'll find in the tape that I said that in 1969, we finally got together with the IUE and decided to have joint negotiations.

J. Um-hum.

N. And that ... that also was true how we came together with other unions

J. For coordinated bargaining ...

N. for coordinated bargaining. And one of the ... I was Chair, I think I said, or the Co-Chair of the Pension and Insurance Committee of the thirteen unions that met together with General Electric and Westinghouse. And in the '70s, we did not have that industry covered. And the way the bargaining was ... with General Electric, for example, was organized at the time, was that we had a national contract and the IUE had a national contract. But all the other Unions were local Unions, and each local Union had to meet with the company separately ...

J. You're talking about, like, the IBEW,--the Machinists--and ...

N. Yes. They did not have any national contract for their shops.

J. Um-hum.

N. In each of their contr-- ... shops they had to negotiate separately with the General Electric management. But UE and IUE had ... So what we did was, we would negotiate separately, and the IUE would negotiate separately. And at some point, when there seemed to be an impasse, we worked out a system where a couple of people from the UE,--top people,--and a couple of people from the IUE, plus individuals from some of the Machinists and IBEW plants, would form a National Negotiating Committee and would meet with the company. Now, at the same time, to keep the other members of the Local ... of the Negotiating Committee busy... You see, we'd ... we'd meet in New York, and ... and each Local,--each ... we and the IUE--would send in fairly large delegations,--people who would be involved in organizing in some way. So, when we had reached the impasse and had a very small committee doing the negotiating, what we used to do with the other people that were there ... So what we did was organize a special so-called informational meeting,--this committee of the ... of the delegates who had nothing to do,--together with the General Electric company. And it was supposed to be a meeting to change organization,--to keep our people busy, but ... I hate to say this, but one of my big achievements was this: I spoke to each of the Committee members and said, Look, when we talk to the company, the thing that we've got to harp on is that we want a dental plan. So we had forty people in the company going around the room: "How do you feel?" With every delegation, let's say, we had to have a dental plan. As a result, the company, in the smaller negotiations, agreed to a dental plan. And the guy that was the head of the IUE delegation, who was the Chairman of the entire body, said later, that he never thought that we could ... we, this subsidiary group,

J. Um-hum.

N. could negotiate so important a benefit.

J. That's terrific.

N. So that was interesting.

J. Um-hum.

N. What else happened, other than those?

J. Big changes going on with the leadership; new people coming in?

N. Yes. That was ... Fitzpatrick died, so Matles moved over and became Secretary/Treasurer. And he picked Bob Kirkwood, who was the Business Agent to Local 610, Westinghouse, Danbury, to be an organizer. And ... But Bob Kirkwood was not very effective, as I think I've said before. Now ...

J. What was his problem?

N. He wasn't very bright.

J. Bob ...

N. We were ... As compared to other unions, we were very democratic. For example, I could go in at any time and talk to any one of the ...

J. Um-hum.

N. of the officers. People would come in and they would see them. But when it came to succession, they picked their successors, and they tried to pick people who weren't that smart or people that they could dominate.

J. Yeah. Well, how ... how would they be dominating them, if they were leaving?

N. From the outside, you know?

J. From the outside, still keeping a hand ...

N. Keeping a hand ...

J. keeping a hand in. Yeah.

N. So ... Matles...

J. So were there ... were there other good people around who would have been much more effective and much more powerful?

N. Sure.

J. Yeah? Name some likely candidates that could have done a bang up job.

N. Well, there was a ... a Joe Dermity, who actually ran against Matles at the very beginning and just lost out. There was Bill--Oh, a black guy from District 11, the Secretary/Treasurer,--I'll have to fill in his name.

J. Um-hum.

N. He ran too. It was dirty politics and he was defeated.

J. How ... How did dirty politics take place?

N. Well ...

J. In what sense?

N. I was friendly with this guy. Chicago's one of our big Districts, you know? And I was friendly with him, and he said they weren't happy,--you know-- saying I (he) would be ineffective, and so on. But they went into my (his) Local as well,--you know,--and smeared me. That was the thing that bothered him most. They went into his own Local and smeared him.

J. Just so that he wouldn't win.

N. So he shouldn't win.

J. ??

N. So then, when Matles got to be of retirement age, he decided to retire and he picked Red Block,--Borus Block as an organizer and International Rep from Massachusetts to succeed him. Now, Boris Block had the lousiest reputation of being a troublemaker; being somebody you couldn't get along with, even with his wife, and so on.

J. Um-hum.

N. And Fitzy, when that happened, actually made believe he was going to retire as General President because he ... he couldn't ... the thought of having Red Block as the Secretary/Treasurer made him feel sick. Somehow, he changed his mind. Maybe Matles got him to change his mind.

J. How did ...

N. So ... So what happened was that, at that Convention, Block was chosen to replace Matles,--Matles' scheme. Following ... Immediately following that Convention, Matles had a massive stroke and he died. So instead of Matles being around to moderate Red Block,

J. Um-hum.

N. Red Block was there on his own, and he was a most unpleasant person to work with! He was ?? But when Fitzy retired, he picked the President of 107, the Westinghouse Local in Chester,--the big Local,--to replace him. And again, I have to think of the name. This guy was a Local person. He was pretty good, but it got to him very quickly. This ... This new President, at one point, had to go to the hospital.

J. Um-hum.

N. Red Block told us not to bother him, not to call him up. When he came back, he felt that

J. Neglected.

N. we had neglected him. Take this business ... In our Constitution is a provision that roughly says that a person comes to New York, the Union will pay for his lodging for, say, ninety days.

J. Um-hum.

N. Red came to New York and he got paid for his ...