Pam MacEwan
Interviewed by Ann Froines
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I'm interviewing Pam MacEwan, who is now executive vice-president for public affairs, the Group Health Cooperative, Seattle, Washington, May 11, 2005. Pam, tell me the story of how you first entered 925. What was your first meeting, your first discussion, as you remember it.

I actually worked in Rhode Island as an organizer. I was first involved with the clerical workers organization, 925. I actually worked as a volunteer—I was on the board, and I did their newsletter and I did organizing and leafleting with them, on a part-time volunteer basis. At some point, I started working for the Service Employees International Union doing health-care organizing in Providence, Rhode Island. I worked with them for a couple of years. My job in Rhode Island came to an end; a campaign I was working on in Massachusetts ended; and I was offered different jobs at—different organizing things I could do. I was approached by Cheryl Schaffer, who was one of the original founders of the union. I just jumped at the opportunity to work with her. I had worked with her in the Connecticut campaign, which I think is talked about; and I loved how she and Bonnie Laden organized. And I also wanted to be in an environment that was supportive for women. Because in those days, SEIU was not a very supportive place for women to work. And for me, to be able to do what I love to do, and be in that environment, just was something I didn't want to miss.

What made you know you wanted to be an organizer? Did this happen to you as a result of college experiences, or what?

I had been very interested in activism and in the women's movement. My own personal experience was that my parents had divorced, and my family had been pushed into poverty by the divorce. I had been in a middle class family, and then suddenly I was eligible for poverty scholarships (laughs)—we had a really difficult time making ends meet. My mother, who was not very—a motivated person who had a hard time ever getting more than a minimum wage job. So I was really conscious of economic issues for women. I had the opportunity to work on those in Washington D.C. after I graduated from college. And to me, the union seemed like an answer to that. I had this very distinct experience of working as a clerical worker in college and making minimum wage; and then I took a job in the Forest Service. I just made a ton of money in the Forest Service, but I wasn't really—I was doing more physical labor, but it wasn't harder work or work that I had to be smarter to do, but to me it was astonishing to get paid to ride around in a truck, rather than to be doing actual work. And to get overtime, and hazard pay, and all these things. So that to me, the disconnect between what men got paid and what women got paid was really very striking. And to me the union was like--here—this is the answer. We'll be able to change what women get paid and women's working conditions.

This was happening as the women's movement was growing.

Exactly.

How did you feel about the women's movement as a whole? Did you consider yourself a feminist?

Absolutely. I was very involved in the women's movement. I worked for a women's organization in Washington D.C. called the Women's Lobby, which had a very radical perspective on policy and women, and had worked with women who worked on welfare rights, and to pass the ill-fated Equal Rights Amendment; we worked on reproductive rights, which at that time we were making more progress (laughs) and now we're kind of going backwards on those issues. I attended International Women's Year in Houston. It was something I was very involved in, and was very, very important to me.

Ok, great. So even before you went off to college, did you have any knowledge, as a youth, of workplace struggles or unions in your background?

No, not particularly. I was much more aware of the antiwar movement. I graduated high school in 1972.

Ok. Could you describe in some detail one campaign you were involved in, maybe the most important one, the one you remember the best, with 925? I guess it would be here in Seattle, at that point.

Although I actually think—

Describe a couple, if you'd like.

One of the things that's really memorable to me is in Connecticut, we were organizing the state employees, in Connecticut. That was through—925 came into an SEIU campaign and took over the organizing of that campaign. That was really memorable to me because they brought two things to the campaign. They brought this kind of camaraderie and spirit and support of women; but also competence. They were just really effective and good and professional at what they did. So the combination was really, really very compelling to me.

At that point you were in SEIU.

Right. I worked for SEIU, so I got to see them in action. Of course I believed in what they did, but then to see that they did it better—in some ways better than the boys (laughs)—they were really, really good at what they did.

You were an organizer. What were some of the tactics you were involved in that they had brought to Connecticut?

What they were really good at was strategy. I probably use that kind of strategy approaches to this day, in my life and my work. So they brought that, and they also brought—so they had the big picture strategy, of where they were going and why, and how they were going to get this particular campaign. But they also were really good about their attention to detail, and how to make lists; and just very systematic about where the votes were, and how to go after those votes, and how to count those votes, and how to persuade people, and how to set up various operations like face-to-face contact, delivering the leaflets, how to get people out to vote. It was this very nice combination of the detail work that goes into a campaign, and the strategy work. Most people can't do both. So for me it was just eye-opening to see how important both things were, and to realize to be successful, to organize workers, you had to do both things well.

Do you remember some of the things you actually did as an organizer in Connecticut?

Oh yeah. (laughs)

What were they?

I wasn't one of the senior people on the campaign. I did a lot of face-to-face meeting people and identifying leaders. I worked at the University of Connecticut campus in Storrs. And I was all over that campus, talking to people on their jobs—probably was illegal—but (laughs) you know I didn't even think about that—I just walked all over the place, and met people and talked to them about the union, signed them up to support our union—

Was this classified staff?

Yes. I also helped identify leaders and recruit—identify people who would be more motivated, more energized about being more active, so that they would be leaders in the workplaces to lead other women to support the union. I really learned to identify those people and encourage them and motivate them and kind of bring them forward to take a leadership role.

So was that campaign successful in Connecticut?

No, I think we lost really narrowly. It was kind of a heartbreaker.

Did you move then to work with 9to5 or 925?

No, I went back to Rhode Island, a changed person (laughs), because I'd had this experience. And then Cheryl Shaeffer offered me a temporary position in Seattle. And I jumped at the chance to move out here, and then that became the permanent direct—when we won—we ultimately prevailed here in Seattle, and I was offered the position as director.

Tell me a little bit about this Seattle campaign, because you must have been very central to that.

Right, again Bonnie Laden and Cheryl Schaffer were really—as you probably will hear over and over—they were really the masterminds of—they got the contact from Seattle; they came out here; they did really below-the-radar-screen work to get this group aligned and supportive of District 9to5, and then at some point we needed to—they did an affiliation through the board of the union; and then they brought the organizers in. I came in at that point. And at that point we had to do just a lot of one-on-one persuasion and signing people up to become members of the union. So you went around and you [had/got] people [to] sign cards. And that was something that I was for some reason really good at. I was good at it in all the campaigns I worked in in New England, and I was known as someone who could come in and just get a huge pile of cards. So, that was--

You must have some insights by now about why you were good at that out. Do you think you could explain that?

I think I had some characteristics going for me, that I inspired trust, and people would trust what I had to say. And I think I was just very, very motivated—I would just walk my little legs off, you know—I would work very, very hard, and get out and talk to people, and make good lists, and go back and talk to them again and again. I believe very much in the message, so I could get other people to believe in what we were doing. And then I didn't just leave them high and dry, I went back to see them again, and talk with them and work with them, to become active in the union. So that was initially what I did, was again—it was the University of Washington campus, very similar to Connecticut, and again walking around meeting people, and talking to them about the union, and getting them to sign up to be a union member. Which for many of them was a first-time experience. They had never been a member of a union before.

And was the main group again the classified staff?

Right. The unit at University of Washington was—this was really the clerical unit—it was I think three thousand white-collar clerical workers.

Do you remember what year you had your successful election?

I think I came here in 1983. I think that was the year of—we ended up having two elections, because I think the employer challenged our right to represent the staff. Sort of challenged us to—it was a legal challenge. What we did instead of giving in to the legal challenge is we held the election again. It was very—I loved it. It was just very much in your face. Ok—you want another election, here's another election. We ran it—we ran it on our own terms, and we won overwhelmingly.

[ ]

(laughs). It was.

When you were talking with the staff at the University of Washington about—it was 925 at this point—

Yes.

--how did you present it? What were the values that you thought the union represented for the workers? Do you remember some of your—

This is retrospective of course, but I think what I remember is, I think we led with practical bread and butter issues. I think we led with—people were very concerned about their pay. There hadn't been pay raises in the state of Washington—there had been a recession—hadn't been pay raises in a long time--and there was a comparable worth lawsuit pending. I think that we talked to people primarily about those issues. And then secondarily, we talked about issues of dignity and respect: how people were treated on the job, did they have a say in their working conditions; and at that time also, computers were kind of sweeping away the typewriters—this is ancient times—and they were coming in a really willy-nilly fashion. There weren't systems of computers that you all bought the same brand. Every professor brought in their own system or their own ideas about it, and some people really liked them very much—it was improving their work—and others were working on really horrible equipment, and having health problems because of that. So we did deal with health and safety issues, primarily, the new technology and what that was going to mean in terms of their health, and letting them have a say about it. I think we also worked on child care issues. That's what I remember the most.

Did you ever feel like you were asking those women—mostly women, not all—to put their jobs at risk in this organizing? I guess as public employees they weren't—

They weren't, and we weren't. Occasionally someone went out on a limb with their employer, but for public employees in the state of Washington at that time, there was a tremendous amount of job security. So it wasn't the same level of risk that they faced in private sector organizing efforts.

Do you remember receiving certain kinds of training to be an organizer from 925?

Most of my training was really on the job. I had one—an SEIU organizer once told me that you throw them in the water and see if they can swim to shore—which would be the organizers (laughs), you know! And that was very much what it was like. And the ones who swam to shore, those were the people who got the better jobs, and got to move on in organizing. That was really the SEIU training program.

9to5 was better than that. But they didn't have a lot of resource to do training. So we would occasionally have organizing workshops. I think there was a 9to5 summer school at Bryn Mawr that I went to. And the District would also run training periodically.

There wasn't much. But they were also in an environment where there had been zero. So anything was really a big improvement. And there was the George Meany School too. The George Meany School was a training—the AFL-CIO ran a training program for organizers and union staff. I remember 9to5 taking on the expense and effort to send people to the George Meany School for additional training.

In some of your internal discussions, or in these trainings, do you remember having talks about women's leadership, and how to help women become leaders, since traditionally we haven't been so outspoken as men?

Yes, I think we talked about that constantly. And I think we talked about it in terms of the women that we were trying to organize, and the issues that they faced in their own lives. There were women who felt they couldn't do anything without their husband's permission, or were really afraid to stand up for themselves at work or in any setting, just because they had never done that, and their success in life had been because they had learned to be accommodating and meek. And yet they were frustrated by their position in life. And I think we were offering them a different point of view: that collectively they could do more, and then individually they could stand up more. That was an every day topic of discussion for us, that we felt we were helping these women make these steps in life. We didn't really think about it for ourselves, but probably we were doing the same thing.

You were really organizing women to empower themselves, which is what the women's movement was supposed to be about, anyhow.

In those days the labor movement had overlooked women, so we were also feeling like we were correcting an inbalance and injustice in the labor movement.

What were the discussions about coming across as feminists to the women that you were meeting? In other words, if you're talking about women's power, were you concerned how they would react to that in relation to fears about feminism?

I think that in the university environments that I worked in, the women's movement was a little bit more mainstream than it might have been in other settings. But I think we sometimes minimized the importance of that. Sometimes we were viewed as radical—this is radical feminist organizers. And we needed to overcome that, and seem like we had more of a commonality with the women we were representing, who might not have taken those stands in their life, or might have felt that they were at odds with the women's movement. But there was—women who—we don't think about it now, because everybody works, and everybody has to work to pay their mortgages these days, but in those days, it was more—people worked for financial reasons, but the idea of women coming into the workforce was still part of people's—it was a change that was happening socially. And I think that women who got up and went to work every day felt kind of a commonality with the women's movement, because that was different. I don't think that's true now. But I think in the late 70s and early 80s there was more of a sense of that.

So there wasn't a lot of resistance to overcome in terms of them seeing you as being too strong as women.

They'd already [selling/set on/settled on] their work for a living. In the 70s, that was—[ ] and then what worked for us in the 70s was a little bit different. Especially women with young children. That was still different.

Now at this point in your organizing, when you were director at here, did you have a family yet? Were you dealing with the issues of—

No. I was married. I actually left my husband in Rhode Island (laughs) to come out here, and then he joined me, several months later. This was in 1983, and my first child was born in 1987.

How did you see your own self developing as a leader? Were you aware of that? Did you think about--?

I had never thought of myself as a leader before. Cheryl and Bonnie and Jackie, and Karen too, were the first to really put me in a leadership position, where I was supervising other people, and I was part of a leadership team. It had never occurred to me that that was something I might do. So it was a new experience. I think a lot of women who work for 9to5, and a lot of labor leaders who came up through the stewardship ranks—and that was many [tungible?], said, "I've never thought of myself as a leader." And you'd look at a woman who was a natural leader, and it was just unbelievable that it had never occurred to her that she would be a leader.

It really had a gender attached to it—leader—

Right. And we were all sort of blind to the effect on ourselves. I think it was a bit of an Achilles heel, for even the leadership of 9to5, that we didn't have enough sense of ourselves as leaders. Even though we were organizing other women, we didn't have a sense of our own power as leaders.

Was that a weakness that had any significance for the organization, do you think, or in the labor movement?

It's hard to know, but I believe when I was here in Seattle in the early 80s, there were just some wonderful, unbelievable women who worked in the labor movement, and most of them are not there anymore—in the labor movement. They're doing other things in life. And I think it's a combination of that the labor movement didn't appreciate and open its doors to women leaders, and those women leaders didn't have enough sense of their own power that they could break down those doors and really change things. I think a lot of women gave up. And maybe they didn't need to.

Interesting. Did you observe or experience any interesting things about the roles and experiences of men, in the organization, 925, given that it was women-led, and women-dominated?

Do you mean the men who came to work for us?

The men who participated.

They were totally outnumbered by the women, but I think they were treated well, and I think they had great experiences and great training. Anything that was open to the women in terms of training in the work environment was there for them. I think it was harder for them to lead. To be considered and encouraged into leadership positions, to be for example the director of the local, or something like that. So I saw that difference, but I thought they were generally treated really well, and really appreciated.

Was there a conscious effort to make sure men were kind of enfranchised in the union, given that they were a relative minority, or did they just [ ]?

I think that there was a shortage—there's always a shortage of good organizers. If a man wanted to work for 9to5 and he was a good organizer, he was very welcome. But in his day to day work, he's in an environment where he's organizing women, he's outnumbered by women, and this is somebody who's got to be really comfortable with that. A lot of men were, and did really well. And some men I think said, "This is not for me."

Now, after years of organizing experience, and different careers subsequent to that, would you add anything more about the values and strategy, tactics, of 925 that are significant?

That I was trying to accomplish?

What did it represent to you, as an organization?

Just say a little bit more about what you're looking for in that question, because there are so many places I could take that.

Just take it somewhere. I don't want to really program your answer, but what values do you think 9—let's focus on that. It was too fat a question, too many things.

On the values. Yeah, there's a lot in that question. There's the values of your vision—where you want to go. And then there's "how are you going to get there." I think that's what I see as the two halves of that question. The values are really two-fold. If it's equality for working class women, that they would have better lives, because financially they would be able to live better—earn better income, have more job security, have more opportunities in life. I also think that there was another part of that vision, that that would re-vitalize the labor movement. I think we had what would be a traditionally feminist view, that bringing these women into these institutions would make the institutions better and different and more responsive. Probably a lot of people no longer think that's true, (laughs) that don't think those changes really got made in that way. And I also know that we envisioned a better society, that would be more just and more fair. I don't know that that was always well-defined, and I think that probably each woman who led 9to5 had a different picture in her head about what that was like. But that we definitely envisioned a more just society that would be more responsive to the needs of people for education and child care and health care.

Are there any specific things about the campaign that you helped direct, and the issues that the classified staff at U. Washington were fighting for, that you could tell us about? There was the election, and then you had to negotiate an agreement, right?

Right. One of the things that we worked on, and we were not the lead union working on this issue—AFSCME really led the way on comparable worth? But we were part of that battle for comparable worth in this state. And I think that was a pretty radical concept. And it's not something that's talked about anymore. It really went against the idea of market pay, and the fact that years of discrimination had created a 2-tiered wage system, and there were men's wages and women's wages, and that it could only be corrected by judicial action. That was a really different kind of idea, that was successful. And really changed patterns of pay between men and women by the lawsuit against the state. And actually, Chris Gregoire, who's our governor now, was the leader of that fight. It's not something that's talked about too much anymore, but it was enormously successful. And just that engagement on that topic—because you can imagine as an organizer to have that to talk about it—that covers a world of things, which is pay on the job, and a vision for a better future, and a vision of what the union can do, and also has an impact on the entire economy. Because if you take one group of women employees and you crank up their pay, then it starts—then everyone's going to have to follow suit.

So the result of that lawsuit was that public employees—the women's pay was adjusted.

Right. It was adjusted upward.

[ ] comparable worth principles [ ]

Right. And it was a blow to the idea of market pay, which is that market pay would always self-regulate to do what was right. And I think this said, no, market pay will never catch up with this inequity. So I remember that as when we started, as being the most significant issue.

The other thing that I remember as being really important when we first started is, the university, and I think this is true of universities everywhere, it was just—maybe any big organization—it was just all these little fiefdoms. And there were women who were very badly treated, when we began. There were just really some horrifying stories in terms of abuse on the job, sexual harassment, people not following labor laws, common knowledge, state laws, things about fairness—and we had a wonderful time pursuing grievance in the early years, because there were so many of them, and they were so blatant. We just won case after case, and we won them for individuals, we won them for groups of individuals; and of course the university eventually caught on, and they revamped their HR office, and they stopped breaking laws (laughs)—they didn't like losing those cases and it changed how they treated people. So that from the time I began to the time I left, the need for individual grievance wasn't there. If you had an individual grievance, usually it was a problem employee. It usually wasn't a problem boss. It had just changed completely.

Now in the very beginning, I understand that the public employees at the university didn't have the right to negotiate for certain economic issues?

Right.

So your work was a lot focused on these kinds of—

Right, we worked on economic issues from a policy perspective, which is why comparable worth was so important. Again, the state employment situation here was really shaped by AFSCME. And the person who was just a long-time leader of ASCME, George Maston, had negotiated the first ability to collectively bargain with the governor, and they had a really odd arrangement in which state wages would be decided from a policy perspective and then everything else would be a bargain with the employer. So it was a pretty odd environment for bargaining. And it made the public sector aspect—the lobbying and political activism—much more important.

You said it would mean that if the state didn't have enough money, they would just never give anybody any raises, right?

Right, but these were elected officials so you could pressure them to have different positions, which we did and AFSCME. It's interesting to think about which is better in terms of delivering better pay, but from the union's perspective—it's in the union's self-interest to negotiate directly for pay because people then give the union credit for their pay. Whereas the arrangement that was here, it wasn't always clear who got the credit when the pay went up.

And that eventually changed.

Right.

[ ] where he would negotiate.

Right. [Tim Curtick] and Susan Johnson and a lot of people worked on changing that.

Ok. A little change of pace here. How did 925 in it's meetings or trainings deal with diversity in the workplace and diversity in the organization, and by this I mean basically ethnic/racial diversity. Was that something that was part of your experience in either the east coast organizing or here in Seattle?

At that time it wasn't with SEIU, although that's quite different today. But with 9to5 it was something we always talked about very directly, and tried to do something about, as organizers and as an employer. There was an effort to recruit minorities to work as organizers, and I think there was some success at that, particularly in the Chicago campaign. And then definitely when we recruited people to be stewards and to be leaders in the union, we made a real effort to achieve diversity. Which at the university we were able to do a good job at, because—3000 people—it wasn't easy, but really, we could always find people who were wonderful leader, who were interested in being active in the union. I think it was harder from a staff perspective, because I think that—

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--along in their career. And I think there's a lot of reasons for that. One is how those careers are viewed by people, which is they're not the highest paid, they're not the most secure; so you're always competing against better jobs when you're trying to get people to stay with the union. And the other thing is that the inner circle of 9to5 was a really tight little group. It was hard to break into that group. We weren't open enough and welcoming enough that we would have been able to bring someone in.

In this case, when you're talking about 9to5 you mean District 925 here in Seattle.

No, I mean nationally. Absolutely.

There is a certain amount of going back and forth on this 9to5, 925—

I know, and all the names are the same. But actually I think we did—

You did call it 9to5 out here.

Right. And I can't even remember—we've changed the name a number of times—

Out east, 9to5 means the old national working women's organization.

Right. And 925 was the union.

But I think out here it was called 9to5.

We used both. But we were supposed to say 925. You're right. You're correct.

No, I'm not sure. They've been telling me there is a history of calling it 9to5 here. So they've been correcting me.

And in Boston, that was the original 9to5. So they really needed to be distinct. In Seattle—we were way out here in Seattle. There's a real sense of distance. We didn't follow the norms as strictly as others did.

Right, and even though I guess there were some people who started with the national organization of women office workers that was preceded by 9to5, most of the activists I'm talking to really started with the union.

Right.

Did you consider 925 a family-friendly organization?

Yes, I did. I don't think union work is a very family-friendly occupation.

Not from the organizer's point of view.

No, it's long hours, and lots of night meetings, and this incredible feeling of guilt that you're never doing enough, which isn't good (laughs) for a parent. But the organization itself was wonderfully supportive. Both my children were born while I worked for 925. I had really generous leave, and I had a huge amount of moral support from the women that I worked with, to have children, and to try to combine my work with having children.

How many years were you a director?

I think from probably '83 to '89.

Did you have other roles after that?

No. I left in 1989. When my second child was born, I felt like I've been doing the job for a long time, and there was a lot of reasons for me personally that I felt like it was time to do something different. And I also felt at that point, 925 was out of favor with the International. And it was really apparent. And so my opportunities with the international were cut off. I wasn't going to be able to do other things. And I felt that—it just seemed—so other things started seeming more interesting and attractive to me. So I left slowly, because the person who took my place, Barbara Green, was diagnosed with cancer. And I helped her out while she went through chemotherapy—I think I negotiated some contract for her—but when she was healthy, I went back to graduate school. And I ended up never going back.

Can you say a little bit more about how 925 was out of favor with the international?

Yes. I think there was a lot of frustration in those years about how SEIU, which at that time was a much smaller union—how were they going to make breakthroughs in organizing. And I think there had been a lot of hope that 925 might be an answer to the problem of the union never grows. So here's this dynamic women's organization—they're going to get out there and they're going to organize people. And I think we helped them tremendously in their public sector organizing. But we weren't able to make the breakthroughs in the private sector that they had hoped for. And I think there was just generally impatience, with how long it was taking, how much it was costing, and I think there was tension with the leaders of 925 in those days. They continued to stick to their original vision, and demand resources and want to do things the way they'd been doing them, and it just led to some friction. I felt that SEIU really wanted those leaders who—the original early leaders—to go away. And to be able to do things differently. And my allegiance was obviously with the original leaders of 925, and it just became sort of uncomfortable for me.

And yet they hung in there for another decade, right?

No, they went away. Bonnie went away, Cheryl went away, Jackie went away.

I see, they went into other—

Yeah, they left. Bonnie did other things. Jackie went to law school. And Cheryl left.

I guess I meant the union hung in there with SEIU for another decade or even longer.

On their terms, I think.

I see.

It wasn't as though they could say, let's erase the union. But I think what you had there with Karen, Jackie, Bonnie and Cheryl—this is my view—you had a very unusual brain trust. And when you had that go away, you sort of took off the ability—what the International is saying is, "This is ok with us. But this is not where the resources and the energy of the union is going to go anymore."

And they had good reasons for saying that. It costs a lot of money to organize people. They didn't have endless resources. And the union had really hard choices to make too. So there's two sides to the story.

Was part of the union's side, the International side, that other unions were organizing public employees, like AFSCME, and they were somehow competing with that?

That had always been the case. No, that wasn't different. I think the issue was the resources and who was going to be influential in the union, for whatever came next.

One of the questions I'm trying to get at is, were the aims of 925 then realized in your opinion? How would you assess that.

That's a really good question. I think in a limited way they were. I think where they were not—I think one of our aims that we lost was private sector organizing. I don't think we were successful at that. So what we did instead was we brought our vision and our energy and this idea of a labor movement and the issues that we worked on—we brought that firmly into public sector organizing. Where it had a huge amount of influence. And that's been terrific. And I also think we brought up a generation of young women who saw this as a career and worked in the labor movement, and they went on to do that. In that sense, the vision was realized, and the labor movement was changed by those things. But if you go back to that discussion that we just had, we all gave up on private sector organizing. It was too hard. It was too hard and too expensive.

There were some failures, right, it was real efforts and then [ ].

Prominent, expensive, embarrassing failures. So the labor movement, SEIU, everybody went towards what was more do-able. And that was public sector and health care. And —kind of some of the low wage service industries. But we gave up on private sector. And if you look in this city, you know, Nordstrom's used to be organized—it was unionized, and that great service culture was developed with the union contracts—with unionized employees.

What is Nordstrom's, for the wider—

Nordstrom's is one of the largest department stores in the United States. And they're out where you are, in the east coast. They started here. Starbucks—I think you probably heard of that company—they were organized at the beginning too. They were unionized here in Seattle.

They're not now?

No, they're not now. And Nordstrom's is no longer unionized either.

Did they actually have decertification--

Yes. They were decertified. Both—I think Starbucks was a disclaimer of interest, Nordstrom's was decertified; the Blues were organized in Seattle—the Blue Shield companies in Seattle-Tacoma were unionized—they were decertified too.

They were unionized not by 925.

No, that was by Office Employees and United Food and Commercial Workers. We lost incredible ground during those years for white collar employees, as a labor movement—I'm not just talking about 925. So we find ourselves in this situation where the labor movement is really struggling to prove its relevance, but the major employers and major successful corporations of the last 20 years—Microsoft, Starbucks, you name it—they're completely unionized. Walmart. And they're not showing any signs of becoming unionized. I think that there was a kind of a backing off trying to organize those types of employers because it was too hard. That's an interesting point to examine, somewhere down the line.

Of course you probably know they're now working very hard to organize family day care providers, which is real women's work, and it may be successful and the union may grow. And it's very different from having organizations in the other places.

Right. But unless we organize those employers—unless the union is successful in organizing the employers that are making the profits that could sustain increased living wage by low-income workers, we're on a different course. It's really difficult for—you see the labor movement struggling with this now. In 9to5, we struggled with it. We were audacious enough to think we could go after those employers and win. And we had huge horrible fights that were generally lost, because of the—

Were you involved in any of them?

No, I wasn't directly involved; I was indirectly involved. Because I was working with the public sector employees who were easier to organize, we could get the contracts, we could win. Choices were made on a day by day basis that just led to a certain direction, which is kind of an abandonment of those goals.

Do you have anything else you'd like to add about the impact 925 had on organized labor, beyond what you've said about SEIU leaders?

I think it helped with bringing women into positions of leadership, and an acknowledgement of the role of women in the labor movement. I think that was probably a real key contribution. And then moving family and social issues to more of the mainstream and to the front of bargaining issues. I think those are probably two very big changes.

What did the experience working as an organizer and director for 925 mean in your life?

Oh, it meant a lot to me. Because I felt like I was doing work that was really meaningful. And I was doing it in an environment that was very supportive for that. And it was fun. We were having big fights with employers and organizations and we were generally winning those fights. So it was not only really important work but it was gratifying. It was fun to do that work.

Were there any particularly remarkable actions that you remember in your years working at the university that—when you say, "We had these big fights"—

I remember things that I remember as being especially fun to win was: the state actually was not able to contract out, because the state laws were written so that they couldn't contract out. There were a couple of efforts by some key departments at the university—the billing service for the university physicians, and KCTS, the television station. When the physicians pealed off to become independent, and I think one of the reasons was to not have a unionized environment, we went in and we had been able to organize and get them to recognize us—if we were able to organize, they would have had to recognize us because of the state law. We actually got the most anti-union people to be the head of the organizing committee. So I remember that being a particularly fun and interesting struggle for us. Because we really had to go—unless we got the most anti-union people we weren't going to be successful. And I think that was a particularly—that was an important strength of ours, was just our ability to connect with women and understand their self-interest and show them how the union met that self-interest, and kind of convert people, from not even being luke-warm but actually being opposed to unions, to saying, "I can't believe I'm doing this." (laughs) I remember that as a really important victory.

Ok, the final two questions have to do with work you've done after you left 925. You mentioned you went to graduate school, and maybe you could say a little bit about what you studied and where that led you.

When I worked with 9to5, I generally always got most personally involved with the health care employees who were at the hospital and the medical school. And I had an interest in health care and health policy. So I actually ended up working in health policy. I worked for Citizen Action, crafting and working on a coalition to pass a health reform law; and then I worked for the state implementing that law. Which was ultimately repealed, unfortunately. And then came to Group Health—I do public policy for Group Health. That's what I've done since. I took a really different direction.

Do you think your experiences in 925, aside from the connections you had with health care employees, helped prepare you for this work you're doing as executive vice-president?

Yes, and sometimes it's hard for people to appreciate how much—where my ability to do strategy and planning and administration—all those—I really learned it all from 9to5. And how to treat employees, and how to work with people—it was my primary work experience of my life, and I view all the skills and my ability to work with people and strategy—all those things I really learned from 9to5. Part of it was just such a wonderful experience, and part of it, I was so young and it was my formative experience. So yes, absolutely.

You have some very creative original thinkers who brought—what I described in that Connecticut campaign, which is the creative strategy with the nuts and bolts hard work—that was really unique. It was unique at that time. I learned to do that from them. They really offered something really important and unique to the labor movement for probably about ten years.

Something you said made me think of a different question. Would you say 9to5 was a democratic organization in the way it approached things? The leadership did a lot of the nuts and bolts work too? Is that part of what you're saying, or--?

That's interesting. It was no more or less democratic than the rest of the labor movement. It wasn't particularly more democratic. I think the decisions were really made by a small group of leaders, and certainly open to the input and in consultation with the next ring of leaders, and with the elected heads of the union. I think the actual union chapters were run in a very democratic fashion. But I think the union itself was run in a top down way, which was the way all labor unions have been run.

And I think it would have been an issue of survival to run things differently. We always felt our survival was at stake. We always felt our budget was being scrutinized, and we always felt kind of up against [it] and whether or not SEIU would continue to support us, and help us along. So I think the women running 925 felt an enormous amount of pressure to do the right thing, to make the right choices, to be performing and showing their value. And I think that actually went against being more democratic.

I don't mean to imply being more democratic is some sort of absolute value we should be seeking, because sometimes it is very messy and [long], and it takes a long time to get people to come to some kind of consensus, and that may not be consistent with labor organizing.

Right. I think it's true. The reason they were successful is I think they were very in touch with what the members wanted. And so they were able to be successful that way. But I'm not--

Which is a form of democracy, making sure you reflect what they're wanting and thinking.

Do you feel optimistic about the work you're doing now, in the same ways you may have felt enthusiastic and optimistic about 925 work?

No. I don't. (laughs) I don't. I have a really wonderful job, I work with wonderful people, and I think the direction of health care in this country is very discouraging. So I don't feel optimistic about that at all. I tend to feel more optimistic about other things, like watching my kids and their friends and what they're interested in, and what they might take on in the future.

Is this an organized environment? Are there unions in this?

Yes. We have ten bargaining units at Group Health—Group Health's completely organized. That was important to me when I came to work here, even though I'm not in a union, obviously, and I don't have a lot of involvement with that. But it's interesting that it's been hard for me too because I'm a manager here, where there's a union, so I've been on the other side. Some old friends in the labor movement don't like me for that, because

I'm a manager in a unionized environment. But for me, I wanted to be in a unionized environment; I wanted to be working for an employer that recognized and bargained with unions—I think it's the right thing to do.

So there are some folks you know in the labor movement who think when you cross that line and go into management, you become the bad guys.

Right. Which side are you on? It's a real core value of the labor movement.

Anything more you'd like to add about the legacy or the significance of 925, in your experience looking back?

I'm very glad that there's an interest in preserving the legacy. To understand that juncture of the social environment we were in, and how that drove how we organized and what we did and how people responded to us—I think if you can understand that, you can understand the labor movement and organiz[ing]. I think that's really important. And I also think, as painful as it is to understand our failures, is also to understand the failures of the labor movement. Because the labor movement has been around for a long time, it's had the same problems, there's a kind of chronic sense of what the failures and the limitations are. And what 925 gives us a chance to do is say, ok, here's something new and fresh that started out with all the optimism in the world, and they ran into the same walls, that all the old guys who organized in the 20s and 30s ran into. Why wasn't that optimism and different approach able to prevail—what are the structural problems that make it hard for any organization to be successful organizing workers in the United States? I think there are some really important lessons there. It's great to look at that experience and what that meant to the women, and it's also—what is the larger meaning of this. I think that's a really important discussion.

And that story is hopefully going to be partially filled in by these interviews.

I hope so.

People have varying interests, and reflecting on that in the interviews.

Right.

Thanks very much.

Thank you!

END of interview.