**Karen Nussbaum**
**Interviewed by Ann Froines**
**November 16, 2006**
**Washington, D.C.**

**Karen, you came to 9to5 out of a social movement background. Tell me about that.**

I often think that the most important description of myself is that I was eighteen in 1968. And that it was a period when the world was kind of an open wound, and everything was possible, every point of investigation was available. And there was an impulse to believe you had a responsibility to make things better. I came out of a Jewish tradition of social justice, and a concern about civil rights. I could see the contradictions first hand that women exhibited, especially between their competencies in their private lives versus their public lives. The ones powerful in public often had the worst personal relationships, and the ones who were extremely powerful in their own homes felt disabled in public, disempowered as public actors. That is what became important to me in pursuing women's issues, organizing women. But I was also informed by the movement around the war in Vietnam, the whole analysis of anti-imperialism. What was so important about that was an emphasis, really, (on) the need to study, to understand it. It wasn't about your gut feelings—it could be about your gut feelings—but there was so much more to it than that. So we studied. We read political theorists; we felt that we had to understand what was at work. It wasn't anything that you could just observe, and analyze for yourself. So that became part of who I was, and my political tradition. Though I read Gramsci, Fanon, Braverman, all that stuff, I never took notes and then decided what to do the next day at 9to5. Still, it gave me an analytical frame of mind that was fun. It was illuminating, and made you think you could understand what was going on around you.

**Had you started college in 1968?**

I had just graduated high school, so I went to college in the fall of 1968 in Chicago. It was after I dropped out of college that I started to read, which I did the next year. It was when I became a political activist that I got interested in what you could learn from books, and how useful that could be, how that could answer questions that you were really interested in answering.

**What was your very first organizing?**

Oh, you know I was in the Brownies or something. (Laughs.) In high school I decided to run for president of my class when I was a junior--president of the senior class. And I did it because no girl had ever been president. It wasn't like there was even a context for that in 1967, whenever it was, and I also hated the guy who was running, so I just did it to mess with the whole thing. I didn't care that I lost—I did lose. . .
But the other element of this is the youth culture. The youth culture was actually really central to our generation and building these organizations that we did in the late sixties and early seventies. You felt like you were entitled to be a full-fledged actor in the world,

and there were opportunities to do that. You didn't even feel it mattered that you were not particularly well-informed. It was a sense of entitlement, a sense of obligation, and you could be gratified by doing it as well. And so the youth culture was really important in the whole mix of my being able to do the organizing I did later.

**You mean it was almost like the youth had a primary role in society, and you were about to take it on, and show the way? I sort of remember that feeling. . .**

Well, there was that, but also there was this vacuum and it never occurred to me that you needed to go work for someone else to do this organizing. I did apprentice myself in the peace movement. I saw what leaders were doing and I went and trailed them around. Sid Peck—I decided I wanted to learn how to raise money, so I asked Sid Peck if he would teach me how to raise money. And so I would go around to meetings with him. And other people.

I thought it would be interesting to do this, do that, and so I would find people to learn from when I was active in the anti-war movement in Boston. Certainly not in the labor movement. They've got this whole structure, and you have to come in and fit in this whole structure that has got a million people older. . . already being the boss. And we just didn't have those limitations in the anti-war and women's movements.. We'd just start our own thing.

**Do you remember those early experiences in the anti-war movement? Do you feel like you learned important things, about failures as well as successes?**

Oh yeah, now that I think back on it I feel like my choices were very canny. So, for example, I was working half-time as a secretary, to earn money to make my living, and the other half time I was working at People's Coalition for Peace and Justice, an anti-war organization in Boston. And I took on as my job organizing high school students around the war. It was like a really smart thing to do, right? I was like two years older than them, but I was enough older that it was a group that I could practice on. You know, I could try to organize them, there was not much to lose, and, it seemed like an easy place to learn basic organizing skills. And it turned out to be true. I got to feel capable—I was a little bit older than them—and they weren't very demanding. For them,it was great to have this 20-year old who could drive to their high school to hold meetings with them. And so that was a way to learn, in practice, what would work and didn't work. And develop basic organizing skills.

**Let's make the transition, then, into organizing clerical workers. What was your early thinking about what you would have to do to organize clerical workers, and how did you begin?**

It began with this realization that here I was working as a clerical worker so that I could do my organizing, and then realizing I could do my organizing on the job, too. And also a realization about, or my grappling with how you deal with the role of women in society. I was never interested in it in its own regard, as some separate bubble of concern, but

more in relation to women as actors in their roles in the world. I was more interested at the level of world peace, or fighting imperialism, or class, and trying to pursue women's equality and empowerment in those contexts, rather than as a separate issue of self-realization. I've told the story before about the waitresses at Cronin's restaurant in Boston, in Harvard Square, Cambridge, actually. This was a local restaurant that had been around forever, and had these working class women who were career waitresses. They had been informed by the aura of women's equality that was bubbling around at the time, and got pissed off at some insult from the employer, and decided they would organize their own union—all eight of them—and go on strike. That was the kind of impulsiveness that was around in those days. And so they did; they created the Harvard Square Waitresses Organizing Committee, went on strike, and stayed on strike for a year. The whole thing was hopeless, they could never possibly win. But they did succeed in getting a group of supporters that would go out and picket with them; I took picket duty every Wednesday night. It was as I walked in a circle for my hour or two every Wednesday night that I began to realize the potential that existed in combining the desire for women to be first class citizens in the workplace, you know, confronting the employer with the power of women's rights. That was really the genesis for me of the idea of 9to5, and how you could do that in my kind of workplace, with the women I was working with.

We tried little groups at my workplace. And what was interesting there was that you could call a meeting and people would come. It was amazing. We had trouble figuring out what do you do next, how do you build an organization that feels like it has an arc, you know, a beginning, a middle and an end, you know, campaigns, and so on. And that is what we learned later in getting training in organizing. And Ellen Cassedy tells the story of the Midwest Academy (in her interview for this project)

What was easy about anti-war organizing was the war created your arc, you know, forces outside of you that determined where your strategy needed to go. And certainly there were endless choices about what you would do, but there were forces much bigger than us that were determining what was happening. We played a different kind of role. What was interesting about worker organizing was that we had to make it all up. We had to create the dynamic tension. We had to build the fight between the boss and the workers, because otherwise. . . The whole problem was there was stasis in the workplace. There were individuals battling bosses, but without organization there wasn't a dynamism or tension that would impel things forward, would create a dialectic. So we had to do that. That's what we had to learn to do differently with workers in the workplace. The other special requirement for organizing in the workplace is that you've got a finite number of people. If you blow it with people in the workplace, you're done. It's not like the peace movement, you know, if you turn somebody off, or say the wrong thing, there are literally a million other people you can go to next. Community organizing is infinite in that way as well. When you are talking about 150 people in a workplace, and you make a mistake with a leader, you're done. So that is a real discipline that we had to learn. And it puts a special kind of tension, torque, to the organizing.

**So what are the organizing techniques that follow from these two observations you just made, having to create your own goals, a campaign, and having to proceed carefully?**

You end up in tears a lot! (Laughs.) It creates an incredible tension on the organizer for one thing, because you lose more often. But, on the other hand, it isn't like the tension of trying to end the war, where you felt like that, in your name, people were dying every day. It felt like there was nothing optional about trying to end the war in Vietnam. There is almost an optional quality for creating an organization for women office workers, you have a kind of freedom; you weren't going to ruin anybody's life. When we started to do union organizing, though, and particularly as employers got more vicious about it, then you began to feel you had people's lives in your hands. It wasn't just that you were going to blow the campaign, but you could make a mistake—it wouldn't affect you because you would still have your job as an organizer—but the members might lose their jobs in the workplace.

So what it meant for us is that we had to develop a real coherent strategy, if not a science, around how we built campaigns. And that was both around the campaign issues, but also about how you dealt with individuals, really, rules for engagement. And that is what we did in our own way in 925 [the union], we re-wrote the rules for engagement.

**Can you describe some of those early campaigns, those early steps in organizing that will illustrate what you are saying?**

We started by making it personal, and that was different from the kind of organizing going on at the time. The typical organizing was you stood at the plant gate and handed out leaflets, and somehow that was going to get you workers. Instead, we would use 9to5 the Association, or do it directly through District 925, and use these surveys, talk to women individually. We assumed there would be five conversations with each individual before you could get them to make a commitment to sign a card, or take the next step of committing to a union campaign. So it was this very intensive one-on-one kind of organizing that we assumed was the way we had to do the work, and it grew out of the 9to5 work that we did, where you would meet with people individually, talk with them, give them a little bit of something to do, and then you give them a little bit more. . . And while it wasn't about becoming anybody's friend, it was about having a personal engagement with the people that you wanted to bring in.

**After you talked to the individuals for District 925 organizing, what would the next step be? You were trying to form committees in the workplace, so the workers you convinced. . . would want to form a union?**

Yeah, the way we did our organizing, in some ways, was enlightened organizing. It wasn't that we made up how to do the organizing. We were in the best new tradition of organizing. You paid close attention to the workers, you built committees, made committees that were big enough, and they all had contacts, you built an organization that had layers. You could map out every single person in the workplace, you could evaluate

where they were, if they were with you or not, and make decisions about the way you needed to expand. So what we did was really good organizing; it wasn't unique, it was just. . . good.

**Very thorough.**

Yeah. I think it was more in the way we built our organization, how we developed our staff, how we structured leadership, the kind of issues. . . and who we brought in. Those were the things that were more unique. That culture grew out of the organization we built when we built 9to5, the Association. Building the Association was really "clean slate" work, you know, we could do whatever we wanted. Then we took that into the union world, luckily operating inside of a protected bubble in an incredibly bureaucratic organization with a lot of rules. We didn't feel like we needed to apply those rules in our own case. The only rules we had were the real life rules that you had to win a majority in order to get members, and you had to get a contract in order to get dues, and you needed dues to pay your staff to do more organizing. So we had a discipline that we had to follow that was about winning, it wasn't a discipline that was about satisfying your own boss, or doing things the way they had always been done.

**You, as a founder of 9to5, the Association, were the head of that organization, and also president of District 925. You were trying to keep things going in parallel. Could you describe what your strategy was in keeping the two things going together.**

We started 9to5, the Association, because we saw this opportunity: here we were office workers, and we thought we could organize, and bring women from their offices into an organization. And it was after our experience in 9to5 for a year or two that we realized that the kind of power we would build up was so episodic, that you could never consolidate any gains. We would run a campaign in the banking industry, and we would get some demands met in the banking industry. Then that campaign would be over. Then we would run a campaign on maternity benefits. . . and you could never consolidate power institutionally. That was when we hit upon the National Labor Relations Act, oh, well, it's right there for us. We began to understand what you can do with a union. But it was very important for us to maintain the culture that we had built, to move that into the trade union movement. What we wanted to do was, both build power for women on the job, but use the power of women to transform the labor movement. So it was to operate in both directions at the same time.

**And by transform the labor movement, do you mean make it more cognizant of all the working women's issues, put women in leadership? What do you mean by transforming the movement?**

For me it was illuminated in a small demonstration that I witnessed, in1970 or 1972. I was in Washington at a big million-person anti-war demonstration, and off to the side in front of the Justice Department, there were about 20 people. It was like a P.L. (Progressive Labor Party) breakaway demonstration, and they had this chant. And the chant was, "What are the unions for? General strike to end the war." I thought, huh, I

never thought of unions as institutions that could motor progressive change, because from my context, the labor unions had been supporters of the war. At least what you saw in the public media, and I didn't come out of a labor background in my family.. I hadn't learned anything about unions or workers when I was growing up. And so understanding that organizations of workers could be used to transform society, not just work relations, but the way all society works, that was what we wanted to do. We wanted both to create a place where women could exercise power within a workers' organization, but also have workers' organizations take on a larger agenda in the world.

**You've alluded to the fact that you paid a lot of attention to training of your worker-leaders, staff, and so forth. What were the approaches to the training? What settings? What was your goal.**

We first worked on this in 9to5, the Association. To us, training was always part of the actual work of the organization. The best training was always in the doing. And so we developed these campaigns around issues, which would both educate our members about the issue and educate the public about the issue, but also create this give and take, the programmatic arc to make things happen. So, for example, when we first started 9to5, affirmative action was starting to be promoted. And you couldn't even figure out what those words meant. What did "affirmative action" mean? We decided we would do a campaign where we would teach people what affirmative action was. We had a big conference in Boston about affirmative action, and then we had specific campaigns that each of our committees did, where they pursued what affirmative action did in their industry. And then we did campaigns where we went after government agencies to enforce affirmative action. We did this whole set of activities over the course of the year that was training, in its own way, but it was also campaigning, winning things, and getting people engaged.

The other thing we were committed to was a combination of action and analysis. Looking at, what is the effect of the work that we are doing. So, after we worked on government enforcement, and those kinds of thing for a couple of years, we realized that what we were teaching our members was that government was the enemy. Because all our focus was on government enforcing the laws. And we realized that that was not what we wanted people to think; the employer is the enemy. So we changed what we did. We did a whole set of campaigns focused on the industries, the biggest employer in different industries, and going after them for changes. Then the "9 to 5" movie happened, and, while I wish we could say that we dreamed up that we should have the "9 to 5" movie, (it was Jane Fonda's inspiration), we did know what to make of it. So we did a whole educational campaign around it. Jane Fonda went to a dozen cities, did events, and I went around the country, and did a 20-city tour called "The Movement behind the Movie." We figured out how we did this interplay between popular culture, public activism, and changing the public debate. We were always very conscious of it, and looking for opportunities to do that. We did it around the introduction of automation, which began in a big way in the mid-1970s, and we realized was going to transform the workplace. As office work was being automated,, then people would be open to an organizing opportunity, or re-thinking their place in the world, or their work relationships,

at the period that they were most irritated by the change, or were most unsettled by the change. And so we did this five-year concentrated campaign on computerization and automation, again, as a way to get at people's consciousness. And we looked for whatever opportunities existed, what the effect was, and would combine direct training with campaign activities, and individuals coming into all of that work.

**And that phrase, "getting into people's consciousness"-- are you saying your goal was to build the national association, more chapters in more cities, around the issues?**

We had operated 9to5, the Association, only a couple of years before we started the union, 925, and we saw these as sister organizations. They shared a sense about who we were organizing, and in what way, around issues, and so on. We could use 9to5 to raise the issues, like the dogs to get the birds out of the bushes, and up into the sky. 9to5 could do that, get out the issues, get people stirred up, and looking for some solutions. Then the union would be the opportunity to consolidate that desire for change and turn it into institutional power. So that was always the idea, and I think we did it pretty successfully for 15 years, or however long it was. 9to5 had this freedom to operate on issues, and a kind of creativity that didn't exist in the labor movement—neither the freedom or the creativity—but we could use that by tying it to the union to change what the reputation of what a union could be, especially for women workers who really didn't think unions were for them.

I want to say another couple of things about education. We were also really clear about direct education. So we ran these summer schools every summer, where a hundred of our leaders would come in, usually on the hottest weekend in July, to Philadelphia—we did these at Bryn Mawr—which turned out to be the site of the original summer schools for working women that had taken place in the 1930s. And our Summer Schools were great; they were so much fun. People would bring their banners from Pittsburgh Working Women, 9to5 Atlanta, and all over the country. There would be three, four or five people from each chapter, and we had songs and skits. We always brought in some great singer, and we always had a great speaker. We always had one man, like a health and safety expert from Canada, or something, just to mix it up. And we always did stuff about corporations, we were trying to be expansive, giving people skills but also opening their minds, to be able to analyze the world. And to have fun with each other. It was just great. And then we would do that sort of thing back in our chapters. . . We continued that tradition in our union, so that our annual meetings for our union were not typical union meetings. You know, typically you have politicians, and you read the minutes. . . Instead we would bring all our members together for annual meetings with songs and skits. I used to do brain teasers, and people would get a new clue each time there was a plenary session. And people got into it, it was fun. We had a scavenger hunt in a hotel in Cincinnati one year, and people were wandering around the hotel for an hour finding stuff related to organizing skills. So it had its own. . . we had this commitment to skills, understanding the world, and knowing how to run your own organization. We ended up with a sense of real ownership of the organization.

**And the summer schools were how long?**

The summer schools were just a weekend, because nobody could get off work much longer than that. We had those summer schools for about ten years. They probably happened the entire time, after I left, as well. In some form, they may still go on.

**Is there anything you want to add about the struggles to build District 925 among clerical workers, public service workers, or the strategies to identify new areas to organize?**

Ironically, we started to do union organizing just as union organizing was closing down. So the tactic that we felt worked so well for us in liberating this sense of power in women workers just came up against too formidable an enemy. The corporate power structure decided they were not having any more union power, and we got caught right in the crux of that. We also were, as Andy Stern says in his remarks (in his interview for this project), what we were so good at—movement-building, really—was forced then to succeed in the most narrow terms of the union structure, that was actually pretty hostile to some of the things we were doing..
So we had to turn out to be the best widget-makers as well, and it was really hard to do both. We couldn't catch a break on the employer side or on the union side, in a way.

**I know that District 925 had some major successes in their campaigns, particularly in the universities and libraries. Was it simply that it wasn't enough workers fast enough to fit into the SEIU requirements at that point?**

Yeah, yeah. We actually had a great win record, we did really good organizing, our organizers were wonderful. We were doing as good as anybody else. We weren't in a position to score big, and we hadn't at that time figured out how to do that on our own. And neither had the institution. Now SEIU has gotten very sophisticated about leveraging power since then. But at the time, the whole union movement was foundering. So we were doing fine with what the opportunities were, but because we started at zero, with nothing, it wasn't enough. We envisioned a movement of women office workers organizing for power in unions. We didn't have the resources, the backing or enough imagination to pull it off in a counter-tide – women's social power rising while workers' institutional power was waning.

**Do you want to say a bit about the dilemmas you felt, the thoughts you had about taking the job with the women's bureau [of the Department of Labor]?**

I was offered the job to be the Director of the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor. I had been put up for the job by John Sweeney and John Hiatt, the general counsel at SEIU. And at first I thought, no, I just want to stay with my union, this is really where I can make my contribution. It was interesting because I was interviewed by Secretary of Labor, Bob Reich, and went to see John Sweeney later that day..

He asked me, what's happening, and I said I told Secretary Reich I would call him after the weekend, and let him know. And he said, "Are you out of your mind? Are you crazy? You would rather stay running your local union instead of doing this job at the Department of Labor? Open your mind!" And you know, that was good advice. There wasn't anything that precious about what I was doing that I couldn't learn more, and enrich myself, and my organizing.

**And the union would continue with other people.**

Yeah, right. And it's not like I thought I was essential. That was what was so cool about 925, because we had such a collaborative approach to organizing, and had great, incredibly competent people at all levels of the organizing. It wasn't that the organization was in jeopardy. It was actually a kind of humility about being an organizer that made me reluctant to go to the Department of Labor. . .and it turned out be a gas to operate in a completely different way. There were all these new experiences.

**I think that for the District 925 archives it would be good to include a brief summary of your vision and your activities while you were there (Department of Labor). Was it three years?**

Yes, three years. Well, I went in and I used all of my skills that I had developed at 9to5 and District 925. And within the first four or five weeks I had this whole plan about what I would do in the first three years I would be there. I went in thinking you need to build this programmatic arc that makes sense, and actually that plan pretty much played out. To me, it meant having these unbelievable resources. I had eighty staff and a budget of ten million dollars. I represented the federal government. I'd go places and say things, and do things that I never thought you could do before. I remember early on in a speech somewhere, giving a kind of speech that I would typically give as 9to5 or the union. . Then I interrupted myself in the middle of the speech, and said, "Is this what government says?" (Laughs.) My goal was to bring as much organizing into the work that I was doing, and use this different vantage point. . . to use government to leverage power for working women, and on the issues that would help working women get mobilized.

And we had so much fun. We took on all these issues. For example, I got to go and investigate the strike which became a lockout at Diamond Walnut, of these workers on a walnut farm. They had been on strike for a long time in California. So I got to go and I am meeting with management and I am meeting with the union, the workers, then we convened a community meeting to get the community involved. I went to Las Vegas, and had a hearing about issues of health and safety and sexual harassment that were affecting casino workers. I met with television writers in New York to find out what their issues were, and how we could address them. And so I got to investigate, work with, and expose the conditions of women in all these different kinds of jobs. We wrote reports and we had this platform that was unbelievable. We did this giant survey, the survey to end all surveys. We had always done surveys in the 20 years of 9to5. So we did this survey, but because we were the federal government we got ten daily newspapers to run the

survey in the newspaper. We had literally a thousand different partners. We ran the survey in eight different languages. It went all over the place. We ended up with 300,000 responses. Then that gave us the basis for making the policy changes—well, working women told us this is what we need to do. But also, just organizing on this unbelievable scale! It was wonderful, just exhilarating, it was great!
Then President Clinton released the report.

I was the Director on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Women's Bureau, and so we held this giant event to celebrate the 75th anniversary. There were these great opportunities to do things on a really big scale. And it opened my mind beyond office workers, so I could understand the working conditions of women in some of the other occupations, and parts of the world. It broadened me a tremendous amount, and it helped me understand operating within a completely different bureaucracy. We had created our own breathing room in 925, but we still operated within SEIU, which is a very bureaucratic operation. And then with the federal government, it really developed my bureaucratic skills. They're quite well-developed now. (Laughs.)

**You mean, dealing with bureaucracy?**

Right, right, not promoting bureaucracy.

**Tape 2.**

**(What is the legacy of 925 in your opinion?)**

When I think of the key elements of 925, they include the way we did the organizing, the importance of campaigns and structure in struggles, the importance of education—both for our members and also for ourselves—the culture that we created, and lastly, how we operated as a staff. I just want to say a little about that. There aren't that many workplaces, I think, that function as well as ours. I hope that I don't have rose-colored glasses on, but I think we really did foster and create a staff that had high expectations of ourselves and each other, an environment in which we all felt entitled to enjoy and own the victory. And all equally were responsible for failures. There was rarely scapegoating, and there really wasn't very much competition. It emerged in a number of the other interviews (for this project). It would be easy for me to say, it worked so well—I was the director—that there was no competition. But that is what we were hearing from people in the interviews, and that is so gratifying. That people felt like, I have enough room to feel that I can do whatever I want here, you know, operate at my highest possible level. And that is what we wanted from each other, because we were all in this together building a movement. And we were not in it to outdo one another. That makes me feel great, you know, I feel like we really built something where people felt like they could throw themselves into it, be creative, and be collective about it. You know there was this kind of collective approach, and at the same time, accountability. This was not just a feel-good consensus operation; we believed in accountability. We were there to do a job,

we were responsible to each other, to the people we were organizing, to the workers whose dues we were spending, by even just being on staff.

We started staff evaluations in the early days of 9to5, the Association. We wrote up these evaluations of staff, and the staff evaluated the supervisors. We took it all very seriously, and I hope created a sense that we were there to do a job. You could get the resources you needed to do your job well, but there were high expectations for the work. We were working for a cause higher than our own careers. Very few people came in as careerists. And it could be fun! You were expected to have your spirit, you know, satisfied as well. The combination of collaborative work, the teamwork, and accountability was what I have tried to take with me everywhere I went. From the beginning of 9to5, then into the union, and the Women's Bureau, and now in the AFL-CIO. And I think it has really had good results just every place that I have been in. It has just been wonderful to see it emerge in so many different ways. And in the stories that have been told in the 925 legacy project.

**After you left the Women's Bureau, in the Department of Labor, you went back into the AFL-CIO. Can you tell us about the job you took on?**

While I was in the Department of Labor, there was a huge fight inside the labor movement, and it really came to a head after the Democrats lost the Congress in 1994. And the leaders in the labor movement decided they had to take on Lane Kirkland, who was the president of the AFL-CIO. The labor movement was in freefall, and he was the wrong leader. It was John Sweeney, who had been president of SEIU, when I had been there those years who became the person who ran against Kirkland, and, ultimately Tom Donahue who took over for Kirkland as AFL-CIO presidentand was there for a heartbeat. I remember being on the subway, on the way to work at the Department of Labor one morning, and reading the newspaper. The headline was something like, "Labor leader says unions are a disaster," or something like that. I thought to myself,"this is the greatest news I've heard in years" because what it meant was that people in the union were willing to say that the emperor had no clothes. It was the first glimmer of a new day in the labor movement, on a big enough scale that would make a change. And then John Sweeney won; to me it seemed much more interesting to go back to building power, instead of just levering the power of government. . . to actually go back and build power for workers. So I went into the AFL-CIO under John Sweeney, and created the Working Women's Department. There hadn't been a women's department there. We had a lot of fun, we did great work, we had these unbelievable conferences that to this day—these were five, seven years ago—people still come up to me and say, that was the most exhilarating thing I have even been to. You know, this sense of building power among women across unions. But ultimately, it was actually too threatening to the institutions, the different affiliates. Affiliates don't want their women members going to somebody else's conference and getting turned on, they should go to the affiliate conference and think that president is who they should love... And the problems of doing women's work from day one, which is that it is marginalized; were factors in the AFL-CIO. When there was an internal crisis about funding, and unions putting pressure

on Sweeney to throw overboard whole parts of his program, they eliminated the Working Women's Department.

And I made this decision about what I would do. The most important thing to me was to do what I could to fight for the program, but ultimately to understand the rules of my institution. I worked for John Sweeney, and I wasn't going to organize against him. It would be wholly inappropriate; I wasn't a member, or a leader of a union. That was the decision he had made, and I could decide whether I wanted to stay, whether there was personal dignity in staying or not. And it was actually a woman friend at the AFL-CIO, Arlene Holt, who had an influential position at the AFL-CIO, who figured out how to make space for me to do the kind of work I was good at, and so I became an assistant to the president, which, at that time, was kind of getting "kicked upstairs." That's where the failures went before they figured out how to boot them out, right? But I ended up being able to run these big campaigns, first around white collar workers who were losing their jobs in these corporate scandals—Enron and World Com—and then ultimately into helping to build this big new organization, which is so completely thrilling, called Working America. I think of it now as kind of like 9to5. . . with men and resources! In three years we've built a membership of one and a half million people, of these working class moderates who live in the suburbs of big cities. Again, we go to where workers are, in their heads, and build organization from there out, as opposed to saying, "here is what a union is, now figure out how you fit into our box, and we'll let you in on the game."

**How do you approach these folks around the country to join Working America?**

Mostly it is done through another old tactic, which is door-to-door canvassing. So we send organizers out into communities who talk to people in their homes, working people who don't have a union, about good jobs, and a just economy, and other issues like healthcare, retirement security. We figure out who identifies with those goals and values, and two out of three people we talk to do identify with them, sign up and become members. Then we engage them in activities. So that's been great, it has been some of the most exciting work I have done in my whole life. It is really cool, at my age, 56, to be able to do something brand new, that is, you know, wonderful, and a big success. And exercises real power.

**And you are getting acknowledgement in AFL-CIO that it is an effective strategy?**

Yeah, this whole idea that you start with where people are, and figure out how to build an organization around that, a movement around that. And you figure out your power strategy based on how people are willing to move, as opposed to starting where power is, and figuring out how to shovel people into that equation. So it has been exhilarating, and lot of fun. But what was interesting to me at the time they deep-sixed the working women's department. . . I felt devastated by it, I felt a personal failure, that all this work had just gone down the drain, that my commitment to try to build women's organizations within the labor movement had utterly failed. So I turned to Millie Jeffrey, who at the time was in her 80s, and who had been a leader in the labor movement. She had been in

the UAW, and a civil rights activist, and worked on legislation.. She was kind, she was not petty, she came to one of our women's conferences, the first one that we ran in 1997. I really didn't know her then. But she came up to me, and said, "Karen, this is so exciting. I am so thrilled that you are doing this." And I hate to say this, but very few older women in the labor movement were generous in that way; they just didn't have that kind of generous spirit. And I really loved that about Millie. And so when I was in my moment of despair I went to Millie thinking, well she has had all this experience, she has had all these ups and downs. So I did meet with her, and I told her my tale of woe, and I expected her to say, "yes, that is terrible, and here is how you need to fight it" and so on and so forth. And instead she said, "well, you will probably just have to figure out some other way to approach the issues, or find some other work that you think is meaningful." I remember feeling so deflated afterwards (laughs); that wasn't what I was looking for at all. Then a year or so later, I realized how right she was, and in a way, it helps me shape my view of what the 925 legacy is, at least to me.

For my work it's always been trying to think about—and not just for me—but for my own perspective, to think about movement, organization, and consciousness. Those are all different, and you make advances in one area, and not in the others, certainly not in all three at the same time. It is the interplay, the dialectic among those things, that is what advances over time. But also understanding that especially consciousness is not linear, it doesn't advance. It goes back and forth. For example, in the last ten years, we can all testify to that! For me to think about the legacy, I realize that I had been much more wedded to the organization part of that, partly because that's got your name attached to it. Will the name of your organization make it through to the history books or not? I realize now that that may be the least important of the things over time. It is more, how you use the interplay of movement, organization, and consciousness, that does, hopefully, in some way, move society forward over time, or at least improves the society in which you live over time. And I do believe that 925 has an important legacy in that respect.

**I have another question from the legacy, or historical, point of view. Is this the first time the AFL-CIO has invited people outside of the collective bargaining situation to affiliate with the AFL-CIO?**

It certainly has never been done on this scale or in this way. Many unions start this way. The history of unionization is often in these voluntary associations, that don't even necessarily have anything to do with the workplace. Certainly there was a whole creativity around organizing in the 1930s that was worker-based, but had a community expression to it. So there are historical antecedents to this. But in the last fifty years, you saw everything about organizing funneled into ever narrower definitions of collective bargaining, where unions, without seeming to notice, had the room in which they could operate become ever more narrow decade after decade. At the same time, the decision-making structure within the AFL-CIO is based on affiliated unions. So no individual union had an interest in, or would benefit from, an additional organization being created. And so it required affiliated organizations taking a bigger view or at least us creating the space that allowed us to prove the case. And then bring along the affiliates. There had been tremendous resistance for thirty years to creating an associate membership directly

affiliated with the AFL-CIO. It had been blocked. We finally figured out the right ways to get past that, to build a model that was so unarguably successful, that we gained the support much more broadly in the unions.

**It seems to me you could say that the legacy is not only the vision you articulated of the interplay of organizing, movement, and consciousness, but the actual, substantial, million and a half people in Working America,**

Right—9to5 with men and resources!

**Right! Thank you, Karen.**