

**Tom Hoffman**  
**Interviewed by Ann Froines**  
Cleveland, Ohio  
December 8, 2005

**I'm interviewing Tom Hoffman in the offices of Local 3, in Cleveland Ohio on December 8, 2005. First of all, Tom, tell me what your position is with Local 3.**

I'm the Programs Director. I live in Pittsburgh. I do communications and training and politics for the local.

**What is Local 3 basically? Who are the workers primarily?**

Local 3 is a Justice for Janitors local. So primarily our members are janitors in commercial office buildings. Although we also have janitors and support staff in schools and universities. We're looking to organize security at some point. Our members are the building service members out of SEIU Local 585, which is now disbanded. SEIU Local 47, which used to be the local here in Cleveland, and SEIU Local 79 in Detroit. We took the janitors out of all three of those and put them together in one local.

**So it's three or four different states.**

Yup, western Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan. And we also have organizing campaigns going on in Indianapolis and Columbus, Ohio and Cincinnati, Ohio.

**Tell me the story about how you first encountered 925.**

Well, I worked for a community organization, it was a citizen action organization in Pittsburgh, that did utility rate hike organizing. A lot of senior citizens, people on low and fixed incomes in our organization. And like many of those groups, they kept going broke, and we'd have to be on unemployment. I think the third time that happened, I said, "You know," (laughs) "I need something a little different here." A friend of mine who'd worked there the previous time we went broke, he came here to work in Ohio for the Celeste administration. And then I told him I was really sort of fed up with where I was, and he said, "Well you know, 925 is looking for an organizer in Cleveland." And the rest is history.

**So you applied for the job.**

I applied for the job, and my first campaign was the part-timers at Cuyahoga Community College, a campaign that had several organizers on it. I think it was close to my last campaign too because it took a long time to win that campaign. We finally got it to election, and then there were challenged ballots... We ultimately won, but it was a long road.

**Were there any memorable experiences from that long struggle that you could share with us?**

I remember much better the library campaigns that we did, sort of around that. The first one that we did was the Medina County Library. That was a small group in Medina, Ohio. Probably my most embarrassing moment on that campaign was that...I was visiting somebody down in Columbus, and we were having a Sunday night meeting, and I really thought it was like 8 o'clock, and it turned out to be 7. And I got there at 8, and they were all, "Where were you!" But we won that election, although I remember it was on the day that the Challenger blew up, so...

**1987?**

Yeah. And then there was the Stark County Library. One of my fondest memories of that one was there was a woman who was...there was a woman who was the chapter president at the time, Brenda Momerofiq[?]. Her Mom worked for the library too, and Brenda, I don't think she'd ever been out of Canton, Ohio. But we got her to go to a lobby day in Washington, D.C. And she'd never ever been on an airplane. And so, the first airplane ride she's ever on, they had some kind of emergency on the plane, and they had to evacuate the plane, and jump out the door on the slide, and slide out onto the runway. So "that'll really give her an education."

Then there was the Euclid Library. That's where I met Peggy Torzewski who's now on staff for—she was on staff for 925 and now she's with 1199. It's always good to see that the people you work with go on to greater heights.

**How many years were you an organizer for 925?**

Three.

**Three years. Were there any issues that came up for you as a man, organizing a workforce that was primarily women?**

You know, jokes. But nothing other than that. I just really enjoyed working in that environment, so I didn't see any real problems. People would make jokes. One of the other male organizers and I, we said we were gender disabled, that's what it was (laughs).

**Oh, I see. So it was more jokes among the guys. You, I'm sure, felt comfortable with it, more or less. Had you ever been an office worker yourself?**

No. I'd been a math teacher before that.

**I see. I know you had earlier experience as an activist with Citizen Action. Tell us a little bit about your background growing up. Had you known about labor struggles and unions?**

No. No, I had no idea you could do that. (laughs) My Dad was a college professor at Union College in Schenectady. I was on that track for a long time. I was a math major, went to University of Massachusetts. Then I went to Cornell for graduate school. That was the year that the blacks took over the student union hall. It was on the front page of the New York Times. I'd chosen Cornell, and then that happened, and I remember my math teachers were teasing me about, "Hey, is your school going to be there when you get there next year." So...I guess being a graduate student is where I really got my first taste of activism. The antiwar movement was really heating up then. I did draft counseling, and I was a suicide hotline counselor. I was a TA. And I really sort of figured out after a while that it was the teaching part that I really liked, not so much the math part. So I got a master's in mathematics and a teaching degree. So then I taught in a bunch of places after that, as a math teacher.

**High school?**

High school, community college, private boys' school in Colorado. So.

**Was there any sort of particular transformative moment that made you decide to become a full time activist?**

My first teaching job out of Cornell was at a private boys' school in Colorado. It was pretty ritzy. One of Henry Clay Frick's descendants was there. And the Goldwyns from Metro Goldwyn Mayer. Actually, Cheryl knows one of the Goldwyns. She went to school with him. The voice of Tarzan, from the new Tarzan thing? I taught him. He was in my class. (laughs) But by and large, you know, this was supposed to be the cream of our nation's youth, and I really didn't end up liking them very much, really. And then, I did one year in a high school. And then I got a job teaching in a prison for a community college in Elmira, New York. A maximum security prison. That was really great. Those guys were really great to teach. So that sort of, you know, cognitive dissonance of, you know, these people are supposed to be bad but they're great, and these people are supposed to be great but they're bad, you know, so I'm like, what's that all about? And I stumbled onto VISTA, so I was a VISTA volunteer. It was the waning years of the Carter administration and there were people from the antiwar movement that were the teachers, teaching the organizing. And they had sort of an analysis of things, and it was sort of an eye opener for me. So that's sort of what did it.

**Do you remember any details from any of the campaigns or struggles that you were involved in as an organizer, that were kind of exhilarating moments?**

Usually the most exhilarating moment was winning. (laughs) I'm trying to remember. It's been a while.

**I interviewed Peggy, and she spoke very highly of how important your mentoring was to her.**

(laughs) Well, I wrote her an email, I said, "I hope you'll be nice." (laughs) Oh, yeah, she must have told you about that there was that one woman that went south on us. She was the one that had...she'd actually called the union and sort of got the campaign going, and then she went south on us. She decided she wanted to stick with management. And I remember we almost...the poor woman who was running the Euclid Library. She almost had a nervous breakdown.

**Did you ever use any direct action in your efforts to either get the union in place or get a contract? 925 was kind of noted for those kind of tactics.**

Right. I remember trying to get a contract for the part-timers. That was tough. I remember we went to...

**This was at Tri-C?**

This is at Tri-C, yeah. And we went to...I'm trying to remember what it was. It was either the board of the college or the county board, I can't remember what it was, where we had a big report card, with a big F—F's all over it. We presented that at the hearing. You know, it's a little tough to get...librarians weren't really into...

**Militance?**

Militancy, right. It was more like a stealth campaign, I think.

**I know 925 was your first union organizing experience, but what do you think was different about 925's approach to organizing. Do you have a view of that? What values does it represent in its efforts to organize?**

Hm. I remember my first real impression was, you know I'd done work on political campaigns before. And it always seemed so huge and nebulous. How could you possibly keep track of all these people, you know. So I really liked the District 925, you know, because you had a very specific universe and an actual list of people. And they were the ones that really taught me how important that personal relationship was. We had very carefully made up lists, which I thought was a really good idea, and that was what we lived and died by, was that list, to make sure the list was right, and keeping track of where people were along the way, and what can we do if somebody's a little weak, how can we change that. So a very personal one-on-one approach which I think was really good. And then the whole idea of...now I work for the janitors. And it's sort of a common theme that that work has to be valued. That was a big part of the 925 was...Karen Nussbaum always tells the story about when she was a secretary, some big guy, white guy, came in and said, "Is anybody here? I can see nobody's here," or something like that, and she said, "Oh, I'm here." So valuing that work. That was an important lesson for me. I always found that my...it's always good to have a good relationship with your clerical people. They can really (laughs) save your butt sometimes. But, the two most important things that I remember are that personal

relationship and keeping track of those lists, and making sure that the work of those people was valued, and that they have the right to be valued for what they do.

**Do you remember participating in trainings and things like that, that 925 would have for organizers and officers?**

Yeah.

**Were they good at that kind of leadership training?**

I'm trying to think of one. I mean, Bonnie Laden was...I mean, the mentoring was probably more important to me than some of the classes, I suppose. I'm trying to remember, because my recollection is that at that time, all the organizers in SEIU worked for the International. So I was on International payroll. So I can remember going to SEIU trainings for organizers, or conferences.

**District 925 was a national union.**

Right. But it was a part of SEIU, and we all worked for—we didn't work for 925. We worked for the international SEIU.

**But they had a certain autonomy within—**

They did.

**--SEIU and the leadership came over from 9to5. Do you remember any discussions about leadership and leadership development in your work with 925/SEIU?**

I'm not sure I know what you mean.

**Well, I guess, you're talking about the sort of mentoring that you got from 925 leadership and in turn gave to the workers that you were organizing.**

Did we get trained in all that?

**Was leadership development an important element, I guess, of SEIU and 925.**

Yeah. Oh, absolutely.

**And especially given that they were organizing primarily women.**

Right, and clerical workers too. I think, as women clerical workers. You know, the tough part of that always was that we...you know, if you have janitors, they all clean in a building, and they sort of relate to each other. But it always seemed to me that the relationship for the clerical worker was more often with her boss. And somehow, trying

to figure out how to break that down and to develop people to see that for what it was, and be able to talk to other workers about that. That was challenging.

**What can you say about the roles and experiences of men as members of 925? Is there any observation there to be made, in working [            ]**

Well, they were somewhat of a minority although, like in the big Cleveland Public Library campaign that was the last big one I was involved in, there were a lot of men that worked in the library. There were men librarians, and there were the custodians. So, there were men around.

**Did they take an active role in--?**

Oh yeah. Yeah, because the custodian types, they would sort of travel around, so they could talk to people, in sometimes ways we couldn't.

**Since it was a public library, were you able to access employees pretty well, as the organizer?**

Yeah. I always felt I was a little shy about that, a little more shy than I should have been, but, I mean, we won, but I probably should have been more aggressive about it than I was, but, whatever, it's sort of my basic personality type.

**Is there anything you'd like to add about the strategies and tactics of 925 in your experience?**

Um...

**I guess you'd be doing it looking back from your more recent union experience.**

Yeah, I think that...the janitors' organizing is much more militant than 925 was in those days, at least where I was, anyway. I felt like we were really sort of learning how to do this. It was hard, you know. Not really a group that traditionally got organized. And I felt like we'd sort of learned our lesson, the same lesson as the janitor's work, the rules about how you form a union and those laws are really not in our favor, right (laughs). They're really a way to sort of keep people from organizing. So, I felt like we should have learned that lesson quicker than we did. Because at Cleveland Public Library, I remember there was this whole issue of...that there were branch librarians. Each branch had a head librarian. And the question was whether or not they were supervisors, and whether or not they would be in our unit or not. And that dragged...oh. It took ages. It took months to go through the hearing to figure that out.

**Did that hold up the whole election?**

Yeah. Because we had to wait for that before that would happen. I think people now realize that that's a way of delaying things, and it probably would have been better to just dump them from the beginning.

**What was the challenge that you faced in that wait? Losing momentum?**

Yeah. Yeah, you sort of have to make up stuff to do, right? Because there really wasn't anything to do. Like the health care unions... 1199 would do marches on the boss, and take petitions in, and stuff like that. We never really did—that was a little harder to do in that environment. I remember in the middle of the campaign they got a new director of the library. I'm not sure why I remember that, but I remember that being an issue.

**Peggy was telling me something about some march that went into one of the main libraries.**

Oh, was that at Euclid?

**I'm not sure where it was, but it was kind of an exhilarating moment, because nobody expected a whole group of librarians...**

That might have been Euclid then. That's probably something that she put together there.

**They had some kind of informational picketing, I guess around the contract, and [ended up] just sort of spontaneously deciding to go and march in. But it was a big library. She said it was seven floors.**

Oh, it must have been Cleveland. That must have been after she was on staff. That was long after I left town.

**How did 925 deal with any issues around diversity in the workplace and in the union, particularly with respect to racial and ethnic differences? Do you remember anything specific about that? What was talked about?**

I just remember that there was a real effort to have a racially diverse staff. And I felt that was important...if you're going to talk to workers, and talk about equality and fairness, you sort of got to practice that lesson too. And I think that—

**Do you think 925 [did that]?**

Yeah, I think we tried to. I remember we tried to make sure our committees were racially diverse too.

**That they reflected the membership, you mean.**

They tried to, yeah.

**Was 925 a family-friendly organization? How were activists' experiences combining family life with the—**

I didn't have one then, so. (laughs)

**You don't know first hand.**

Right. I didn't have a family then.

**What about your observations?**

But I know...we'd get invited over to Karen Nussbaum's house for dinner, or I'd go to Anne's house. There's sort of a whole network of activist types here in Cleveland. Like I hung out with Jay Westbrook who's on city council, and met some other good friends through there.

**So in a way are you saying your work life and your social life began to mesh?**

Yeah. Well, I didn't have any social life outside. I tried, but...that was one of my frustrations with Cleveland.

**Do you think some of that's endemic to labor organizing, in the sense that it's so time-consuming, you work more than 40 hours a week. I don't mean to put words in your mouth.**

Maybe. It wasn't that I didn't try--Lord knows I tried—but I really had a hard time finding a social network of single people. It's true, most of the people who work for... had some kind of relationships.

**Well, that question really applies more to people who have kids...**

I know in my current job it's tough.

**Because you do now have a family?**

Now I have a family, yes.

**Well, comment on that. What are some of the stresses and strains for you?**

A lot of it depends on this sort of campaign mentality, I call it, where, you know, "Oh, we've got to work all this time because we gotta win this campaign," you know. And you know? I have a stepson who just graduated from John Carroll here and I have a son who's going to be 12, and a daughter who's 10, and I've really just said, you know, where I am, I'm going to choose my family over my work. That's the way it is. Like last year we were working on the elections. It was Halloween, which was right before the election, so of course things were really crazy. And I said, you know, I don't care, I'm



going trick or treating with my kids. You know, you feel bad about it too, you feel like, oh, I'm letting everybody down, and oh, we might lose if I don't do—but I said, you know, I'm going to do this. I even actually did a conference call while I was walking around with them. But we had fun. And this year, my daughter decided to go with her friends. So if I hadn't gone last year, I would have missed the last time. You know, that's a valuable lesson there.

**In your opinion, were the aims of 925 realized?**

And that would be...what are the aims? To create a movement of clerical office workers, I'm afraid I don't think they did that.

**The leadership says their aims were to try to break into the private sector and organize those clerical workers.**

We never did that here. We tried. I remember I did a—actually it was a lot of fun. We worked with an eye care place. I had somebody, one of our members at Tri-C. And she drew me a computer terminal, with a face on the screen, with sort of bleary, drippy eyes —

**END of SIDE A  
START of SIDE B**

Damn thing's cleverer than we are. It scares me. So...if you filled this thing out, you'd get a free eye check at this vision place. And we ended up, we were at the main terminal, the terminal building, in downtown Cleveland. I don't know if you noticed it, but it's right downtown.

**That tower?**

Yeah. Not the big new one, but the sort of smaller, older one. Which is the Daily Planet. The guy who did Superman is from Cleveland, and he modeled the Daily Planet in his cartoons from that building. But anyway, so people would come out and we would give them these things.

**Were these real?**

No, they were like just a poster.

**But I mean, they could really get a free check?**

Yeah. Oh yeah. They could go, get a free checkup. And we ended up with this huge list—and one of the things we put on the bottom was “And I would like to know more about District 925.” So the cool thing about that was that we actually got things back from people. And it was cool because then we could actually go talk to them as 925. We

didn't have to like say, "Oh, women office workers," we could actually say, "Well, you asked for more information about this, so here I am."

**And these were various office workers from those big buildings.**

Yeah.

**Did that go anywhere?**

No.

**What were the obstacles?**

There were some... We could just never get... There was a law firm, and there was a publishing company, and the people, they were just...they couldn't get anybody else that wanted to talk about the union. We tried, saying, "What you gotta do, you gotta get some people together," and they couldn't get enough people together to talk about it. A lot of them were really scared.

**I suppose they had some reason to be scared. There weren't protections against getting fired...**

Absolutely. Right. I'm not saying they shouldn't have been, but I'm saying that they definitely were. It's just been...we always felt like somewhere there must be big rooms filled with clerical workers. But we could never find them. We tried looking at... telemarketing. We tried...places where you, like if you call up on the phone to order stuff over the phone, we figured there must be services like that, but we could never find them.

**I know 925 in Boston really tried to break into insurance, where one imagines there are large numbers of clerical workers, at least before computers, processing papers like crazy. But... They were there, it was just they couldn't break in.**

Right. Yeah, I think that's true. I'm sure that's why Andy finally pulled the plug on it.

**What is important in the legacy of 925, do you think? In some ways you've addressed this in other comments, but is there anything you'd like to add about the legacy of 925? How would you describe it?**

Well, I always thought that we always had the best people in 925. The best organizers and the best staff. They were just...we were all cool people, I thought. I thought that was...There was that time when a whole bunch of really cool people came together to work on this. It's kind of sad that it's all sort of gone away. But—

**What do you think happened to some of those cool people? They're still in the labor movement?**

Yeah, well, I'm still here, right. I think Cheryl, last time I heard, she was working for some AIDS foundation? Anne's still in the labor movement, she's working as a state council person here. Kim Cook, she's [still in]. I hear Adare Damon—have you heard that name? She was in 925. She's up in the northwest. I hear she works at the Sierra Club now.

**Someone pointed out to me that 925 did produce some leaders.**

Right.

**Who are still with SEIU to this day.**

Right. Karen Nussbaum.

**And Debbie and [      ].**

Right.

**Do you think 925 had an impact on SEIU?**

Yeah, I think so. I think they recognized that we had really good people. Again, I think what finally did it for Andy was it didn't look like there was any way to do this on any scale that would really create some kind of big movement, you know? I remember after we won the Cleveland Public Library campaign, I remember Bonnie saying—you know, that was like 300 people, 350? That was a sizeable...and she said, "You know, I just get the feeling that the international is—that Andy's—that's not gonna cut it. We could do that forever and it wouldn't really impress them that much." And I don't know if that was just cause we were with the girls, (laughs) or if it wasn't going to produce large numbers of people. I mean, the Justice for Janitors campaign, which is now sort of an institution in SEIU, they spent years and millions of dollars to get to the point where they could organize on scale. So I'm not quite sure...if we quite got that chance, but...

**I see. Actually Stern kind of reflected on that point himself.**

Oh yeah? What did he say?

**Something about, kind of, we won't know if there had been more time, maybe it would have borne fruit, or something.**

Right.

**What did the experience working as an organizer with 925 mean to you, do you think, looking back? It was your first union organizing job, right?**

Yeah. Well, how was I to know you could do that for a living, huh? (laughs) Coming from my background, who would have guessed, right? So, it certainly opened up my eyes as to...it gives you a different way to look at the world, that makes...probably a way to look at the world that makes more sense than some of the other ways you could look at the world.

**Would you say it set you on a path of commitment to the labor movement?**

Yeah...I'm probably a little burned out now, though. Sort of.

**What do you do primarily in your current job with Local 3, and how long have you had this job, by the way?**

I've been there about...well, I've been there since before the local started. So after I left Cleveland, I moved to—did you ever meet Mary Ann Collins? She works for the International. She used to live in Pittsburgh as international rep in Pittsburgh, and she went to D.C. And I bid for her job. I think there was only two times that the staff union of the international—somebody actually used the bid procedure. I was one of them. So I got a job as the field rep in Pittsburgh.

**And so you were servicing locals?**

Yeah. And that was a real shock, because there was sort of this sense of teamwork with 925, that wasn't there in Pittsburgh. I was pretty isolated. There were two people like me in the whole state, right? Me and another guy. We sort of developed a team after a while, but we were really spread out. So that was kind of a hard adjustment. I really missed the close contact of working with a team, you know? But anyway, so field services department was—Andy got rid of that. So I had two choices: I could work for the Pennsylvania State Council, and then this guy Rob [Schuler] from Justice for Janitors came and said, you could be communications director for this new local. And I said, "Oo, that sounds like fun." If you live in Pittsburgh and you do political stuff, the real center of the state is Harrisburg, which is like three and a half hours away through some of the worst driving you could imagine. Or, I could be in Pittsburgh and go to Cleveland occasionally, maybe Columbus. So that seemed—(laughs) That seems a lot easier! That's a much nicer drive.

**How long have you been doing it then?**

It's been, let's see...we had a big convention in Pittsburgh in 2000, and the local was... 585 was trustee in 2001...and...I started there sort of the end of 2002, so it's been a little over three years.

**Is Justice for Janitors sort of the name of the campaign that SEIU is running?**

Yeah, because that way you're not talking about union. Because union's sort of a bad word. We did that with 925, as office workers...

**Win some respect...**

Right, some respect, you know, just cause...like if I do—I mean, I could show you. Here's a press release I did. But if I do a press release that doesn't have the word "union" in it, I feel like I've done a good job, cause—

**Even though it'll say SEIU somewhere.**

Somewhere, but if you say Justice for Janitors, that's different.

**Do you feel optimistic about the organizing you're doing now?**

Actually we're doing really great. We've got this rally today, and we're going to really start ramping things up here in Cleveland. And we had a significant victory in Indianapolis, this big French multinational corporation finally agreed that they would go union. We've now got a majority in Columbus. Cincinnati's proving a little tough.

**By a majority you mean you've organized the majority of the—**

Yeah, the way it works is you go contractor by contractor, getting them to agree, if we get everybody in the room, will you be a part of that. So, in Columbus we've sort of reached that so we can now actually start negotiating a contract. And [know it]. Getting that contractor in Indianapolis, that was a big step there. But...

**So, what are the implications of getting this agreement from a multinational organization?**

Well, it was exciting to...we used relationships with unions in Montreal and France, because the whole...the world is all one now, and we can't win just here in the United States. We really have to figure out a way to work multinationally. I know that's one of Andy's big things, which I think is absolutely right. So by working on this campaign, against this GSF, that gave us the abil—you know, that gives us a reason to develop those relationships. So that was exciting. I think that's pretty cool.

**It's interesting that Debbie Schneider is the person heading up that international effort.**

Oh, right! That's right.

**Tell me about this job you had at the State Labor Council?**

I was working on a trusteeship in Buffalo. I had to go up to Buffalo like 3-4 days a week for like 9 months. My kids were little at the time, like 3 and 4. It was really awful. And I just wanted, "Whatever, man! Give me something else to do, because this is really bad!" Our form of county government in Allegheny County, the county around

Pittsburgh, changed from three county executives to basically a mayor of the county and a county council. And the labor movement really felt like they should really weigh in on this question and really work for some of these candidates... So, as they were looking for somebody and I said, "I'll do that!" Then I hooked up with the AFL folks, the political folks, and we really did a good job there. We really built a serious program there.

**Exactly what was that program?**

The AFL political program is that you call all the members, you go visit them at their homes as much as possible, you leaflet them at the worksite, you send them sort of slick mail, however you can contact your members. And each of the unions had to agree to do that, for each of their members. And we actually could show that our members turned out at a rate much higher than the general public. It was—

**SEIU members.**

No. I was working for the whole labor council. SEIU loaned me to the Labor Council. And it was really fun. We really did a good project, and put Allegheny County on the map.

**And you helped elect certain council people?**

Yeah, we had a supermajority on our county council. We didn't win the county executive seat because the candidate was so bad. He was awful. But anyway. We really did a good job. And I really tried to get a job out of this. I sat down with the labor council president. I said, "You know, we've really put this council on the map, and what you really need to do, and I can help you make this happen, is you need to hire me as the executive director for the labor council. And keep this program going, and other ones," stuff like that, but he wouldn't do it. Oh well. But the political part of the AFL program is great. But I just—and I've seen this over the years that I did that. We could get to the point where we could say, "We turn out all our members to vote." But if it's only 50, who cares. And that's what the problem is, is that the list gets shorter each year. Like the Steelworker lists are terrible to call, because there's nobody new coming in the door. And they're all old and retired, and "Oh, your husband died yesterday? Oh, I'm so sorry." We get calls like that all the time, because it's all these really old guys, and there's nobody coming in. And if they don't—you know, it's not enough to be able to turn out all your members, if you don't have any members to turn out. That's just my—I don't know if this... So, I think that this split had to happen, or something had to happen, because if we don't figure out how to turn that around. And clearly SEIU's figured out how to do that. We're going to be over 2 million members shortly.

**Already it's the largest unit within the AFL.**

Well, not anymore, but.

**Right, but it was.**

Right. And it was the only one that was growing. All those other unions, whatever organizing they were doing was just trying to stay even.

**Ok, thank you.**

**END**