

Interview With Nathan Spero

The 1970s and 80s Pt. 4

J. Well, it was an unhappy ending after all your years there.

N. It was. The thing is that ... unhappy as far as those people are concerned.

J. Um-hum.

N. But as far as the rank and file people around me,

J. I see ...

N. they all liked me and we got along well together. One of the things that would happen ... When a particular Local had a big problem and they wanted me, no matter how busy I'd been, I would make time to go. An assistant of mine, for a time, was Howard Foreman,--Howie Foreman,--a very capable guy. I don't know. There's a sort of story ... Someone called Haggy ... Haggy Schae-- ... Schaeffer, who worked in our newspaper at the time, and Red was after her. And there was a ... Howey ... She chose Howey instead. He divorced his wife and child. It was a mixed up sort of thing. But then both of them left because they couldn't stand Red Block. So--you know ...

J. ??

N. And I'm friendly with Dave Kotelchuk, whenever I see him.

J. And just a year ago today, you received a nice letter from a fellow named Tom.

N. Yes.

J. Who was he?

N. Thomas Quinn. He was the ... an International Rep for the UE. He was the Business Agent for the Air Brake,--Wolmading Air Brake in ?? Pennsylvan--in Pittsburgh,--a big Local. He left that to become an arbitrator and conciliator for the Pennsylvania government, and finally ended up as the head of the Mediation and Conciliation Service in Pennsylvania. He was chosen for that job by a fairly progressive governor,--whose name I can't remember.

J. I want to say Wolfred.

N. No.

J. But no, it's not.

N. It was somebody who was active in ... in providing hearing powers in communities where they couldn't get TV or radio ?? But then, he was kept by a succeeding Republican governor, whose name I don't remember but will find out. And he had quite a reputation. He settled some very important newspaper strikes. So suddenly I got a letter from him asking me what was happening, and I told him

what was happening in Queens College and in Queens and with the History Association with that labor map. He was very much impressed. Then he wrote me this letter saying, "it's wonderful I'm keeping up with the world."

J. How was your transition to retirement? How was that for you?

N. At the beginning, it was tough because the Union was my whole life, you might say.

J. Right.

N. Then we, Sidney and I,--my wife and I--went on a trip to Europe. And strangely enough, things happened in Europe during our trip which tied in with the way I felt. For example, we were in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia on May Day. We were in Yugoslavia before that and I asked around what's happening on May Day, and none of the people there seemed to know very much. So it didn't surprise me that Yugoslavia split up later on. But on the day, things did close down, and there were revolutionary songs over the radio. And they had a march of the partisans at the wharf in Dubrovnik, partisans who had fought in the ... And so we joined, Sidney and I, the parade,--a May Day parade,--in Dubrovnik. Then we were in ... in Spain, and in Spain they have what they call Spanish Steps that lead down into the main shopping areas in some towns, and they have beautiful flowers all over the place. And we were there, and they had the flowers there. But they also had Green Peace complaining about .. maybe it was the whales, ?? whales or something like that. And they had people each wearing a sign representing their country. Quite a lot of countries were there. So I had a sign on me, United States, protesting, and they took pictures of that.

J. Um-hum.

N. So that happened. And then we were in Greece, and there was some sort of an assassination taking... So the Greek junta--what do you call it gendarmes were there,--you know,--and Sidney and I were almost arrested because we walked through a barrier they put up,--unwittingly, it's true. So it was interesting,--you know?

J. Um-hum.

N. We had these exciting adventures. And then my sister told me about the IRP (Institute for Retired Persons at the New School for Social Research), so we joined the IRP and got involved in that.

J. Institute For Retired Persons.

N. Yes, the Institute For Retired Persons at the New School.

J. And you became President of that.

N. I was the President for several years.

J. Um-hum.

N. And then the Director of the IRP got a letter from Beverly Bruce, who was the Director of the Queens College Extension (asking for someone) who had a labor background, so he recommended me. And Beverly and Shaun liked me, so I continued on. Then I found a very influential mentor there, Jane

Latour, who also helped me out, got me a job as a librarian and got me on the New York Labor History Association Board and on the Map Committee. So, somehow, I got back into the labor movement.

J. So in terms of a retrospective of labor, at this point, looking backwards and forwards, what's your ... what do you have to say about a movement that you spent your life in and that's fallen on ... that's experiencing very hard times?

N. Well, I ... I try to be optimistic about that and feel that, over the long run, working people will make the right choices; that over the long run, the labor movement will recover its strength and play an important, key role in determining how working people fare; that it's encouraging that somebody like Sweeney was elected President, and he's a man that's more responsible than anybody else, except for the companies, in keeping trade unions at a low ebb. Lane Kirkland was forced out and ...

J. Lane Kirkland.

N. Lane Kirkland was forced out. And it's also hopeful that this new labor movement ... Labor Party that's in process; that it's gotten quite a lot of support, and its objectives would change conditions in this country. ?? would make it a far more livable place for working people in every which way if the Labor Advocate movement was to succeed. So there are some very hopeful signs that are taking place. And there are tremendous obstacles to overcome. The ... The large corporations in this country have tremendous power, and the globalization undermines working conditions in this country. The ... And the two existing parties resemble each other very much. They ... There's not too much difference between the Democratic Party and the Republican Party these days so that ... But I ... I prefer to look at the brighter side of things with my confidence that labor will do the right thing; that the right kind of labor movement will emerge eventually. And I'll do everything I can to help. I'll even pay twenty dollar dues to the Labor Advocates.

J. (laughs) Well, I thank you for all of your time and for your interviews.