Tom Hayden
telephone interview by Stacey Heath
July 19, 2006

I'm speaking with Tom Hayden. How are you?

I'm fine, thank you.

Good, could you just spell your last name for us for the tape.

H-a-y-d-e-n.

Great. And I just want to verify that you understand the call is being recorded—

Yes.

--and will be transcribed and submitted to the archives.

Yes.

I know that you worked with 925 around the fight over automation. Could you tell me about the work you did with them, and particularly about the VDT fight, and how that fit into the overall 925 fight.

I don't remember the year, but you can look that up. I was involved with a working women's association that came out of previous relationships I'd had in the anti-Vietnam war movement, with Karen Nussbaum in particular. They were trying to organize women office workers, and they brought these issues to my attention. What came from that was a very successful movie done by my wife, Jane Fonda, at the time, with Dolly Parton and Lily…

Tomlin.

Tomlin. And the issue of video display terminals was simply one of many. But subsequent to the project getting underway, I began to focus more and more on whether there were issues of VDT's. Particularly two: one was health and safety problems, and second, control of the modern office, in whose hands.

And how did that fit into the overall 925 fight?

9 to 5 was the name of the movie. It became the name of the SEIU Local, as I recall it, so you have 9to5 meaning working 9 to 5, the song, the reality, and then 925 the number of the local. And I think Karen Nussbaum would be the absolute authority on that, she's easy to find in Washington DC at the AFL-CIO. But it probably came out of organizers asking women office workers what their litany of complaints was, and there was probably a recurrent complaint over the impact of video display terminals. There was an ultimate issue of whether there'd been

adequate studies of radiation, whether they were safe in that sense, but there were also issues of the glare which would cause harm to the eyes, headaches, migraines and so on, and then the general fit of the furniture, which in those days it required that the worker be adjusted to the furniture, not that the furniture be adjusted to the worker. So it became a workplace issue around which they organized. And in order to elevate the organizing, we proposed legislation to set ergonomic safety standards, as it began to be called. And that led to a lot of controversy in California, I don't know how many other states, but then eventually the Clinton administration, where Karen Nussbaum went to work, designed some voluntary guidelines which I never was very enthusiastic about. And that's where the issue remained. I suppose now, under the present administration, it's been rolled back. But there was some progress made on establishing these standards as norms, industry norms, as opposed to state regulations of workplace practices. And as with most things, it became extremely difficult to make it a requirement that was enforceable.

And the role that you played with them in this—you said you introduced some legislation—can you say a little bit more about specifically what kind of work you were doing with them, in addition to legislation?

We wanted to bring attention to the issue, so the work involved doing some press conferences and hearings in the Capitol, where we were able to display for people what an ergonomic workplace looked like. What the screens were that could go on the computer to reduce the glare, to reduce the radiation; what kind of chairs would reduce back injuries; how serious the problem of carpal tunnel syndrome was, what could be done about that. So I think we brought a huge attention to the issue. And as a spinoff from that, there were probably a lot of offices that voluntarily changed, starting in the state capitol but there was a ripple effect beyond that. In addition, I introduced, not once, but several times, legislation that tried to put into law minimum standards regarding the ergonomic design of the workplace. Again, establishing standards for glare off the screen, standards that would limit the possibility of carpal tunnel wrist damage, and so on. Those, again, led to a lot of hearings, debate, I don't remember the exact outcome, it may have passed one house, but in the end we couldn't get over industry's absolute abhorrence of having any workplace regulation. They would argue there's no problem, and then when that failed, they would argue that they could solve the problem through voluntary initiatives and so forth. Labor was with us, although it wasn't a primary issue with labor, because organized labor represents organized workers. And this was an effort to organize the unorganized. So part of our problem was we lacked a constituency. We were representing an emerging constituency, women in the workplace, but we didn't have—this was not at the time a number one priority of the environmental organizations, the labor organizations, but it was definitely a number one priority of the business community to kill this bill.

And also then more generally, as an organizational and movement strategist, how did you see 925, what was its role, what were its strengths and weaknesses?

I thought that women were disproportionately underrepresented in labor and in the ranks of the organized, and that this might be a way, through the movie, through the legislation, through the hearings, to illustrate that these were really serious problems, and not some kind of lesser women's problems or something like that. There was an inherent...I won't say discrimination, but there was an inherent lack of serious attention to these issues. And without getting more

attention, it would be hard to get the organization rolling. I think the movie was a big factor, but having proposals embodied in legislation also attracted a lot of attention, and so the chapters, I guess you would call it, of the association, were formed. A couple of offices ultimately got organized. In the course of things, the association became incorporated into the SEIU. And there we have it.

Could you speak a little bit to what you saw as its strengths and weaknesses?

The strengths and weaknesses were the same. We were trying to give voice to the voiceless and representation to the unrepresented. So the weakness was that voiceless and unrepresented people don't have much impact. The strength was that you get an awful lot of public sympathy when you point out that there's some real problems and people are suffering with them and they're not getting any representation and they should be at the table. So I think we brought it out from behind the curtains and made it a more public issue.

And then how would you describe the legacy and how it fit into the historical arc?

I think you'd have to talk to Karen Nussbaum about that. I feel that it was a small contribution to beginning the organization of women in the office, and the struggle of labor to get organized, and get anybody organized and keep them organized, is a long one, and everybody know that story, you know how it goes.

Great. Anything you want to add?

No, just talk to Karen, there's others around the country who have a much more specific handle on what happened after they left me behind. (chuckles)

Ok. Alright. Thank you so much for your time. I appreciate it.

Ok. Stacey, nice talking to you.

Thank you.