

Interview With Nathan Spero

The 1970s and 80s Pt. 3

J. So Red came to New York and got paid ...

N. He got paid ... Yeah. As long as he remained as .. as an officer. There's one good thing he did. Maybe he did some other good things, too. But when it came time for him to retire, he chose Amy Newell to replace him, and that was a good thing.

J. A good thing. She has a very good reputation.

N. She was a very bright, bright woman. So ...

J. So what is this ... How does this jive with your experience with the UE. Here's ... The Union has a reputation as a democratic Union, but the succession is hand picked and engineered.

N. Well, that part of it wasn't correct,--wasn't right. But what I ... what I told you about Red and having his lodging paid for in perpetuity ... The small potatoes, generally speaking, we were honest.

J. Um-hum.

N. The ... The ... Nobody was making any great amount of money out of the Union. And as I've said before, in our Constitution provided that nobody should get more than the highest paid person in the industry, and we pretty much ... Not only did we stick by it, but for years we would get less than the ... less than the highest paid person in the industry. So ... And our program was a progressive one. The resolutions were great.

J. Well, I have a piece that William Serrin wrote about the UE in ... in its fiftieth anniversary in 1986. And he starts off by telling the story of Local 506, and how the ... the officers were asked to go to Japan to see a plant,--and this was a GE Local,--and the ... the Executive Board voted that they shouldn't go, and they went anyway. When they came back, they were booted out of office by the

N. True, because that ... See, that was one of the things that happened ... The IUE leaders let themselves be treated to trips to Japan to see how the other half works,--you know--

J. By the company?

N. by the company,--by Westinghouse, by GE. We disagreed with that ... disagreed with that kind of ... for various reasons. In the first place, the free trip put us into the put you into the--you know ... You were indebted to the company. And secondly, the reason they were sending you there was to learn the Japanese speed up plans. The Japanese ??--you know--were turning out automobiles and parts and appliances at a much more rapid place than we were in the U.S. So we were opposed to that, too. And in other ways, we resisted pay offs. For example, when we had these General Electric negotiations, as I say, they took place in New York for a long time, and the company would have tickets for the baseball games,--indeed, for the World Series, when they took place. And the IUE accepted them and they went. And we had debates among our people. And they said, Look, you will let the company buy you ... pay for the breakfast foods that you have,--you know,--rolls and croissants and coffee,

J. Um-hum.

N. so what, to me, what's different in ... And our point was the breakfast was an incidental thing that nobody would think anybody's buying you with.

J. Um-hum.

N. But when you accept tickets,--you know,--immediately everybody perceives you as being in the debt of the company. And so we never would take any of the special tickets, though the IUE was doing it all the time.

J. Well, Serrin notes that here the Union was celebrating its fiftieth anniversary at the Convention, and he says: "This week there were no big dinners and cocktail hours as at many Union conventions," so that the tradition continues of conserving the ...

N. Well, I don't know what he means by a big dinner. We always had a banquet at the end.

J. Uh-huh. Yeah.

N. We always had a banquet the same Wednesday. And the Locals always had their own little parties. But it wasn't ...

J. It wasn't Las Vegas.

N. It wasn't Las Vegas. It wasn't those guys carrying the President.

J. Yeah. Well, the Teamsters are a special example. Yeah.

N. No.

J. It wasn't anything like that.

N. You know,--the ... the Research Director of the General ... of the UAW, at the time,--and again, his name I have to look up,--visited our Convention,

J. Uh-huh.

N. was interested, friendly with most of them in the leadership. And he said: You know ... You know--when our people come to Conventions, you can tell the way they're dressed, they're

J. Coming to party.

N. They're coming, and they're coming dressed very well. And here, there's a difference. There's a lower quality of dress. Of course, for a long time in my office, I was the ... the fashion model??

J. Sartorial splendor.

N. You see what I wear. You see what I've got. It wasn't very much different from that.

J. Yeah.

N. So, in many ways ... And when it came to negotiations, when I worked on these industry coalitions with other Unions, the guys there would ... The company would make an offer, and the guys who were there would say "Let's us decide if it's right. Let's us wack it up,"--you know--?? What do the people in the Local know?"

J. Um-hum.

N. I always had the responsibility of bringing it back

J. Um-hum.

N. to the local people and consulting with them, so that for ... when it came to General Electric negotiations, we had these meetings, and membership meetings that I handed in resolutions, what we wanted to do. And we got together with the other unions and worked out a joint program.

J. Um-hum.

N. When it came to the final settlement, we had to go back to our membership to have it approved. The IUE did not have to do it. Its negotiators ...

J. So the membership ratified this. And then, of course ... Yeah.

N. Yeah. But then, after a number of years, they adopted it. They were so embarrassed because here we were voting, and their people ?

J. Yeah, I know. Um-hum.

N. We would explain that they, as a matter of pro forma democracy, went ahead and did that. So these are all the ways in which we were democratic, despite important bureaucratic elements as well.

J. So, in 1983,

N. I retired.

J. you decided to retire.

N. Correct.

N. And what ... what made you come to that decision?

N. Well, in 1983, I was seventy-and-a-half years old. Is that right?--1912,-seventy-one,--almost seventy-one. That was one. Secondly, my conscience troubled me. That was ... We had ... We had Ed Caliczek working with me and Barbara Riceman. Did you ever run into her?

J. No.

N. She is a bright young woman, and they were both anxious to have my post.

J. So ...

N. And so, when I decided to retire ... Our officers were not nice people, at that time. ?? was the Secretary/Treasurer, Red Block as ... Red Block as ... Hugh Harley as Director of Organization, Red Block as Secretary/Treasurer, and this 107 guy as President,--whose name I can't remember right now. When I told them I was going to be retiring,--you know--they acted as though I was not there anymore. The five or six people with whom I'd been friendly,--people, Jerry Erie whom they talked about there, said that they were going to ... that they were rehabilitating ... renovating the premises. The head of that Local told me he wanted me to come. So then, he invites me to come and Ed Bogins sends Barbara Riceman down,--you know. And it was a lousy thing to do,

J. After all those years of service and ...

N. after all these years?? I had all these contacts with the other unions in the coordinated bargaining sessions.

J. Um-hum.

N. So he sent other people in, and froze me out. He wouldn't ... They were very nasty people,--you know? That's not the way to handle things. So I ... I ... at the end, I was getting into fights with them, mostly with Red Block.

J. It's awful! Spending your life working for people to be treated right, and to be treated like that, after a lifetime of service, is quite despicable.

N. Well, you saw the ... You saw the telegrams I had.

J. Yeah.

N. The outside union people,--you know--

J. They responded well.

N. they responded. They saw me and they did. With these guys, I think one of the things they resented was that I had publicity,--I had done things and was known, and it sort of diminished their role in the Union.

J. Um-hum. And you were connected to the original founders and leaders,

N. Right.

J. and ... who had the reputation, so you had that legacy. I ... I love this card that Fred Wright made for you: "To Sid and Nat, best wishes for many happy years," and all the messages from your friends. It's quite a lovely piece of work. Here's: "We'll miss you. Everybody in the boat pulling without you;"--quite lovely. And all the telegrams you got from the AFL, the IUE -- the Coordinated Bargaining ... all the different Unions,--Machinists, and even the IBEW sent a telegram: Coordinated Bargaining Committee. So ... so you left. And what was the date of your retirement?

N. May first, 19--

J. May first,--May Day.

N. 1983.

N. Um-hum. And how was that for you?

N. Well, it was a ??

J. What kind of a feeling did you have at ...

N. There's just this other thing.

J. Um-hum.

N. Barbara Riceman, when I was about to leave that day who was there longer than Barbara Riceman ?? So Barbara Riceman spoke to me about who should be the Director of our organization. So I agreed with her that she should be because she's a woman ??

J. Um-hum.

N. We didn't have that many women in our leadership. So just about that time, she was having a baby. She was having a baby, so I thought I would stay on while she was having the baby,--you know,--an extra six months--

J. Um-hum.

N. and ... and then retire. Well, she didn't want that to happen. So she got together with Red and they said, "Well, we'll do without you." So I don't know how they fared, while she was ... but it wasn't a ... I thought it was an unpleasant thing for her to do.

J. Especially after you had supported her in that position.

N. I'd supported her in many ways that he Red said, when we had these negotiating meetings with General Electric, "What do you need her for?"--you know? "You don't need her. Come yourself." I asked her to come, and fought with him and got her to come.

J. Well, how was she supposed to learn what--you know--the ropes, if she wasn't in the room?

N. Well, there were other things she could do ...

J. Yeah.

N. she could have done. But the point was that

J. You supported her. Yeah.

N. ?? I supported her, but I got her to ... So, in every way, I ... well, I took seriously this business of equal rights for women:

J. Um-hum.

N. women have the right to get ahead, women and the glass ceiling,--that sort of stuff,--and I think she could have been a little concerned with me.

J. Um-hum.

N. But she wasn't.

J. So was that the end, in terms of your contact with her ??

N. Well, I saw her a few other times, too.

J. Um-hum.

N. See, what happened ... What bothered me was this: that when I was in the twenties, and so on, thirties, the Union--working for the Union and being responsible, and so on, the dominating things of my life.

J. Um-hum.

N. And I had opportunities to go elsewhere when I worked for the UE. No, that's my organization,--you know. Even if you paid me more, I wouldn't leave.

J. You were loyal.

N. So shortly after she became Director of Organization, she left and took a job with a Child Welfare Committee. And she's still Executive Secretary of the Child Welfare Committee in New York. I think she had ambitions to go further,

J. Careful

N. but she told me ... But at one time I saw her and asked her once,--the one time I saw her at .. that ... She'd supported a program that Cuomo opposed, and so she wasn't picked for a good job. Through all these years I think, she's still there,--the Executive Secretary.