

Dely Gasataya
Interviewed by Ann Froines
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(Dely Gasataya is Chapter representative to the National Executive Board of SEIU, and works in the University of Washington Medical Center billing department.)

Tell me the story about how you first entered 925.

I was a union member, just an ordinary union member. I do not know that a union exists. It just happened that one of my supervisors was giving me a hard time, and I was telling this to my older sister who is working at City Lights, and she was the supervisor. When I was telling her, she asked me if we have a union, and I told her, I don't know. And my sister told me that you should join the union because as of now you are a free rider. I said, how come? Because they are the ones bargaining for your contract. And I said, oh, I don't know about that, and she told me that you should join. And nobody asked me but I saw one of the application forms, a flyer like this, and so I read it. I became a member then. So that is how I became a member. But I was not active then, yet.

Did the union then help you with the problem with you boss?

I still didn't know how to bring it up, that thing. I just happened to solve the problem because I went to the manager, and tell my problem. But fortunately, she helped me with my problem. What she did was to transfer me to another supervisor. With the supervisor I then had it was the same thing, giving me a hard time. But I still didn't bring up the problem, because I don't know how. That's how it started.

This is when it was called the Classified Staff Association?

It was called CSA-925 then.

Do you remember what your first union meeting was like?

One time I was walking up the stairs and one of the union reps was sitting in the stairs. And I know him, that he is our union rep because he was always sitting in lunchroom, and he kept smiling to me. And I ask him, why are you there? He said: I was shut out by the manager of the lunchroom, which is next to the office. You know, they don't like someone from the union sitting down there. But it's the lunchroom!

I asked him a question that interested him to follow up. That's how it all started. He called me to ask me a favor. He started me distributing the information leaflets for the union. And I said yes! You know, information when there is an issue. It was called THE VOICE, that is our union organ at the time. So he asked me to do that. That is all, I

started from there, distributing leaflets. And then he talked to me, and encouraged me to become a union steward.

They elected me to be a union steward. I was so nervous at the time to accept the job (laughs). And they said, no, you can do it, you can do it. I said why not, you can do it. This was 1992, and my first trip to Cleveland. That was my first meeting. When he told me about going to Cleveland, he said, we have a convention going on in Cleveland, and he encouraged me to go to that convention. I didn't know anyone from the union. I did know Cindy, who was the secretary then. I was all by myself on the plane. And that was my first training.

Was that a good experience, that training?

Yes, that was the first time in my life I attend a meeting.

So you hadn't had any earlier experiences as an activist, with any other issues?

No, I don't have any. It all started in 925.

Describe some of your own experiences as an office worker. For example, did you experience or observe a lack of respect toward office workers?

Yes, that is how I got started with the union. My supervisor was not respecting me at all.

What were the ways your supervisor acted badly toward you, do you remember?

Yes, a lot! I had something stinging in my eyes, maybe my eye shadow got in the way. So I went to the restroom and tried to fix my make-up. And I saw my supervisor sitting at the door, and looking at me, and then she called me like that (makes a hand motion with the fingers signaling "come here"). But I already know that gesture, because in my country, this is calling your pet. (Laughs) You know, animals.

What did she say, that you shouldn't be doing this? What was her complaint?

She just told me to come to her office, and she showed me all the work, and she said, this is all the work you are not finishing. She thought I was going to the rest room for nothing, and making up myself. And one time I exploded, because when I was on the phone, she came near me, and right into my face, she asked me, "Is it personal? Is it personal?" Just like that. I exploded, and I hang up the phone, and that is the time I went to our manager. And I know my manager is siding with her, because the way she talks, she said that I often go to the ladies' room, I go to the bathroom all the time. And I told her it is the call of nature, what can I do? I have to go the rest room. So I have to give reasons why I am doing that. And that she asked me if I am willing to have a meeting with her. And I said, yes, I would like to talk about this. I can no longer bear this. So I was waiting for them to call me.

Then the manager called me. Am I willing to move away from her and move to another supervisor, and I said, yes.

And you had already been working at the university for a long time, right?

I was hired in 1977, and I was only 3 years in my position. It was 1980. I was a new employee, and I didn't know what step I am going to do. . . I didn't see anyone in the lunchroom, and I don't know how the union operates.

Did you observe other people experiencing problems?

Oh, yes! Very common, very common in our office. Last year, we had a class action. All the co-workers signed a petition to our new director. They resolved the problem, but some of my co-workers that signed the petition, they said, even though the problem is resolved, that person is still here. And I said, we already did the first step, and that's way they _____(?) down right now. That was only last year.

Did you know anything about the women's movement in the U. S. in the 1980's?

I heard about that. But this is the first involvement I have. I emigrated in 1977, and fortunately, I was hired after a month I arrive here in the United States.

Had you worked in this field back home in the Philippines?

No, and I don't know if there is any union movement in our country. Maybe there is but I am not paying attention. Even my mother is just a housekeeper, she is staying at home, doing the housekeeper job, the kids, tending the husband.

What was your father's work?

He is a meat inspector, but I don't think he is involved with a labor union. You know, the Second World War just ended in 1945, and so in the Philippines, there is no kind of organization there.

Can you describe one of the campaigns or struggles that you were involved in with 925?

They nominated me to the bargaining unit, that was in 1992. Back then, before 1992, our union is not like, it's not fair share yet. But I was able to get some members. That is the first time I try to talk to my co-workers on the importance of the union, and, like me, joining the union is like having an accident. This is what I thought, because the supervisor is giving me hard time, and you are accident-prone, you shouldn't join the union. That is what my sister explained to me, no, they are bargaining for your benefits. I tried to bring in the workers in my department, because I know that the membership there is only 20 percent. We are a big department. So this is my first start of organizing.

And I remembered that _____ (a name) mentioned that they need 500 people to sign that we will vote for the fair share thing, so that is how I got those people to be active.

As a steward, you had to handle co-workers' grievances, right?

Yes, Jake was my mentor then, Jake Carton, this is how he educated me. Dely, lets go to, I would observe, and he was doing the talking. That is how he trained me. And every time they make another step, they say, you can do that, and I would take another step. That is how I started to learn how the union functions.

Did you feel good about 925's approach to organizing?

Yes, I was into it, because our union then was, well it was an open shop, and people did not think of joining the union. Then when I became a union steward, in my office, they are not giving me a hard time anymore. (Laughs.)

Did you convince them in your office to join the union?

Oh, yes. I approach them one by one, but we are not bargaining yet for fair share. We are bargaining for additional vacation. I really like that fair share thing because they are deriving benefits from whatever we work on. I do not like that unfairness. If that is the case, you should not be involved in the _____ (?). But I didn't say that. They should be a part of this contract, regardless. I always talk to them, giving them examples from my small knowledge and understanding. How are you going to win a case, when you have no money? And there are members that are facing disciplinary action, and sometimes it goes another step, and, of course, it will cost us money—they consult lawyers, there is the salary of the staff that work on that issue—so I give them examples and explain how it works.

Did you feel like you were asking women to put their jobs at risk when they joined the union?

That's what they thought, but that's not true. Because it helps management to give us promotions and increases. So help us to do that. The union helps us do that. The management is not doing that. We need to do something to make a voice.

Did you receive training for the various roles you have played in the union?

Oh, yes. I always came to the training, because I know I need that. I know when I first accepted the work from Jake, I said I cannot handle the grievance because of my language barrier and sometimes I may not be able to grasp what they are talking about. Usually when I started doing my own grievance, I asked, can you describe what your case is? So I would have a very long understanding. I am glad that all the grievances I had at that time were resolved easily. And that there is such fine results, and I am happy that it happened without any struggle on my part.

I think it was our second bargaining and I was organizing with data entry workers, when three of my co-workers called me and said they had been 75% (3/4 time) employees at the university, and they had been there for six years already in the position. _____(?) was the organizer at that time. I said, OK, go ahead and join the union, and when we have the contract we can see how your position can be permanent. When they had been organized, and won the best contract, they said to me, OK, Dely, we are in the union now. We would like now that our positions be permanent. They said that when they work overtime they are only paid (for) "fulltime." I called one of the union reps here, and they gave instructions to me. They said, OK, Dely get the 220 form, and after we review the 220 form, we will see the supervisor. But the first thing you should do is request that the supervisor release the 220 form. And that is the first thing I did. I wrote the names of the four people and requested the 220 forms. They gave me the 220 forms, then the next step was to talk to the supervisor and request that those people should be permanent. So I asked the supervisor to put those people in a permanent position, and I don't hear anything from them! After a year, I found out that they had already been made permanent. And I said, oh, good!

And they didn't come to thank you!

No, they thought it was the management that did it. I request the 220 form, and that's the first step. If they didn't agree, then we would pursue it. But they did it, with no hard time on our part. So that was my first case, and I am happy about that. (Laughs.)

Can you tell me about how you felt about the organization 925, your thoughts about getting involved, and the people you were meeting?

I had a very positive feeling. The people are very friendly, they are like sisters and brothers to me. And I had a sense of belonging. And the knowledge I derive from there was different from the world I had, going to work, home, back to work. I got a sense of value from working with your co-workers. And telling them how to be aware of what is going on. And how we are going to deal with. . .because they are complaining their salaries are small, the work is too much, the unfairness. Before then, I do not know how to deal with that.

Were you a steward for many years?

Since 1992, I am still a steward. I was in the bargaining for this last contract. And that was another exposure to me, because this time our contract is being approved by Olympia, our government. And the first contract we sent off, they approved it. During all those years, collective bargaining doesn't pass in Olympia yet. And that is the one, me and my co-workers were calling Olympia to pass collective bargaining. And finally it passed.

So you were doing that kind of political work, too. Did you go to Olympia ?

Yes, I encouraged my co-workers to go, and if not, I will go. Quite a few years we were doing that, to talk to my representative to pass the collective bargaining. It passed not too long ago.

Were there men active in 925, I know about Neal, who was president, but other men?

Not too many, but now I see men coming to the meetings. Two or three, Neal Culver and Andy Bird, but Andy Bird is no longer here.

Do you think 925 had interesting strategies and tactics for organizing? What were some of the actions that you were involved in?

Oh, yes. Signing petitions, we did a big signing of petitions for the U president, and we hand-delivered to him. It was last year when they tried to outsource our work. So we worked on the big petition card that all the members signed. And we hand delivered that to the big bosses! Our work has already been outsourced.

I didn't know that, you are the first person who's mentioned that.

Because that is very important to me. Uh huh, they have already out-sourced our work, and then in the bargaining, they are trying to put in language, that is they are not satisfied. . . of course, we did not like that language. So we really worked hard, my co-workers, it was the first time I marched, so all the co-workers marched around the building with signs.

Did people lose their jobs because their work was outsourced?

Actually, no. Because that is what I have been telling them. As long as this language is in our contract, we are protected. This is very important to us, because if this language will disappear and they will put a different language. . .but I am glad they are listening. So they have outsourced some of the work, but we are still there. There is a lot of work. As a matter of fact, in the contract now, they transferred us to another department, to the billing department

Are other jobs at the university being outsourced? Is this a big problem?

I remember that the student loan department at the University of Washington campus was outsourced. And I know now that they are trying to outsource the billing department. The collections department has been outsourced. And at that time I was telling my co-workers the language is very important. If you need this job, this language must be here.

One of the questions here has to do with issues of racial and ethnic diversity in the workforce, and how 925 presented those issues to the membership or the staff. Do you have anything to say about that, as a woman from another culture?

(The union? Kim?) is trying to do something about that, to hire a different ethnicity to be involved in organizing. I am one of the participants on the committee on diversity. We are trying to work on that, to identify all the members of color, we are just starting.

Is the goal to develop leadership?

Yes, that is right.

What do you think are the reasons more members of color don't come forward to leadership?

Maybe it is their responsibilities, or they think they cannot do the job. They feel that family comes first. And I try to give an example. The president of 925 is a working mother, and she is a family woman, she can come and bring her child . . . I give those examples. And I think if you have a family, you should be working on that, because you have kids in school. And that is our goal, to protect our jobs. It is harder for you, because you have kids. If I am out of work, I am the only one who will be affected. But you have kids that will be affected. So in the union not only single persons should be involved, all the persons should be involved.

So people can bring their children to the office and to meetings?

Yes, she can bring her child, and one of the staff can baby sit. Even dogs. (Laughs.)

Do you believe that the aims of 925 were realized?]

Yes, I think almost all of our goals that we work on . . .

You go to the National Executive Board meetings of SEIU. What are they talking about now, what are the big issues facing 925?

The Washington chapter has been biggest delegation, and at the national level we discuss how we can get to the Olympia issues, we talk about national problems of the whole union. We are trying to look for friendly politicians that support our issues, and, of course, the health care, that is the biggest thing. We were able to reduce our health care insurance (cost) in our contract. We were able to negotiate that in our new contract. They wanted us to pay 14 % but we were able to reduce it to 12%. And then we have a 3.2% (raise) coming. And of course, the biggest thing for me is to retain the language on outsourcing. All the language in our contract, we were able to retain it. We are happy about that. (Laughs)

Is there other activism going on in the Seattle area besides the labor organizing of 925 that you are aware of?

I know about 1199. We were helping them. But maybe I am not aware of it. We work in Olympia with 1199.

What are the important legacies of 925? What has 925 brought to this community?

We were able to retain the name, Local 925. We were only an extension of the local, because it started on the east coast. But we were able to retain that name. So we are able to continue the work. I wish I can help with the new organizing (family day care workers) but I cannot drive. So I have to organize here. I remember another union, the apple workers in Spokane, we went there and helped them. I would like to help them, too, because we have the same needs. Not because we would like them to help us but to _____. It is the strength we are looking for.

Do you think that 925 had an impact on SEIU as a whole?

Oh yes, we bring lots of numbers now. Before we were only 3000 strong, but now we are more than that. And we were able to get Local _____ into 925, so I know we have impact.

Has there been anything that has disappointed you in your work in 925?

There have been some issues, like gay issues, that I am not very compatible supporting, but aside from that, I am still involved.

Is that for religious reasons, or cultural reasons?

In my view it is not the standard, normal thing. I just like what is standard, whatever is normal.

Of course, the various caucuses say, well, what is normal? They want to challenge the idea that there IS a normal. . .

For me the standard is man and woman.

What does the experience of working with 925 mean in your life? Has it changed your life in some ways?

Yes, it developed my personality. Before I cannot talk, and to ask me to be interviewed, I am very shy. It developed my personality. And I can stand in front of big people, like the president, as a delegate. In fact, in Washington, D.C. that is the first time I saw all of the presidential candidates. And it is a new experience to me, our union is heading to political organizing.

Did you start to say that you were speaking before the president?

No, I just happened to be in there. But I had the chance. ...to do interviewing, to give the questions. They give you the privilege to ask questions.

In your organizing work have you ever given speeches?

(Laughs) Yes, that was the first . . . to give interview, to develop my speech. I remember the first meeting I attended of the Asian-Pacific-American Labor Association (APALA). And I remember that Neal was talking about sending a person like me. It is an organization of immigrants, those people who have migrated, and there is no union yet. And they have a lot of Asians that are starting over here. I am not active, but I attend the yearly meeting, an honorary, fund-raising meeting, and I attend that. And so our union is supporting that.

Do you identify with the East Asian community? (long pause) What community do you feel a part of?

I usually feel involvement with my fellow Filipinos. I come from that world. Maybe because of my involvement with the union, they want ethnicity to be active. . .

Are you active in any Filipino organizations?

No, no it's my friendship networks, yeah.

Do you feel optimistic about the work of 925?

Oh, our goal right now is to grow 925 and I am supportive of that.

What keeps you going, oh, that's a slang expression . . . what keeps you motivated to continue your work with 925?

Because it is the only way to voice our needs, and I am helping to encourage my co-workers, but if there is nobody to do it, well, I'll go, because there's a need.

You say you gained a lot of knowledge through your work with 925 over the years. What kind of knowledge has been important to you?

Of course, my life as a worker in the workplace. What do you call it, the dignity and respect, that is very important to me. I like them to respect me the way I like to respect them. That is the most important to me. They say a smile is the shortest distance between two people. That is how I like to work. (Laughs.) Of course, if you are happy with your co-workers, no problem. If you have small flow of work, then money is nothing, only the relationship between the co-workers and the big bosses, are very important to me. Of course, money is important to me. Of course when you work in the union this is what we are working on, this is a part of your package.

Do you feel the climate has improved for the workers since you've had the union?

Yes, oh yes. It has improved. They tease me that every time they see me they ask for increase, of course, you have to work for us so you will win that. They call me "Miss

925.” (Laughs) I am supporting 925, this is the only way. Of course, there are ups and downs, the hard thing is when you are bargaining and my co-workers do not understand. Sometimes they have the expression, the union is weak. And I say the union is not weak, the members are weak. (Laughs.) I have arguments, but I try to gain respect from them. We are working as a group. 925 is the organization that helps us. They are just like a mediator working for us. And sometimes they say, why doesn't the union go on strike? But they are not state employees, management will not listen to them. They will listen if all of us go on strike! Not to them.

Have you participated in any job actions? The one-day action?

Oh yes. We were in the one-day action in 2000, I was able to get all my co-workers out of the office that day. This is the only time I got discouraged, because after more than 30, the director of the university hospital gave us a disciplinary letter. But we were able to remove that in our contract. I work in the Billing Dept of the Medical Center.

What did you actually do on the day of the one-day strike?

Marching around the campus, because they are not going to give us the increase.

[The interview concludes here when Dely is interrupted by a friend arriving. . .]