Joe Buckley
Interviewed by Ann Froines
Boston, Massachusetts
January 18, 2006

I'm interviewing Joe Buckley in his office in Boston, SEIU, January 18, 2006. Tell me how you first encountered the women from 9to5.

My supervisor of SEIU, John [Geoghan] called me up and he said that they had been talking with a group of young women up here, who had been working on legislative issues and legal issues around women's rights, and they felt that wasn't moving them quick enough. And they decided that they wanted to get into a union and bargain contracts and try to speed up that process. He wanted me to meet with them and talk to them about how to organize workers. So, one night after my regular work, I met them up on Beacon Street, and we started talking about organizing workers.

So you in effect were the first SEIU person, or one of the first, to talk with them...

One of the first, about it, I'm sure a lot of SEIU people talked to them but once they hit the ground, I was one of the first people to start dealing with them.

Can you remember anything about that first discussion, what your advice might have been, what their concerns were?

I think the main thing that I remember about it is, it was Jackie Ruff, Karen Nussbaum, and Doreen Levasseur. Those were the three people that were there. The main thing that I think I tried to impress upon them was that in organizing workers in industries, it's different than organizing around a public issue, in that there are issues of running quiet, trying to build your strength quietly without letting the boss know about it, reaching out, forming a network. We used to call it the underground campaign. I think that might have been new to them. Because they did a tremendous job on publicizing their issues, and they had campaigns up here—they had the worst boss of the year, and all that stuff. So they were always on the news, and always doing something. But if you're trying to organize workers, you can't really be that public, when you start out. So I think that's probably what we talked about at the beginning. Trying to refocus them on how they had to get this job done.

Was this when they were kind of shopping around for an affiliation, or had they already—

I think they had already, you know, taken SEIU.

What were you doing with SEIU at that point?

At that time I was the campaign director for the Alliance. We were organizing 30,000 state workers in Massachusetts. It was right after the state had reorganized the collective bargaining laws. We were going to be, instead of 260 bargaining units where nobody was able to set up meetings and meet with the governor in the state, now there were going to be ten mega-units, and there was going to be an election to see who would win the rights to all those units. So, most of the time I did that, and then occasionally, when they had time, we would meet and we'd talk about organizing and targeting and things like that.

Tell me about some of your own experiences as a worker. You said you came out of the nursing home industry?

Yeah. (laughs)

What led you into the labor movement?

I didn't see myself as part of the industry. I was a maintenance man in the nursing home. Basically, what had happened was, a friend of mine and I, when we graduated from college, we went around the United States. We had an old Volkswagen bus, and we outfitted it, and we worked different cities, and we'd get enough money to go to the next city and see what was going on there. So, he got drafted, and I had it in my mind that I was going to go to Europe. So I picked up a job at this nursing home for what I thought would be a couple of months, to get enough money to get a ticket on Icelandic Air, and go and thumb my way around Europe. But—

Was that in the '60s, late '60s?

Yes, it was 1969. What happened was, the Hill-Burton Act had just passed, and there was all this money floating around, and any time you get a good federal law that tries to help people, there are always predators who come in and they take advantage of it. It seemed like this little group of brothers was involved in all kinds of financial manipulations. Every time they did something, it would be a pay cut for the workers there. So, a group of them came to me and said, "Joe, you went to college. You must know what to do." And of course I had no idea what to do. There had been a lady patient in the nursing home. Her name was Ruby Wentworth. She was 82 years old, and she had been an organizer for the Boot and Shoe Workers Union. So I said, "Ruby. You know, all the ladies here are all upset, because we keep getting our pay cut, and they're asking me what to do." I said, "You were in a union. Could they help?" And she said, "Joe, what you've got to do is call the AFL-CIO, and they'll come up and help you." And then I said to Ruby, "But Ruby. They're all steel workers, truck drivers, you know all those big jobs. We're just nursing home workers." And she said, "Well, then what can I tell you. Don't call them, and keep getting your pay cut." So I said, "Ok, you're right." So we called them. They came up, we organized, we formed a union. At that time, things weren't as sophisticated as they are now, so, after they won the election we didn't really hear from them for a while, so we assumed that we were supposed to just act like a union. That we had a license, kind of like a license to drive, and act like a union, so we put together our own proposals, and we demanded meetings with the company, and sat down and... Then

they fired us all. We wound up on strike. And that was really our second contact with the union, to call them and tell them we were all on strike.

So even though you won the election, they refused to recognize you?

It wasn't so much that, it was that SEIU was so sparse at the time. It wasn't now, with 1.8 million members, and regional offices, and all that, it was a guy. And he helped us win the election. Then we didn't hear from him. So we thought, well, we better do something. And so that's...And we had a strike, and then, about six months after the strike, they asked me to work full time for the union. Which I did.

And did you ever get that trip to Europe?

Only partially. (laughs) About 20 years later.

So that means you have a long history with this union, at this point.

Yeah. It's easy to remember. I started working for the union in 1970. Right now, it's going on 36 years.

What were some of your own experiences as a maintenance worker in that nursing home. Did you see the need for a union, or it was the mainly the people—

Yeah. When I look back at it, it was kind of funny, because we didn't have any guidance from people, and our initial demands, a lot of them were around health and safety issues. To be honest with you, I don't think the term "health and safety" occurred to us. We wanted them to fix all the autoclaves. I don't even think they use autoclaves now, but... they were all broken, we wanted those fixed. We wanted to have better lifts, bath lifts, for the patients and for us to lift them up. We wanted better cleaning equipment. Things like that. So, I think, it's funny, workers kind of naturally gravitate towards...you know, they want to take care of themselves a little but they also care about their jobs, you know.

Yeah, they're the ones who know how to improve them.

In a lot of ways, I think back on it, it was the best job I ever had, because, you know, I like to tell a lot of jokes, and those poor nursing home patients couldn't move, so they had to sit and listen to them, you know? (laughs)

Had you participated in any other kinds of political organizing, as a college student?

Actually, I often talk about this with some of my friends who were tuned in. I really wasn't tuned into that stuff. I mean, the war...I remember when I was a freshman at UNH, we saw some people marching up the street, and they were holding candles, and we were all saying, "What's the matter with those people. Are they nuts?" And then of course, if you flash forward four years, when I actually went in for my draft physical, the whole bus was armed with briefs as to why they shouldn't be in the army. It was that

political evolution, realizing that things weren't always as we were told when we were kids, but I was never really part of any formal group, like SDS. UNH wasn't exactly the hot spot for—

University of New Hampshire?

Yeah. It wasn't exactly the hot spot for political activity. It's too cold to be politically active.

Did you grow up knowing about union struggles, the labor movement? Had that been part of your background?

I was aware of them but not really tuned into them. I really fell into the union. Like our town—I'm from Haverhill, Massachusetts. We had a vicious newspaper strike there for a number of months. The Haverhill Gazette. They hired—there was a crew of strikebreakers that went around the country. I was aware that my parents were really upset. They withdrew their subscription. But I was too young. I really didn't...I just knew it wasn't good, and that there were some nasty people down there. I wound up being a paper boy for the competitor newspaper that sprung up. But didn't really have politics in mind. Later, I found out my whole family was in the shoe unions, my ancestors, and that when they would have picnics they would argue and fight because there was one union called the Shoe Workers Protective Union that was like a company union, and there was the Boot and Shoe Workers, and there was the United Shoe Workers who were more militant. There were all these unions up there, floating around, and all the family members were divided in their loyalties, but... This is my father and mother's people. I missed it all. I guess I was more interested in the soda and the cake, you know?

Was your father or mother a shoe worker?

No, my Dad was an office worker, although I found out that he was the observer in an NLRB election at Western Electric, where they got clobbered. My uncle said he was so pissed off, he wouldn't talk to any of his fellow workers for about a month. My mother was an RN. After I got in the union, she actually joined our union, and, you know, the place where she worked, and left—she became the chief steward and the negotiating committee chairman and all that stuff. In her later life.

That's interesting. In SEIU?

Yeah, in SEIU. She kept telling me, "Don't get me fired, for Chrissakes."

That's certainly a unique story. Nobody else I've interviewed has talked about how their mother came into the same union they worked for, later on in life.

Well, at one point I had eleven family members in SEIU. Who were workers. They weren't staff members or anything. I mean, I hated Thanksgiving, because I got a report

on everybody's staff rep, and, you know, "This guy's not doing his job, can't you get rid of him," or something like that.

Were you involved in any way in any of the campaigns or struggles locally that 925 had?

I think on most of the early ones I was involved at least tangentially. Some more directly involved. Some disasters.

Do you remember any anecdotes you can share?

Well, there was one time that Karen Nussbaum got a lead up to this computer firm in New Hampshire, I think it was Salem, New Hampshire. And she challenged the guy to a debate and he accepted. That had never happened before, you know. So she was nervous about it. So I agreed to coach her, and go along. So we drove up together to the debate. I would guess there were probably 75 or a hundred workers there, and there was this boss, and there was Karen. And Karen raked him over the coals. He couldn't come up with one thing that she couldn't stuff right back down his throat, you know. I was sitting there thinking, "Oh, this is going great! She's clobbering the guy." And it all did go great, until he broke down crying. And he started sobbing and weeping, and begging for mercy from the workers. And of course, the workers'll always give mercy, right?

They felt sorry for him.

They felt sorry for him, and we lost the election. So. That was one disaster.

So it was a debate in the context of an organizing campaign.

Yeah. And, you know, I would advise them and work with them on Brandeis, and Allyn & Bacon when they got stuck in negotiations—Jackie Ruff was down there. She asked me to help out, and I started going to the negotiations with her. But, you know, they were all smart. It wasn't like I carried them. I just would notice something and say, "Try this," and then they would just do it. So they were—well, you know them. They're smart cookies.

Do you want to say anything about your own assessment of those young women as organizers at that time? I'll get back to that later, too, in my questions, but was that your first sort of encounter with the sort of "new woman" who had come out of the women's movement and the antiwar movement?

Well, at work, I guess. Well, no, actually, because we had hired quite a leftist type crew to work on the Alliance campaign. And at UNH, like I say, we didn't start things off, but they were warming up as I was getting ready to leave, and there was some fairly radicalized people there. But I mean, I guess what I would say about them is, they were the type of people that everybody would hope would be attracted to the union. You know, in my own mind I always say, when I'm looking to the staff person, the way I

judge it, I think I told you that at one time I had eleven family members in the union. And I always say, "Would I want this person to a be a rep, for my immediate family, or my cousins. How would this help me at Thanksgiving or Christmas," you know? And they all would pass that test with flying colors. They were dedicated, and they cared—I mean even to this day, you know, especially with Karen, you can see it still burns in her.

Was there any particular campaign you were involved with, with 925, that stands out in your mind?

I would say the thing that stands out most in my mind, in my working with 925, was the strike that we had up here at Secretel Answering Service. I don't know if you've heard anything about it. It went on for about nine months. It started out as a little strike in Roslindale, and before we were through it wound up having national implications.

Why was that?

Well, just quickly, to give you a summary, 925 had organized a group of answering service workers, they had a couple of successful contracts, then this guy came in and he bought the company, and he was kind of a flim flam artist. He had this deal set up where he would buy a company, keep it for a while, and then re-sell it to somebody, but he would resell it at terms that they couldn't really afford. Because he was an insider, he knew it, and the victims would be so enthused to buy an answering service, and feel it would be a good business, that they would buy in. He would wind up repossessing the thing, and getting all their down payment and everything else. But anyways, to make a long story short, he was from Georgia. He came up, he asked to see all the union stewards, and when he did that, they all came in the room, and they thought it was meet and greet, but he fired them all. He said, "I don't want any unions around here." And Doreen Levasseur, who was head of the local at the time, called me up and she said, "They need your help." I basically didn't know what I was getting into, and we wound up...I'd work there in the day and go down and picket at night, because it was a 24-hour operation. Another guy who was involved, Ron Bloom, he formed a nationwide creditors union, he found out that the guy was deadbeat—he owed Hertz, Brinks Security, he owed all these big companies a lot of money—we honed in on that. We had picketlines in Miami at his place. There was a lot of, I wouldn't say violence, but there was a lot of rough and tumble on the picket line. The women were very tough. In fact, they were too tough. They had a van and I used to say, "Unless I'm there, do not...Stay in the van. Stay in the van until I show up from work." And I'd always come down and they'd be out picketing, causing trouble, you know.

These are the employees.

Yeah, right. One time one of them was kidnapped by a strikebreaker's boyfriend and just literally taken away and manhandled, and we had to chase after, so it was—

So pretty much all the employees went out, and then the guy brought in a whole bunch of new employees—

Right, and strikebreakers. And there was a lot of racial overtones to it. We wound up working with all the churches in the area. There were TV shows about the strike. Doreen Levasseur was on these local talk shows all the time.

What were the racial overtones? They brought in black strikebreakers, or--?

Well, pretty much. What he did was, he went to Bromley Heath right away and recruited young women to work there. Most of the workers, they were white working class from Roslindale. So right off the bat, there were those problems. Tried to work with some of the black ministers in the area, because some of the strikers would get a little bit out of hand, and you know…

Say the wrong thing

Say the wrong thing. A lot of times, I don't think they really meant it. They just threw those words out as a litmus test to see where your loyalties lie, you know, in the strike. But anyways, it was rough, and it went on for nine months. And I couldn't say that we won it, precisely, but we did put the guy out of business. And it was so far out of business that they couldn't revive the company. So in some ways, you know, we taught him a lesson, but, it was hard for all of us, you know.

And especially those mostly women I guess who were on the lines with no money for all those months.

Yeah. Well, after a certain point everybody gets other jobs to keep going. But the interesting thing about them was they stayed with us. But, our secretary right out here was one of them. Wendy Henry. She and Sue Wood picketed every night for nine months out in Brookline.

And then after that she came to work for SEIU?

No, she went on a long trail, and then she was switching jobs somewhere and just happened to come by, and we had an opening. So she wound up here.

That's a good story. Were there any other examples where you were asking, in effect, well, in this case, thinking out loud here, the women themselves decided to put their jobs at risk to support the stewards, right?

Right.

Were there other situations you were in where in effect you and other union folks had to ask people to put their jobs at risk?

Well, I think they had a pretty aggressive campaign at Allyn & Bacon. I really didn't ask them to do anything. I was just helping the 925 people. But they had issues there where

the workers were actually debating personally with the company vice-president in department meetings. They would get up, and formally say, "I'm challenging you, and I'm going to debate you on this point," and they survived all these meetings, you know.

So they were pretty militant, just in and of themselves.

A lot of them were.

Because you weren't actually an organizer for 925, some of these questions aren't quite appropriate, but, did you receive training to be a union organizer at any point?

Well not really, no.

It was all baptism in fire.

It's all common sense, when it comes right down to it, you know. Then you learn by your mistakes.

Were you involved in setting up any trainings for the 925 people, or was your advice more informal than that?

My advice was pretty much directly to the first staff people there. And then, once they got the hang of it, they did their own stuff. They didn't need constant hand-holding, you know. They were like, "Show me," and then they were gone.

Do you consider yourself a leader in the labor movement? We've been exploring, in these interviews, a lot about leadership and women's leadership, what leadership means. What are your thoughts about leadership in the labor movement?

I guess I would say I'm an incident-specific leader. Certain things come up, I can be a leader. But I don't view myself as somebody who's going to be in the history books or... We have other people in our union I think will be. But, you know, I don't see myself in that particular role. I just enjoy working with my class of people, trying to make things better for them. I don't know what that is, but that's what I like doing.

Well, I guess a lot of the work when you work for a union is sort of support work, isn't it.

Right.

Bringing the expertise people need to move forward.

The real idea to it is, try to teach people to do it themselves, and get up and running, and become self-sustaining.

Over the years, what did you observe about the strategy and tactics of 925. Were they different from other unions, do you think?

I think the main thing that I felt about 925 was that none of us knew at the beginning how hard the employers would fight, and how much they hated the thought of office workers organizing. You know? So I don't think we were ready for the overwhelming attacks and relentless attacks that employers would get involved in to beat back 925, especially in private sector situations, you know? They would force them out on strike, they would fire their stewards, close down the company. Allyn & Bacon eventually left town.

Do you think that was in part due to the fact it was a unionized place?

I have a sneaky suspicion it was, and I think a lot of other people did. But I think we just didn't know how much they were ready to dig in. I think for an employer, it's one thing if some guy down on the production line is forming a union. You don't really see him, you don't really have to deal with him that much, you just want them to get the work done. But when your person—your administrative assistant or your secretary or whatever—who sits five feet away, and knows when you show up for work, and who's giving you phone calls, and all your idiosyncrasies —is forming a union, they put on the boxing gloves. They're not going to have it. I don't think at the time we started organizing, we were thinking, or even, do we have the capability to do things, that nowadays we do. [Public campaigns]

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START of SIDE B

--which is something we do a lot now. Nobody had really thought of that at that time. We just ran fairly straight NLRB campaigns. What we were doing then was learning that NLRB campaigns don't work.

Can you describe a little bit of a public campaign that makes the employer more neutral? What do you mean by that?

For example, in SEIU we have this group we call Justice for Janitors. They will start ahead of time meeting with community groups and explaining to them the issues involved: janitors poorly paid, no respect, safety not an issue, a lot of sexual harassment, a lot of issues like that. Then we start meeting with churches, community groups, talking to all those people, to get all those leaders to come and meet with the corporations, and demand that they allow either card check recognition or an election without interference. Our union has done that in a couple of places. They've done that in Justice for Janitors and they've done that in some hospital campaigns, where they've gotten hospital chains to stay out of the election. You know, if you have an election where a worker has a free choice, 90% of the time they'll vote union. It's only when they bring in these anti-union consultants and play a lot of psychological games with the workers and cause them to be fearful, and worry about the place closing and all that, that you lose. If I got the call from

John Geoghan today and we started meeting, we'd probably start thinking about organizing places in different ways. You know?

Some of the other folks have mentioned that too. How would you answer the question, do you think the aims of 925 were realized, given that they did hope to crack the private sector?

Yeah, well, I think if you took the vision that people had when we started, compared to what we have now, we'd probably say it wasn't realized in terms of members. On the other hand, it did develop an awful lot of people who are out there doing similar things. Maybe not in the clerical field, but we have a lot of 925 people who are heads of locals, representing thousands and thousands of workers. So I guess inadvertently, they wound up being a great training ground of hard-working and dedicated people. And those people in turn have done a great job in representing hundreds of thousands more people. But, I think that, in terms of organizing private sector clerical, the numbers nationally must still be dismally low.

Do you think 925 had an impact on SEIU? I'm sort of hinting, in a way, that it did.

I think it definitely did. Not when it was that small, but as time went by, a lot of the people that came from 925 became leaders in SEIU. You bring your experience with you. So I would say there is significant influence in SEIU in a lot of the higher jobs. Like Debbie Schneider, we were just talking about before the interview. She was a vice-president, she had the ear of the leaders, and now she's head of global reach for the union. And she started out here in Boston with 925. Mary Grillo was another one, started out in Boston. She was head of the San Diego local for 15 years. I guess she's now moving back here. She's going to work on hospitals here. Kim Cook up in Seattle, she's still—I believe she is a vice-president.

In the union.

I think she's a vice-president in the union and she's head of the Seattle local. And there's more around. I just need a minute to think of them.

Do you think 925 had any impact on organized labor in general?

I know that at the time, all the councils and everybody wanted to have somebody from 925 with them, you know? I think they played a role in articulating women's viewpoints to groups that, prior to that, probably were insensitive or not thinking about it, you know?

What kind of work are you doing now with SEIU? You mentioned earlier you may be working on an international campaign. Tell me about that.

Right now, I'm a regional director in my job here. Acting area director, that's what I am. And my job here is...SEIU has a lot of standards now, you know, 20% of every local's budget has to be invested in organizing, and we have certain criteria for how many

members have to be signed up on COPE, and we work with the locals here to make sure they're meeting those standards. We want to make sure we have 21st century locals out dealing with 21st century employers, you know? And then I think in the next few weeks I'll be going to London to work on a Justice for Janitors campaign in London, England.

Do you have any idea what that will mean for you? I mean, what kinds of work will you be doing in London?

Well, I believe that I'll be working coordinating the campaign for five departments in the field, to try and bring recognition to that union. It's called the T and G [?]. And they've gone down from two million members to seven hundred thousand in the last number of years, since Thatcherism, since Margaret Thatcher. And they've got a new president who wants to organize, and he's made friends with our president. This is a joint project to see if our techniques here can work there for them.

I see. And are you going to be organizing just janitors in this effort?

Yeah. Just janitors.

That's interesting. I suppose in London too a lot of the janitorial work is probably done by immigrants, right?

Yes, it is. And their labor laws are, from what I've heard, unusual. They don't have union shop there. All the agreements that we would call union contracts—all of their contracts have a clause that say, "this contract is not enforceable in any court of law." So apparently there's quite a bit of trust involved in keeping these things going. Which I won't be used to. We're going to have to learn from them on some of this stuff, you know.

Do you feel optimistic about this organizing that SEIU is doing now, and also about this work that you will be doing in London?

Optimistic about what SEIU is doing nationally here?

Yeah.

Oh yeah! I think it's great. I think they're doing a good job. I mean, I worked in the South years ago, and the thought that we would get eight or ten thousand janitors organized in Houston was something that never really occurred to us. And they did it in a fairly short amount of time, six months, something like that.

Was that fairly recently?

Yeah, it was a month ago. Two months ago. You know, in terms of London, it all remains to be seen. Frankly, I'm terrified, but we'll see how it works out.

Do you think you'll be living in a hotel? Or do you think they'll rent you an apartment so you can have a kind of regular life?

They told me that they're going to find an apartment for me, so. Campaign promises, you never know, you know? "Oh yeah, it'll be great!" You get there, "Oh, jeez."

I lived in London almost two years in the mid-'60s. Well, what keeps you going as an organizer? This is sort of my final question. Because you've got one of the longer histories of people I've interviewed.

I believe in what we're doing. When I first told you I backed into the union, I wasn't really someone who was well schooled in Marxism or labor history or anything, I knew the regular things that other kids knew about, the Pullman strike and all that. But when I was a nursing home worker, and we were talking with the organizer, and he was explaining what you get out of a contract, I couldn't believe what a good deal it was, you know. That you actually have legal rights, legal standing in a court of law, that they have to spell out all your rights, and that you get to keep them. And I couldn't believe what a good deal it was. And to this day, I can't believe what a good deal it is. I now know how hard it is to get that deal, but for people like me, and people from my home town who are my friends, and people I've run into, I feel like it's something that's worth getting. And if you can couple that on somebody that's putting together a national strategy to make things better for all workers, that's it. We're home.

Yeah, and that seems to be a big emphasis of SEIU now. People have been—during election campaigns, people come around in their purple t-shirts and encourage voters to get out and vote.

Years ago, I worked in Pittsburgh, and of course, the Steelworker building was there—it's huge. It's 10 or 12 stories, and we had our little local there, and we were pumping away, and I used to think, if only we could get the resources of that building, to help us, how easy things would be. A couple of years ago, I was down there meeting a friend of mine who works for the Steelworkers, and as I was waiting outside the building, everybody going in had a purple shirt on. I said to him, "What's going on?" He said, "Well, we're running phone banks in there, but most of the people are your members." You know, I feel like we've really come a long way. It used to be, "SEI-who?" I always tell people in meetings, when I meet with locals and they want to know about SEIU, I always say, "You know, when I first started with SEIU, if we went to any meeting of the state fed. or any bigger meeting, you entered the room and you knew exactly where the SEIU people were sitting. Because you found out where the dais was, and you projected the exact opposite and as far away as you could possibly go, and looked in that direction, and sure enough, that's where we'd be. By the kitchen, usually. And now, we've got a seat at the front, you know. So, we're happy about that.

Anything else you'd like to add about the legacy of 925 that you don't think you've mentioned? That I've asked about?

Well, I'll probably think of something as soon as you go out the door, but I'm sure there's a million more things that I could say, but don't come to mind right now.

Ok. Well, you'll have a chance, if you think of something or an anecdote, to attach it to your interview transcript when you see it.

Ok. Very good.

Thanks so much, Joe.

Thank you. Ok.

END of interview.