

Valarie Long
Interviewed by Ann Froines (on telephone)
Washington, D.C., April 23, 2006

First I want to verify that you do understand that I am recording this interview.

I understand.

OK, great. And do you agree to make a gift of this interview and transcript to the Walter Reuther archives?

I do.

Then we'll start with the questions.

Why don't we start by you telling me the story about how you entered 925? What made you go to that first discussion, that first meeting?

I came to 925 when I was at the University of Cincinnati

Hold on, I am having a little trouble with this.... And what year was this?

I think it was about 1986, the year before 925's merger with SEIU.

Had you had earlier experiences as an office worker?

I had been working as a data entry operator at a state office building in Ohio. My first experience as an organizer had been to organize myself and my co-workers into a union; a couple of different unions were vying for union rights for those people.

What role did you play in that early organizing before 925?

I was part of a team of organizers under Debbie Schneider's leadership, and I was project organizer working to unite office workers. They were not pro-union people, to say the least.. .it was the University of Cincinnati organizing effort of District 925.

Can you describe some of your experiences as a data entry operator and office worker?

I worked second shift, starting at 3:30. I worked mostly for women on the night shift who processed payroll (brief unintelligible section).

Was part of that experiencing a lack of respect for the work you were doing?

Absolutely. . .we worked under a big bureaucracy, and under a hierarchy, where people didn't take your input...People who were doing the work who had suggestions were very

rarely listened to. And there was a male-female dynamic to it, because the bosses were male.

What I want to do is double check that this is recording adequately for me to transcribe, OK?

OK, we're all set. What did you know about the women's movement? Had that been a part of your experience at all?

Not directly, but indirectly. I'm 44, so I wasn't doing a lot of women's movement type organizing... But you are aware of the times that you live in. . .with the civil rights movement, I always figured I was born too late, for the march on Washington, etc. I was in school, then I was a young mother. I started organizing when I was pregnant. There were a lot of ways that the women's movement captured my imagination--sexism, being a new mother, being in the work world, you know. And watching other people's struggles, whether they were single parents, or not being acknowledged because they were women. So I was aware of that type of stuff.

Do you remember any discussions in 925 about the women's movement or women's issues?

There were many people in 925 or worked for 925 that were much more active in those struggles. And those conversations that people would have, who were organizing, in a sense, as a manifestation of the women's movement, and were trying to transfer the power of the women's movement into workplace power. So Karen Nussbaum was very involved in all aspects of that as a leader in 925, and Anne Hill in Ohio, and Kim Cook and Debbie Schneider. They were all very close and very good role models.

I'm going to ask you a couple of questions about your background. Growing up, did you have any knowledge or opinions about labor unions or workers' struggles?

I grew up in Ohio, in a steel town. My grandfather was a steel worker, my grandmother was an LPN. And race was a factor, there was a difference in pay in what my grandmother got (brief unintelligible section; race issues?). It was a very pro-union household.

Did you say "race issues" or "wage issues"?

I said, "race." Being an African-American family in the sixties and seventies, there were issues of race that you couldn't deny. As an African-American family, the discussions at the dinner table were about race.

So you had political awareness because of your own family's experiences in the wage force, and in the community. . .

Yeah, (brief unintelligible section) there wasn't much that happened that didn't get talked about in church, in families, at the veterans' hall, that type of thing.

So how would you describe your family background, in any terms you want to?

I grew up in a middle class African-American family that went to church. We were active in our church and in our community. I'd say, I came out better than some. My grandparents both worked, my mother and father worked, and I was raised by an extended family, not just my mother and father. My grandparents have been a strong influence in my life.

Can you describe in some detail one, or possibly more, campaigns or struggles that were important to you in your work in 925?

My first experience was at the University of Cincinnati, where I learned the craft of being an organizer, as I said before, under Debbie Schneider's tutelage. While I had put in a couple of years in CWA (Communication Workers of America), in 925 I learned basic organizing, how to chart a workplace, how to do one-on-one meetings, how to move issues, how to get cadre of workers who are organizing for themselves. I learned how to listen under Debbie's guidance. It was a transformative experience for me. Because I could see how the workers took on the boss in a way they had never done before, and they stayed active in the labor movement after that. There were a lot of leaders that were developed out of that campaign, and I was really proud of the work that we all did.

I know from talking to the other folks that the University of Cincinnati campaign was really a long struggle, with a lot of different stages. . .

When I worked there, we took it to an election and lost. It took two more times before we finally won the thing. I only worked there for the first round. It was still transformative, and some of the folks who were part of the initial effort hung with it through the other wars.

What are some of the tactics you remember best that were characteristic of 925's organizing?

A lot of issue campaigns, and lot of campaigns where workers take on the boss around issues of university policy, of issues of self-worth, of pay equity. 925 was very good at taking workplace issues, and moving people into action around them. We did that with any issue that we could.

University of Cincinnati was a public university?

Yeah.

So when you were campaigning for union representation, were women's jobs at risk? Women and men.

Always subtly so. I mean you would not be fired because you were a union activist on paper, but you could be looked over for promotion, you could be ostracized, you could be looked down upon, you know? There was always the subtle stuff that was hard to put your finger on but you know it was a union animus(?)

Do you remember courageous things that people did when they were organizing?

When people stood up to the boss, before going home to cook dinner, they would come to the union office and have meetings and plan the leaflets for early morning and the lunchtime activities. People were courageous in trying to get a voice in the workplace. It was remarkable what people did, and as you pointed out, it was a really long struggle. It took years, and many people stayed with it, throughout all those years.

Could you say again the time you made the transition from member organizer, so to speak, to working for the union? I want to make sure I get that straight.

I started with CWA around 1984, and I was a member activist with project _____-CWA, and I stayed with that for a couple of years, and then went to 925 in February of '86.

Do you remember receiving trainings when you became a fulltime labor organizer?

We did trainings . . .Debbie would do trainings as part of the campaign, assessing the workplace, how to do a house visit, how to do one-on-one communication. We would probably have formal training monthly, or so, and then there would be larger trainings of 925 staff in different parts of Ohio, so we would go to the library campaign in Cleveland, the University of Cincinnati campaign. We got together as District staff and did trainings. Either herself or Kim Cook. Kim Cook and I worked together in Cleveland on the Blue Cross/Blue Shield campaign. Kim Cook took the lead on that.

In these trainings was there any discussion about women's leadership, or women as leaders?

It wasn't like a topic, but all the leaders were women. There was a way in which you didn't have to talk about it, because you were living it. All of the major leaders of 925 were women. We were doing workplace organizing to give voice to women, because they were the ones who were doing those jobs, libraries, University of Cincinnati. It was all women doing that work.

Did you think of yourself as a leader?

I kind of grew into the role, because as the years progressed for a very long time, I saw myself as an activist, and a staff person, as it were. But through the years and with more responsibility, I supposed I morphed into a leader.

This might be a good time to ask you how you combined being a mother with this fulltime labor union activity, because it is not exactly a nine to five job!

No, it's not, and my son (unintelligible word) did better or worse . . . One good thing about 925: it was kid friendly, so it was not unusual to have my child with me at Saturday meetings. We always had child care. There would be times when I would go out house visiting, or whatever the work was, and I would take my son with me. A lot of times he helped me get in the door. But other times, I just wanted to spend time with him. I couldn't leave him with my grandmother all the time. I was fortunate to have the extended family, and a way to drop my kid off . . . When times got really hectic at work, I could drop my kid off and still do my job. But the union was accommodating around that, and I was fortunate, because in other union situations, I don't think that would have been the case. Being in a union organization that was run by women and understood women's issues or accommodations that had to be made for people who had children . . . I wouldn't be an organizer now; I wouldn't be a leader now, if it wasn't for that accommodation.

This is a bit of a change. Did you . . . let me put it this way: what did you observe about the roles and experiences of men as either members or organizers in 925?

There were a couple that come to mind that were very talented organizers. Tom Hoffman was one of them; he is still with SEIU now. He was one of the leaders on the library campaign. And also Matt Nathanson was one of the organizers with District 925 in Cincinnati. And both of them played leadership roles in organizers on the campaigns, were very aware of the organization being run by strong women and weren't threatened by that. They made huge contributions; it was a very good partnership. Those two particular men stick in my mind. There were others as well.

Did 925 in its meetings or trainings deal with issues of racial or ethnic diversity in a direct and open way? Were there issues in the organization around that?

I think the women's movement, in general, and 925 being a manifestation of the women's movement, struggled with race issues. I don't remember a particular incident of this, but if you look at a lot of the 925 history and legacy, it is not overwhelmingly people of color or women of color. There are obviously women of color who are office workers, and were part of the women's movement. And I think there was a struggle that was had, that I wasn't privy to all the manifestations of it—this is just an observation—(but) I don't think we tackled the challenge of race in the women's movement all that successfully.

So even though you don't remember or didn't experience specific incidents, you are aware, as an African-American woman, that you are in a largely white women's organization. Is that kind of what you are trying to say? I don't want to put words in your mouth.

No, I think that's accurate, I think that's accurate, I didn't look on it as a negative, per se, but in retrospect, I would say that we probably didn't deal with those challenges as well as we could have.

I know there were discussions about trying to have the union leadership reflect the membership, you know that kind of issue. . .do you think that happened in Ohio, to some extent?

Could you repeat the question?

I'm sorry, that was kind of involved. . .A number of people that I have talked to have mentioned that there were attempts, even though the upper level leadership of 925 were white women, to make, to encourage the local union leadership to reflect the ethnic/racial diversity of the membership of the union. Do you think that happened to some extent in Ohio?

I think that happened to some extent in Ohio. I think that was just a tenet of good organizing, to involve workers who are as diverse as possible, in age, ethnicity, departments. If you are going to do good organizing then you are going to have people who reflect the membership in leadership positions. But the higher up in the organization the whiter it became.

I guess we can get to the legacy questions of this narrative. Do you consider that the aims of 925 were realized?

I think it is a continuing struggle. I think there are empowered women from 925 and successes in different workplaces, there is the chapter in Seattle. But I think the struggle for gender equality is one that continues in this country, just as is the struggle for racial equality. I think we would be worse off had it not been for the influence of 925.

Do you remember, or were you involved with other kinds of activism going on in your community in those years you worked with 925?

I was not an overall activist in other community endeavors. I had my hands full as a staffer doing organizing along with raising my son. So I didn't get involved in a lot of the broader community organizing or empowerment activities going around me.

Do you remember some of them?

Back in the early days, like in Cincinnati—I didn't live in Cincinnati so I wasn't part of that community—I don't remember what other stuff was going on. In Cleveland, quite frankly, I commuted from _____, Ohio, because I was living with my grandmother. She had my son. So I was commuting back and forth to Cleveland, about 36 miles or so. I was in my little cocoon, just doing my work. I should have been more involved in community issues, I am sure there was all kinds of stuff going on, but actually I was not involved.

When you were working in Cleveland, what organizing campaigns were you involved in?

I was involved with the Blue Cross/Blue Shield campaign, which was, I guess some people say, a “failed experiment.” It was an important endeavor to try to organize the (brief unintelligible section), and I worked with Tom Hoffman on the libraries in Cuyahoga.

When you look back on that Blue Cross/Blue Shield organizing, how do you assess it? What do you think was going on?

I think it was hard to get workers ultimately to have enough power to take on the Blues in a really big way, to get enough traction with the boss to leverage a settlement that worked for folks. There were a lot of individual workers who did good work, and we did some good work, collectively, as a union, but ultimately, we didn’t have a strategy that made it important for the company to settle and let workers have workplace organization.

How long a campaign was that?

Oh, a year, maybe a couple of years. Could you hang up a second? . . . Sorry about that.

That’s OK. What else is important in 925 to the legacy in your opinion?

Can you repeat that? I’m sorry. . .

What other things can you say about the legacy of 925 that you haven’t mentioned? You talked about training women leaders in the labor movement. . .

There are a lot of women in the labor movement who came through and continue to be leaders because of their involvement in 925. I think it was a good training ground for women and a good way to develop leadership in a safe environment, and to nurture women leaders, because women understand women, and women were very good about taking the craft of organizing, taking it seriously, and moving people in the system to organize. And it carries on in the rest of their lives in different positions of leadership in the labor movement today.

What there anything that disappointed you, Valarie, about working with 925?

I don’t have any disappointments about working with 925. I have very fond memories, it was my start, young, new, I was very fortunate not to be doing data entry for a living. It wasn’t like I started with 925 saying, this is what I always wanted to do. Having been given the opportunity and seeing what the possibilities were, I was very thankful to be in that cadre of women.

What specifically happened when you made the transition from member activist to fulltime organizer for the union. Who approached you, what job were you filling?

When I came from member activist to staff person, it was in CWA where I made the transition. When I went from CWA to SEIU I was interviewed for the position by Debbie Schneider, at the University of Cincinnati, and I think Bonnie Ladin. I became an organizer.

What is CWA?

Communication Workers of America—CWA.

What brought you to Washington, D.C.?

I was working in Atlanta, after the University of Cincinnati campaign. I worked on several campaigns in Ohio. Then I got transferred out of what was called the office workers division and into the service division of SEIU, and I worked in the Justice for Janitors Campaign.

What years would that have been?

About 1989.

And did you take your son down there with you?

Yep.

How did that work out, without the extended family?

Yes, he moved down there with me, and we worked down there for a few years. Then I worked in L.A., he actually went to kindergarten in Los Angeles. We went back to Atlanta for a short time, then we came to D. C. in 1991, something like that.

And you are still working in that division of SEIU?

Yeah, I am a vice president of the international union and a vice president of the largest property services unit in the country, after being president of the local here in D. C. that recently merged with the larger property services union.

Are you still directly involved with Justice for Janitors?

Yeah, I run part of the property services local that has 8000 members in D. C. and another 4000 in Philadelphia. I am vice president for this part of the eastern region and one of four vice presidents of a department services local that has 85,000 members. I am vice president of the international _____ (several unintelligible words).

I see why you are in airplanes so much now!

Yeah, except I've got to figure out how to keep healthy, with all the bad air in airplanes.

What are the main responsibilities you have, in your role as vice president?

I am a leader of the union. I run our organizing and political programs, what we call the _____ (unintelligible phrase). My territory in Philadelphia to northern Virginia. Then I sit on the steering committee of the property services division where we make strategy decisions and policy decisions for the 250,000 property service workers in (unintelligible words). . . .part of the executive board that makes policy and political decisions for the whole union of _____ million members.

The whole SEIU? So you are dealing with your division, and the whole union, in a leadership capacity.

That's right.

You are in a position to comment on whether you think 925 had an impact on SEIU, in general.

Oh, absolutely! There was a time when the union was looked at as an amalgamation of different autonomous locals, mostly run by men. It was based on the influence of 925 that more women were put into leadership positions in the union. You know, going back to the office workers division, Bonnie Ladin was made division director, and then she was director of several projects in the union. And other women who took on leadership positions within the union—Anne Hill, Debbie Schneider, Bonnie Ladin, Karen. Those folks opened up a lot of doors for folks. As you know, now we have one of the major labor leaders of the country is our secretary-treasurer, and the first woman of a major federation—Anna Berger. None of that would have been possible without the work of 925 in SEIU. It had a huge impact on women being leaders of this union.

OK. This is kind of a reflective question. What did you learn about yourself working all these years with SEIU?

I think I learned how to manage large projects (rest of section is unintelligible due to technical difficulties).

Another way to ask that would be: what do you think your particular strengths are as an organizer and leader?

I think I am a good listener, and willing to take risks. I take risks on people, and I expect people to thrive, and give people a (safety net)? so they can grow. And I think I understand what other organizers are capable of, not just myself. . . .(pause)

Your son must be in his twenties now?

I am a grandmother! My granddaughter will be three May 3.

Do you feel optimistic about the work you are doing now?

Oh, absolutely! I think the union is being a leader in the labor movement, and we have very good leadership in the union. We're not afraid to change, to deal with union membership going down in the country, to try to turn the country around. I'm very optimistic about the possibilities, and very proud of the risks we've taken. It's about trying to change the things that need to be changed; it is a very exciting time.

When you say, "proud of the risks we've taken," can you give me a couple of examples of those risks?

Well, I think our most recent risk—the jury is still out on if it is the right choice—we left the AFL-CIO with some other unions that want to take back this country, and organize millions of service workers. . . we are going off this cliff together, and taking very seriously our responsibilities to unite workers in the service industries.

When I read about unions in the newspapers, it seems like 80% of the time it's about SEIU.

And there is UNITE HERE with their Hotel Workers Rising campaign, the Teamsters, UFCW (United Food and Clothing Workers)—all these unions are taking very seriously the responsibility to organize millions of workers, that if not for the efforts we're trying to make, don't have a chance in this country with the anti-worker laws and the anti-worker government. All of the capital of this country is so global now, so you really also have to work with unions in other countries which we're doing well.

Are you involved with any of that?

I've been working with a local in South Africa organizing security officers as part of our (unintelligible phrase) to organize security officers. It's exciting to be part of discussions with that union. I've been there twice. Their movement is so different than ours, they had a 90,000 workers' strike. . .

What is the main way their union is different from yours?

They are only ten, eleven years away from apartheid, and their movement is younger, and their workers have such a sense of entitlement, and they have captured the essence of their liberation struggle.

Are they taking a lot of risks?

They face a lot of the same challenges we have in this country with capital being so global. Their struggles are made easier because their workers have such a sense of _____ (?) about them. It will be interesting to see if their density—they have about

35% density now—will grow, or they'll do what we did and start declining. I keep saying to my comrades over there, "Don't make the same mistake we did, keep on organizing!" (Laughs.) If you just pay attention to what you have, and not to (unintelligible section) labor movement in this country.

Do you see yourself continuing this work the rest of your working days?

Twenty years and counting I'm still _____. Other than gardening (laughs). I don't have any plans to change.

Anything more you would like to add about what keeps you going as an organizer?

I think what keeps me going as an organizer is the incredible amount of hope I have for this country. It is an inspiring time. I was privileged to be part of a half a million immigration rally in D. C. I was standing on the stage—and we ended being an hour behind schedule because of my crackerjack stage-managing, but irregardless, looking across these people. . . I remember thinking to myself, I knew I was too young to be part of Martin Luther King's March on Washington, but I had the feeling that he was probably looking across a similar crowd back then, and saying to himself, "Oh, my God, now what are we going to do!" (Laughs.) It gives you incredible hope, that people can come out of the shadows and stand up, and say, we are not going to be invisible. We are not going to be treated as criminals, we want to part of the American Dream. It is this generation's chance to take a movement, and not stifle it, but really translate the power of liberation that the immigrants are feeling, and combining that with the struggles of race in this country, the struggle for equality across all kinds of diversity, and translate that into workplace power, where you can make it tangible. That is kind of where we are sitting, in history, to my mind. It is wonderful to be part of that.

Well, you described very well the feeling of a possible turning point in what has been going on in this last year or two.

It's amazing, just to play a small part in this. Our local here is mostly immigrants, is mostly undocumented. An amazing transformation is going on, and trying to tap into the excitement of it . . .

Since you work on policy, can you comment on what SEIU is doing on the hill with respect to immigration law reform?

We are battling with our coalition partners to make sure that whatever bill comes out is as worker-friendly as possible. There are a lot of very negative forces at play here. (Unintelligible sentence.) Some kind of compromise will be made. At the end of the day, it is not about the bill, it is about what people do to translate the power that they feel now into tangible gains. Not a lot of legislation can do that; it all comes down to workplace power and community power.

Well, Valarie, I am really glad we persisted, because you are a very articulate interviewee.

I am sorry it took a while.

That's OK, I am still working on the project. And there are a couple of more people I am hoping to interview by telephone. Is there anything else at all you would like to add about the legacy of 925 before we close this interview?

No, I am really happy you are doing this project to capture this history. For the future you have to know your history, know what happened before, so you can move forward. It's a very worthwhile project, and I'm happy to be part of it.