Debbie Schneider
Interviewed by Ann Froines
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SEIU headquarters, Washington D.C.

I'm interviewing Debbie Schneider, who is one of the early organizers in 9to5, at the national headquarters of the Service Employees International Union here in Washington D.C. on November 3, 2005.

We'll start at the beginning. Tell me the story about how you entered 9to5.

I first heard about 9to5 when I was in college, and I was working—I contributed to a magazine called Politics and Education and I actually edited a series about clerical worker organizing at universities. So I ran into 9to5 just as part of putting that series together. Didn't think much of it in terms of myself, but it was where I first had heard about it—their early work doing organizing at universities among clerical workers. After I graduated college I went to Boston, got a job in the publishing industry, and was really just trying to make a living and find my way. I was looking around for different kind of activity, whether it was political or artistic, to interest me, and get connected to the Boston community. I tried lots of different places. One day I came to work and [had] been leafleted with a "Women in Publishing" flyer from the Boston 9to5, and I remembered them from this magazine article. So I went to my first meeting, and really from the day I stepped into 9to5 I just felt at home there. So that was in 1978.

Tell me a little bit about your earlier experiences as an activist and organizer. Do you remember anything about what your world view was at that time?

I was a progressive—didn't have to be converted to that; I did not come from a working class family but from a—my mother was a high school teacher, my father was an attorney —but we always had progressive politics. I knew that worker issues were important issues, things I cared about. I think that was probably as sophisticated as it was at the time. I had done political organizing—anti-apartheid work; I'd been young during the antiwar demonstrations but I'd been at every one I could get to. So I had a background of activism. And was trying to find a place to exercise that when I first got to Boston. I had been a literature major in college; people said, well, go to publishing. And it was really a ghetto of both clerical workers, but also people like me, college graduates in the liberal arts who were trying to find jobs. I was told that I was very lucky to have landed a job at the place I did, which was Cahners, which published trade magazines. My job was to tabulate market survey results. It was a completely menial job, but I was told I was lucky because there would be a—that's the only way in. Modern Plastics was the kind of journals that they published.

It was considered clerical work but there was a bit of a career ladder there?

They said there was, but I would say that after I spent a year or so there, I didn't see one. And it was very low paid work. And I actually didn't stay there. I went to do other—which were also clerical jobs—clerical jobs for the college-educated, which especially in Boston is a whole category.

So I started in 9to5, was recruited to join the organization—I had called up, had a recruitment lunch, which I've described in another interview, and they tried to figure out how to fit me in. I joined the campaign committee, which was the committee that launched annual campaigns against certain employers around issues, and tried to make them change their policies. I soon got to be the chair of the campaign committee. One of my early memories...I was a pretty shy person growing up; I had never done any public speaking—it was not who I was at all. But they said I had to speak from the campaign committee at some National Secretaries' Day event that had some celebrities at it, 500 people, all sorts of press in Boston. And they just said, "We need you to do this." And I said, "Well, I don't have any experience or particular comfort level," and they were like, "Well we need you to do this." I remember working very hard on the speech and practicing it a lot, and went down to the 9to5 office at lunch time and got in a cab to go to the action with the director of 9to5 who I didn't really know, who took my speech and edited it in the cab on the way there. I thought I was just going to die. [laughs] But of course I didn't die, and I succeeded at giving the speech even if it wasn't brilliant. And I really watched a very systematic work with me as they developed me as a leader to be a public speaker; we later took on this Boston Survey Group—there was all kinds of antitrust allegations that we took to the Attorney General's office, and I learned antitrust. This was an organization that would take you as fast as you could go, even a little faster than you might be ready to go, to learn a huge amount of things, to help change the world. And I just couldn't have been happier in that organization. It was an organization that had a lot of energy, vitality, fun, presence, seemed very smart but not self-righteous; it hit a tone that I felt very comfortable with compared to other left kinds of organizations I had been active in.

These things you're describing you're involved in now—by then are you working full time for 9to5--?

No, I was still a worker. I had gone to work for an educational research project, and I was a data coder there. So I was still doing clerical work, and by that time I was the vice-chair of 9to5 in Boston.

You mentioned that there were sort of trainings and development of you as a leader. Can you be a little more specific? Do you remember what some of the trainings involved? Or was it just, you learned it by doing it on your own?

They did both. I think that there were workshops on public speaking, there were workshops on chairing a meeting, I chaired that campaign committee at some point, and I know that I had—because I've actually found these since—different curricula on chairing a meeting, putting on a press event, speaking in public. So there was very explicit training that was part of this.

At the same time as you were doing all this, did you come at it feeling part of the women's movement as well, as part of the working women's movement, or how did you see those two things fitting together? Had you participated in women's movement activities?

I'd always been a feminist. I don't think I had ever—my activism had not really been in the women's movement. I was drawn to this because it was a working women's organization, because—I think I hadn't been really drawn to most of the women's movement stuff, as I was coming up, because it did seem so middle class to me. I liked the combination in 9to5 of the women's movement and the worker's movement, and what that really entailed. And I felt very comfortable there in ways that I think if I had dabbled over the years, in college or something, going to the women's stuff, I never really felt as comfortable as I did when I got to 9to5.

Do you remember any specific discussions among you 9to5 activists about feminism and 9to5?

No. I don't ever recall that. It wasn't a question if we were a women's organization, because we were—that was the definition of it. I don't ever remember people talking about whether it was—how it interacted with feminism. We were out to improve the working conditions of women. So that was in my opinion a feminist proposition and it didn't seem to need discussing.

Partly what I was thinking of is, based on your notion that you perceive feminism as sort of middle class, and therefore feminism or the feminist movement might be sort of a turn-off for a working class woman. Was that part of your consciousness or development at that point?

It wasn't at that point. Later on, when I became a full time organizer for the association and then for the union, I think that there was probably some more explicit conversation about that. But as I came in essentially as a rank and file leader, it just wasn't really in the mix.

So is there anything in your background that you think oriented you toward working class women and labor struggles?

I don't know. It's a good question. My father was a corporate tax attorney, whose favorite song in the world that he would sing around the house was Joe Hill. And I never quite understood where that came from.

Did you ever have a chance to ask him?

No. I might ask him this weekend. [laughs] So I think we were always brought up with —we had union songs around the house. We were a sort of Pete Seeger—Weavers family.

That means something. I don't know where it comes from, but--.

But not in a red diaper baby way at all. There was not that kind of ideology. But I had progressive politics, and always knew that economics were a part of it.

Was your mother in a teachers' union?

Yes, and she was a loyal member of her teachers' union. She was a high school English teacher.

I actually left 9to5 soon after this couple of year period as a rank and file leader, because I was so struck by that organization's ability to do adult education—that it would inspire women to go learn about antitrust, or to go learn about these things, because it mattered to their well-being, their economic well-being, to their organization. And I was really struck by this. And so I decided I would go get a degree in adult education, worker education. This was before Reagan. Democrats were still in charge. I thought that there was sort of a way through worker education to really pursue some of these goals. This was coupled with the education research place that I worked at; it had done all this research about if you take a child before birth, and you give them every kind of advantage—you give the family social service and health care, and you give the kid education and health care from birth on up, and you do a longitudinal study, compared to kids who didn't get this—could you really change the outcome for families. And the results really said that the number one indicator of educational success, even if you put all of this into a kid, was their parents' economic status. So I thought, being a teacher isn't it. I need to work with the adult education part. So I had this idea—I'd sort of had an education focus—that I would go do this worker education, and that would be the way to do it because you had to affect the parents' income. And I went to Harvard, and dropped out after 6 weeks of their education program, because I realized I was not really going to be able to do it that way, and that it was much more direct to just figure out how to organize workers for higher pay.

Was that a labor education program specifically, or something in the Harvard College of Education?

It was just in their College of Education. And so I decided to become an organizer full-time, and left the education part. And got a job with the 9to5 affiliate in New York City called Women Office Workers. So I was an organizer there for a couple of years, in the early 80s.

And what kinds of groups were you organizing at that point?

It was really private sector clerical workers in New York City. That included publishing, law firms, but mostly the financial industry—insurance and banking. Which I'd become pretty familiar with in Boston through 9to5. We did all kinds of wild things to try to get press in New York, which is much harder than getting it in Boston. I remember being told that you had to, in your headline of your press release, you had to have sex and or

violence, preferably both, if you had any hope of getting covered. I remember we hung a boss in effigy. And I would say that the energy and visibility and success that I felt so much in the Boston chapter of 9to5 was hard to replicate in the New York City chapter.

And this was part of the big 9to5 national association.

Yes. When 9to5 went national, what it partly did was affiliate some working women's organizations that already existed, and Women Office Workers was one of those. But then it created new 9to5s in different parts of the country as well. So the New York City one already existed but affiliated.

But it was a great experience for me. I met an incredible number of workers. Talked to them, had a lot of recruitment lunches; we did a lot of different work, but it didn't have the same momentum and success to it that our chapter in Boston did.

In either of these two situations, was there any particular campaign that was particularly exhilarating or memorable to you, looking back?

The Boston sSurvey Group one really was, where we felt like we really caught these guys in a secret wage-fixing antitrust violation. It was all the big players in Boston. And it was exhilarating. It was very exciting. You felt like you were playing on a very big field and that we were making a huge difference. I remember the John Hancock campaign—I was also the chair of the committee when we took on John Hancock, and that was also a big campaign in Boston. I actually don't recall any campaigns like that in New York. I don't think we ever were able to really get to that level.

Did the campaign with the Boston survey research group have an impact on working women in Boston, do you think?

I think we stopped them doing that practice, of setting an artificially low ceiling on clerical wages. It would be hard to draw the exact line to, did that improve wages, but I think it took a huge illegal impediment out of the way.

Was there a legal aspect to this campaign too?

Yes, it was mostly legal.

A ruling prevented them from doing that, some kind of legal--?

I really can't remember that, and it may be that I left before it was all done, because these legal cases take a long time, but the Attorney General of Massachusetts took the case.

That will be in the other part of the archives.

I hope so. [laughs]

What was different about 9to5's approach to union organizing, once the local started, and then the district?

I didn't get to the union until a few years later. I left Women Office Workers when District 925 first formed, and several of us left Women Office Workers to create a New York City organizing committee for the new union 925. And we went in as salts or colonizers, whatever they're called, to see if we could bring the union to the important industries of New York City. We did that for about a year and—

An example again—what would that be?

I worked at the big insurance company AIG, American Insurance Group, and I did claims processing there; a friend of mine went to a bank, and a friend of mine went to publishing. We sort of did this amateur targeting, and went in. I think about a year into that we realized that this was really not going to take off that way. I went and worked for a union for a year, because I really wanted to work for District 925, but they were only hiring people with union experience. So I went to the garment workers' union in New Jersey for a year. They created a clerical local for me to fill up with members. That was pretty unsuccessful, but I did get to actually work on a big strike in Chinatown among garment workers while I was there. And then the year was over, and I called the union back up, and they hired me in Chicago to do organizing among the county clerical workers in Cook County, Illinois.

So [now] to your question. So I didn't really know much about how most unions organized. I learned how the garment workers did it, which was they followed trucks around from the manufacturer to the contract sewer, that was non-union, to find out where they were sneaking stuff to be sewn non-union, and then they hired pickets to go on strike. They told the women who were sewing to go home, and they got a union. So that I saw, and I knew that wasn't really the way they probably built their union in the early days, but it's what it had come to by that time. Or at least what I saw it had come to. In District 925 we did organizing in very similar ways to 9to5 which is in certain ways, one worker at a time. We found leaders who were real leaders in their workplaces, who wanted a union; built a core of them; trained them; got them to talk to their co-workers til we got to a majority, and worked to get recognition, mostly through the legal means of the NLRB or the public law to do that. We built it up through a lot of communication, education, one-on-one conversations, telling the truth, being very informative, and figuring out how to survive the employer's anti-union campaign, through either applying leverage in a community, or through preparing the workers for what they were going to have to go through so that it wouldn't be such a shock to their system. To me it didn't seem radical, what we did. It seemed like that's how you organize a group of people to do anything. It seemed very natural to me.

I know you were involved in a number of union organizing drives that were successful. Would you like to describe one of them that you think was the most successful, most memorable to you, most difficult?

The biggest and longest campaign I worked on was the University of Cincinnati clerical workers. A collective bargaining law for public employees was passed in 1983; our union, 925, was in Cleveland; we got a call from the University of Cincinnati clerical workers, a couple of them, to come down and interview with them—they were interviewing various unions, and in the public sector that happened all the time—they would interview you, you'd do a little presentation about why your union's the best union. I wasn't there during that period—I was still in Chicago—but some other organizer did that. This group selected 925 as the union they wanted to organize with. And there was an organizer—Kim Cook, actually, who was sent down to get it off the ground, to work to build the first organizing committee, and once it looked like it actually could be a real campaign, they wanted to find somebody who would move to Cincinnati and do it. So I moved there in '84. We had our first election 1986—1400 workers, and we lost by 29 votes. So we had to do it again. It took another couple of years. We won in 1988 by a 2 to 1 margin. I bargained their first contract and the next 2 contracts—it was an employer that was really very anti-union—much more so I think than any public employer we had seen. Cincinnati is a conservative city; it's not very union-friendly; and this public university really fought the union.

Was that your first collective bargaining experience, at the University of Cincinnati?

That was the first time I bargained, yes. And we ended up actually having to go on a small strike for each of the first three contracts. Each strike got a little—each of the three years got harder. So the organizing took a long time, and it was always hard. The easier places was where faculty work—if faculty were union. So if you were the secretary in the English department, it was not a hard choice for you to go union; if you were in the hospital or you were in financial aid, the College of Medicine, College of Engineering, certain places, the top administration, the president of the university was very anti-union and his whole personnel department was. It didn't feel like a public sector campaign, after I'd been in one in Chicago. So that was my most memorable. We did a lot of different tactics. It was very creative and it was very fun. It was hard and it was long. And I saw office workers go from never having been active in anything in their lives, to leading big rallies, doing a lot of press work, going on strike, going to court—every kind of activity and leadership that people surprised themselves with, over and over again, with their own eloquence, with their own toughness, with their own determination. And it was the best work experience I had in my life, was the years that I spent with that group of workers.

That was quite a few years, from what you're describing. For 8 years, possibly?

Yes.

At this time, you're describing to me a life where you're working many hours a day and many evenings. Did you have a family, a partner—how did you do all of this? Did you feel like you were sacrificing anything to do this?

I never felt that way. I got married and had a child 1988, right at the second election at the University of Cincinnati, and it was poorly timed, and it was very stressful. And there were internal political problems inside of SEIU, with 925, that all took place on my watch in Cincinnati while I was on maternity leave. So there was a lot of stress and some ugliness around all of that. I always worked a lot of hours. I always felt like in 925 we had fun, and there was a lot of camaraderie. So I didn't feel like I couldn't have a life. But my life was really—my friends came from that work, it was bound up with that work. So, when I all of a sudden had a family and I had a stepson came into my life around the same time, and felt like I had to figure out—my family was quite integrated into my work. My kids came to meetings. My husband was president of the teacher's union in the same city. We ended up actually being in the same building—our kids wandered around the building a fair amount. But you also did have to get home in a different way than I had previously, and I didn't go out partying at night with the other organizers, and the stuff that I had done when I was younger. And it was always a sort of a logistical challenge, how to balance everything, but I never really felt that it was a sacrifice—I didn't feel like I wasn't able to participate in my children's upbringing—I got to enough soccer games for my taste. We had a lot of practical challenges about how to manage the life of two labor leaders who did a lot of night and weekend work. But I think that especially while we were both mostly based in Cincinnati, it was manageable and it felt like a rich life to me. I did probably work less hours after I had my kids, you know, but I always worked a lot of hours.

In this struggle at the University of Cincinnati, were you ever in a situation where you were asking workers to put their jobs at risk, or were they pretty much protected by the [public] sector bargaining laws?

I think people felt like they were putting their jobs at risk. One of my worst moments during that period of time was in the third contract negotiations, and we were really escalating—we were getting ready to strike on the first day of school. And the strike notice was misdelivered. And it was my fault. Put it in the regular mail instead of certified mail, or something like that. People really were into going out on the first day of school, and if you didn't give the proper 10-day notice, it wasn't a legal strike, and we were in the midst of trying to decide what to do with all of this, and it was a very hard period. And they sent certified letters to every single person's home in the whole bargaining unit, saying, "Your union has called an illegal strike, and if you go out on this strike, you will not be protected under any labor law." And this was in certain ways par for the course for this employer. They scared people about losing their jobs. Now compared to a private sector brutal campaign that we are used to, this was milder; nobody did lose their job for union organizing. But I think people felt like they were taking a big risk, and they were moving way out of their comfort zone. And going on the strikes, and —we, to compensate for not going out the first day of school, which we decided not to do, we decided we were going to do the biggest, most noticeable strike that could ever exist, in 3 days. We called it "the herd." We put all this—

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START of SIDE B of TAPE 1.

--[standing] on a picket line. We struck in very creative ways over 3 days.

So essentially there was a work stoppage for 3 days.

Yes. And each day it was different. But we didn't do it in a traditional way where we were trying to stop scabs from coming in or something. We were trying to really make our case well known through the university community, and came up with a variety of different ways to do that, and to make people feel the power of their numbers. I think in 925, we learned it from the association 9to5, we learned it from community organizations. We were very creative about our tactics; we never felt bound by "this is the way the unions have always done things." So "the herd" I think was one of those where keeping people in groups of two and three hundred, while they're striking, was just hugely powerful for our members.

Can you remember any things that members did in any of these kinds of situations that were particularly courageous?

I really think that when we asked people—for that particular day where we did the herd —we had people go on strike at 10 in the morning which meant they had to go to work—they had students and patients and all sorts of people in front of them—and they had to get up and leave at 10 o'clock. Because what we didn't want is for people to stay home on the strike day. We wanted them to be present, and we knew if we called the strike for 8 a.m., lots of people would just not come to work. And we wanted them to be present. That may not sound so courageous? But they had to be right there with their bosses, with their students, with their patients, with their co-workers, and assert themselves that they were withholding their work. The public speaking, the legal strategies—all of these things I think are very courageous. I think taking the actions that they took, given the backgrounds that they came from, where—we never did a civil disobedience. We actually did some trainings for civil disobedience and never ended up doing that, at least with this group of people.

By this time you are indeed a leader in that situation. Is there anything you can say about your own development as a leader? Did you have thoughts about it? Do you remember [growing] as a leader?

My early days as a rank and file leader of Boston 9to5 resonated my whole life, which was people pushed me to take the next step and take the next step. In 925 that was normal; we were given a lot of responsibility with not that much experience, and we got the experience by doing it, and I never felt like I was abandoned, but we really were encouraged to take on a whole lot of responsibility, as we developed as staff in the union and as leaders in the union. I became good at public speaking only because I had to do a bunch of it; when I was an organizer I didn't do very much at all, because our members do it. I became president of the union in '93 when Karen went to the Department of Labor as the head of the Working Women's Bureau. After '93, I went back to my early days as a rank and file leader and started speaking more. So I think that for all of these

experiences, they just load up on each other. We got used to taking on new things. We made mistakes—I delivered the strike notice wrong—I didn't sleep for two months, and had trouble eating, because I felt so incredibly responsible. And in my early days, I remember a mistake I made—I had published somebody's number on a roster of an organizing committee and it was an unlisted phone number, and I lost a week's sleep over that. You learn by mistakes, and you learn by doing. And I had great teachers, in the union and in the association—I was incredibly lucky in both of those cases.

After you assumed the job as president of District 925 which was by now a national organization, tell us about the responsibilities of that role. What were the variety of things that you had to do, that you were responsible for, as the president of a national union?

I had never aspired to be the president of a national union. Karen was our president; she was our founding president; she was a young woman, she was our president. And nobody thought she was going anywhere. And when she decided to leave and go with the Clinton administration, it was a shock to all of our systems. She's all I ever knew as a union president, and she was brilliant. She was an unbelievable speaker, she was visionary, she knew how to play in the women's policy world; she was an incredible spokesperson, she was all that big picture brilliance. And so it never occurred to me that I would ever succeed somebody like that, because that's not how I saw myself. I saw myself as a detailed, one-worker-at-a-time, get my list right, put people together kind of organizer, and not that kind of a national leader in any way. I had never been to a board meeting of 925, because as staff we didn't go to the board meetings. So I didn't even know the other board members. They asked me to fill out Karen's term, and I was very surprised.

Through an appointment process, you mean?

Yes. [laughs] I was very surprised, but I had had a very long history of never saying no to this organization. When I didn't want to speak at the first national secretaries' day event, I didn't say no, because the organization needed me to do it, and I had never said no. So I guess it didn't even really occur to me to say no, but it was something that I felt quite unprepared for, I would say. So in the end I think I did the job very differently than Karen did. Something I learned earlier in my career which is that my first organizer with the union 925 was Cheryl Schaffer, who was the most unbelievable organizer, and brilliant, and tough—an incredible organizer. That's when I was working at the insurance company, and she was my organizer. And when I became an organizer, I thought I needed to be just like Cheryl. And Cheryl is a powerful presence in every way, and I am small and perky. And for a while, I kept thinking I was a failure because I wasn't getting close to being Cheryl. And I think it took me a while to realize that the most important thing when you're an organizer is to be real and genuine and that you had to be yourself. So I figured that as I took over from Karen, that there was no way I could be the same kind of president that Karen was. We were at a different stage with SEIU when I took over as president, and one of my top priorities was making sure that we could be

completely independent from SEIU and not rely on any subsidy from them, and I took that very seriously—I wanted us to have an organizing program that we funded ourself—

And why was that—why did that matter so much?

Because we'd had great years, with lots of support from SEIU, and we'd had dark years with a withdrawal of support from SEIU, and I felt responsible for our members, that we not have to rely on that. That if we got extra organizing subsidies or any kind of extra anything from SEIU, that was a great thing. But that we would not rely on that. We had started organizing by being open to organize anywhere in the country, and that became very expensive to service. So in the first couple of years I was national president I was sort of focused on getting ourselves very stable. And said we wouldn't organize any more except for in the four cities where we had big conglomerations of members; we would get ourselves financially independent—we raised dues. So a lot of that kind of work, which wasn't the sort of issue work, it wasn't public work, but I felt like it was organizational work that really needed to happen. And then I did have to go to the different cities where our members were and be president and do that; that part actually was always fun, just to be with our members. Really trying to put an organizing program together and figure out what could start to really work. We made a decision to try doing child care organizing in Seattle. We'd been around child care workers, because we were sort of the women's union, we'd bumped into them elsewhere but we had really never made a decision to really spread our jurisdiction there. We decided to do that, and that was a process with the national executive board—and really figuring out how to lead that board when they did not know me.

And the national executive board really is the national executive board of District 925.

Yes.

And were you also, as president of 925, on the International's executive board?

Not automatically. Karen had been on the international's executive board, SEIU's executive board. When she left, I came to Washington D.C., asked to meet with President Sweeney and Secretary-Treasurer [Cortz]; and asked to be put on the executive board, and offered that I had a lot to contribute, etc. etc. They did put me on the board—it was Sweeney's last meeting as president of SEIU before he declared that he was running for president of the AFL-CIO, so I got on the board in '95. And so at that time, I had three jobs, which is I was the national president of District 925, I was the regional director of the union in Cincinnati, so I was still basically coordinating our bargaining and organizing in Cincinnati, and then I served on the international's executive board.

And do they meet quite a lot, the executive boards?

SEIU's executive board meets twice a year, and District 925's executive board...I think also met twice a year. So not very frequently.

Were there issues that you had to deal with, with the president of SEIU, as the president of District 925, that are memorable or important for this story of the legacy of 925?

I was also on the SEIU public division board, and so I was active there. We tried to—I'm trying to think about the answer to that—what did I deal with Sweeney or—well, see, Sweeney was just leaving. So Andy Stern was the president. Really around our organizing program is where we mostly interacted, where we really had to come and make a pitch. I remember making the pitch on child care. Actually the person I had to go really pitch it too was Tom [Woodruff] who was the organizing director of SEIU under Andy Stern. And he was completely against it. Completely against it. They never stopped us from doing it, but they wouldn't really fund it. It was a center-based project that we were trying to make happen in Washington State. We always were interested in the home-based child care workers too, but we had our first foot in on center-based. Now some decade later, SEIU's doing huge important projects in home-based childcare, so I like to think that we helped plow those fields so that the seeds could grow up now, but there really wasn't an interest in that. So it was those sorts of things that I would have to interact with.

Do you think lack of interest had anything to do with it being such female work?

No. I think they couldn't figure out how you would raise standards in that industry. That there wasn't enough money. It was all these little small centers. They couldn't see their way to winning for those workers. And—

And you could see a way to improve the lives of those workers?

We did. But I think...yes. We did. We didn't have the same sort of vision that the current home childcare organizing has figured out. And I think we couldn't have. I think the experience SEIU had organizing home health care workers led to figuring out how to do the home child care. It wasn't like we had ugly fights. I think they just declined. And we went ahead and—they gave us some support for the Seattle work, but very little. So we would have those kinds of interactions. Mostly, we were members of the board and of these division steering committees and those kinds of things. There wasn't...like us petitioning. We were sort of part of a group that was trying to figure out, under a new president, how to direct this union.

What issues about diversity and racial difference came up in your organizing in 9to5 or 925?

What I remember in Boston in 9to5, is that at least at the period I was there, that black women weren't even really in the clerical work force. That when we would walk past the John Hancock building into the 9to5 office, you would see all these white women streaming out of the John Hancock building, who are working class white women doing clerical work, and lining up to go into the elevators to clean the buildings were all black

women. And so we used to just be miserable that we were too white of an organization, but it had something to do with the workforce, which I also think in Seattle is to a certain extent true. We always took it as a given, that to build an organization, you had to have the same diversity in your leadership and your staff as existed in the workforce. And that was much easier to do—in Ohio, we had a pretty big black workforce in both Cleveland and Cincinnati. As a complete generality...we did a lot of organizing, house visits, one-on-ones, black workers were much more open to the union. They were much more free of racism, so that as a white woman, I could organize black workers pretty easily. It didn't feel like there was a chasm there. They didn't want to come into an organization that was all white, but they didn't really care that me, the person who happened to approach them that day, was white. It was not a problem. We had more problems the other way around: that if you had a white workforce and a black organizer, you'd have more difficulty. So in terms of being pro-union, I don't think we ever had problems in terms of—and for the most part, in Cincinnati and Cleveland, it was really just white and black—there wasn't Latino, there wasn't much Asian. We never really had problems on getting support from black workers when it was time to go on strike, when it was time to the sign the cards. We never got up to the proportions we needed in the top leadership of the union. But we always had an integrated staff; we insisted on integrated executive boards, even though democracy sometimes would get in the way of the staff's desires. But we worked very hard to recruit people to run. It wasn't ever perfect, but it worked ok. We had a lot of rich experience about black and white workers who really worked together on the union, and got some very different perspectives than they had before they were in the union. Just as we had with Democrats and Republicans. There's a lot of Republicans in Cincinnati and in the clerical workforce, among the white workers. The union was a place that was really neutral on this. Especially the strong leaders in the union, as we started to educate people about issues, candidates, so on, we were able to get people to cross over lines on voting. But part of it was just people trusting the organization enough to be open to hearing from each other, and getting the information.

So you did in your union work in Cincinnati do that kind of political education?

Yes.

You did support candidates?

Yes.

And support work around public policy campaigns that were relevant for the union?

Yes, absolutely. We don't have the same constraints as 9to5, as a 501c3 would. So we can endorse candidates, work for them, and we did.

You've already talked some about 925 as a—not so much about 925 as a family-friendly organization, or at least your own experiences combining this hard professional organizing work with parenting. So let's not waste time with that,

unless you have anything you want to say about it. Did you have to do any educating of the national leadership of SEIU about being more family-friendly around board meetings or anything like that?

No. We would try a lot of things in 925, offering childcare at meetings, and things like that. Truthfully, among clerical workers, they mostly never took us up on it. Childcare workers did—we always had a gang of kids at every meeting. But in the clerical workforce they didn't. And a lot of young mothers would not be very active in the union. You'd find lunchtime ways for them to do it, but they really just had too many responsibilities that they had to leave and go do. I was fortunate in that I had a husband who was a full partner. We knew because of the two different kinds of—the lifestyle that we had with our jobs, that we had to pay babysitters, so we had always a sort of mini-army of teenagers available to help us out. So we had a set up. And I never felt like I had to educate anybody at SEIU, but this is a local union issue, and not really a national union issue, I think.

During this period, when you were so active in Ohio, what other kinds of activism was going on in the community? Do you remember, and did other organizations ever appeal to you for support for their activities? Maybe that wasn't something that was on everybody's radar screen, but...

The progressive community in Cincinnati, Ohio, in the '80s was a pretty small thing. We knew what each other were doing. There was a pretty vibrant homeless coalition, that we actually worked with together on a big fight about the privatization of our public hospital. We really staffed and really put 925 and SEIU on the city map in a different way than we ever been before, because we did a lot of work in coalition with other organizations. They had a great organization. There was a Citizen Action organization and they always had some campaign going on. There wasn't a lot of organizing going on during those days. And I was never tempted to leave the union to go to another organization that seemed like it had it more together.

In your opinion, were the aims of 925 realized?

We built a very good union for our members. We won considerable improvements for them. Those are organizations that I hope will last forever. Differences that we made in those women's lives that will last forever. And in that, it was a success.

It never got the size that we wanted to be; we never got into the private sector, which is what those of us who came in in the early years intended. And so in that, I would say we didn't meet our goals.

We helped create a very progressive organizing union inside of—at SEIU. We knew organizing, and having more members come into your union was what you did, what unions did. There were hardly any other local unions at SEIU that believed that. They believed their job was the representation part. We always knew that organizing was the lifeblood of the union. And we took seriously our responsibility to be part of a leadership core inside of SEIU that would move that agenda, and I think we succeeded at that.

What impact, beyond what you just said, did 925 have on SEIU, do you think? Any other impacts?

I think being a basic organizing union. There are a lot of things that we knew from the day we started 925 about how to build organization; about diversity of leadership and staff to reflect the membership; about how to talk about issues. I remember going to a training sometime in the '90s of hospital workers at SEIU. And they did this whole fancy Power Point; they'd gotten consultants and everybody else to try to teach organizers how to talk to professionals—that you can't rip up their direct supervisor; you can't tell them how oppressed they are; how you have to talk about issues in certain ways, that we had always done in organizing office workers. So I don't know exactly what the chicken and the egg on that is, but I think that when we came into SEIU, we didn't feel so at home. And I think that 925—you could ask Kim this question—feels more at home in SEIU. SEIU is more like us. Which direction that is, and who can take credit for what—I think that we helped build a very strong progressive movement, and I think that we helped make changes in the whole labor movement as well. Karen going to the AFL and lots of other people that were founders and helped build 925 are sprinkled all over and take that experience with them.

Do you have anything that you'd like to add about what being an organizer and leader in 925 means in your life, or meant in your life, I guess we need to say?

I grew up with 925. It's what turned me into an adult. It had a huge impact on me personally. [laughs] I was shy and not very confident; somehow or other when I was doing work for this organization, I lost those things, and I was very glad to lose them. It was surprising to me to be altered by an organization and to have really what I consider the basics of me altered by my activism.

You were also earning a living doing something you loved to do—

Yes, it's a great thing. It is a great thing, to be able to earn a living do work that you think is this important.

The other thing that I loved about especially being in the local union is what variety of tasks I had in a given day, and how much different expertise you were able to get, so you know how to do the media and write the leaflet and do the research and do the politics and bargain the contract and organize workers and go down to the NLRB and fight a case. It was an enormous opportunity to have a job with that much variety, that does such good. And the many days that you feel like you're not making a big enough difference and it's not working well enough, you can take comfort at least in knowing that you're doing work that is good work, and it's interesting work, even if the success isn't clear every single day.

Since you've said, and we've observed, that one of the aspects of the legacy of 925 is that it has created these many women leaders who are working throughout the labor

movement, I'd like to conclude with a question about the position you have now in SEIU, and what that means to you and what you're going to be doing with that job. (I'm going to put a new tape in.)

END of SIDE B of TAPE 1.
START of SIDE A of TAPE 2.

Tell me something about the job you have now with SEIU. What's it called? What do you expect to be doing?

I started a job in November of 2004 at SEIU that had never existed at SEIU before. It's title is the director of global organizing partnerships. The concept behind the job is that our members work for companies that are no longer based in a community; they're not even based in this country—they're multinational. Our members, especially who work in property service, who are janitors and security officers, all work for big multinationals. The people who work for food service work for big multinationals. And we're trying to figure out, as much as the companies have figured out how to meet their goals by crossing borders almost seamlessly, how the unions figure out to meet their goals for their members by crossing borders as well. The trade union movement is really quite split up by countries. Trying to figure out how to deal with these employers with other unions that share them is our job; to get those employers and those industries unionized where they're not; to have a coordinated effort to raise standards for those workers across borders. So that's my job, and I've been at it for about a year.

Can you give an example of any meetings you've had with unions in other countries yet, or are you just laying the groundwork for it?

We've done a lot of groundwork laying. We've met with unions in about 15 different countries in our industries. We're working with two global union federations—one for food service and one for property service, which is the natural place where unions from different countries come together by sector to create global organizing plans which really had never existed before, and so, that's a lot of our effort, trying to make those plans with the global union federations, to work with unions that we've met with, unions in other countries; to make those plans a reality. And we are off to a very good start. But it is an awesome proposition.

And this effort is going to be mostly about organizing new workers, right?

Yes.

It's not servicing [workers] already there—

It's about organizing new workers but also trying to figure out how to deal with these multinationals on raising standards for workers. But if the companies remain mostly non-union worldwide, you just don't have much of a chance in that conversation. So it's both

of the things. It's really getting more workers in those industries into unions, and then having a strategy with those partner unions about how to raise standards.

Are a lot of the workers we're talking about here, women workers, in many of these industries?

They are, but I must say that as I waded into this world, it reminded me of going to my first Labor Council meetings in Chicago or Cincinnati in the 80s, because—I'd walk into a room and be the only woman, especially at the executive board level of those labor councils. Even though many of those unions were substantially female workers. That's what it feels like mostly. I'm mostly meeting with men, even though they represent women workers, because that's sort of the state of their union movements as well. So it is a little bit of déjà vu, but yes, mostly these food service workers are almost all women. The security guards are men. But the cleaners are a lot women and interestingly enough, they are immigrant workers—the cleaners, all over the world.

They come from someplace else.

They come from someplace else. So we have a lot of experience with organizing immigrant workers that we've been sharing. It is really fascinating work.

The reason we're doing this legacy project is because SEIU 925 came to an end in 2001, I believe. You were president, then, right?

Yes.

You were involved in those mergers. Tell us about it.

By the end of the 90s, discussions had started in SEIU about what it really takes to have a good strong local union. I was on a committee before the 2000 SEIU convention called the President's Committee 2000, which was really trying to come up with a platform for that convention. And there was a lot of work done on what really makes a powerful local union. There was the inability, really, in District 925 to get to a certain size in each of our four cities—we had decided in the mid 90s to only focus in those four cities—we had never been able to get to critical mass, which I felt was 10,000 in each city, to really be able to staff up in the way that you could really have a sophisticated organizing program, political program, communications program. And we didn't see it.

The other thing that became clear was SEIU was moving much more to a divisional structure by sector. We were still an occupational union that was national—I knew that fit wasn't going to go very well for very long. We were a very good union inside of SEIU, and nobody was out to break us up. Because we've ended up being 95% a public employees union, having a state operation that had a serious political program meant a lot, that being able to really have our members be in one state where they could help each other on important battles—budget battles in particular because we were publicly funded —our members in Boston couldn't really add to the power of our members in Seattle,

because of who we ended up organizing, and how we ended up after 20 years. And this was an important question. If our members in Boston couldn't really add to the power of our members in Seattle, why were they in the same local? We had done things like, we had all subsidized the Seattle chapter while they were an open shop for almost ten years —the rest of the country had—until they got their union shop fair share agreement. Then the Seattle people helped subsidize the Boston chapters. So there were different ways that we helped each other. We tried to have certain kinds of economies of scale. But it was very hard to do when we were 10,000 in four different cities.

We made a decision to explore changing that structure. To try to really figure out how we could get the kind of powerful local in the communities where each of our members lived and worked, and dared to ask ourselves the question about whether this national local was going to be as successful for the next 20 years for our members as it had been for the first 20. And some of that was about getting ahead of what we saw coming in SEIU, and wanting to make sure that we were in the driver's seat on any kind of change in our structure. So we started conversations first among the senior staff of District 925 and then among the executive board about whether we would look at a restructure, and people felt like it was important to review our structure and decide what to do. And in the end, that leadership group did decide that we would explore getting all of our members into public sector unions of 10,000 or more that were in their own states. Really a lot around the politics of that. And in the end we did a long retreat—maybe a 3-day retreat. People talked about it at a convent in northern Kentucky with our staff and our executive board...

Which is about how many people?

25, 30—to really make this decision. And the decision was taken. We had a lot of criteria about partner locals—how we would decide if we would merge or have them merge into us, and how would we restructure. So it took a couple of years to do it and to do it right, and it was all finalized by June of 2001. I think we started the process some time in '99.

And you're saying when that happened, the total membership of District 925 was about 10,000?

Was about 10,000, and in Boston our members went to the major public local there. In Ohio our members went to the biggest union in Ohio, but it was also a big public sector—they had about 5000 public workers, we had about 4000, but they were a huge union—that was also health care workers. And in the state of Washington, the opposite happened, which is that other smaller public locals—we were the biggest public local in Washington state—so other public locals from SEIU that were smaller—school board locals, things like that—merged into 925, and so we were able to keep the name. 925 went from being 10,000 to being 10,000 really. We went from being national 10,000 to Washington State 10,000 almost overnight.

Sort of a satisfactory balance in the end. Was it a really difficult decision for some people? Did they feel like something—

I think it was a really difficult decision for those of us who had been with 925 on a staff level for a long time. I think our regular members, and even our activists, didn't feel that kind of nostalgia. They wanted to be in the strongest union possible; they looked to the leadership, to this executive board and to our staff leadership to help judge what that would be; and when we made a unanimous recommendation that this would strengthen our members' power at the bargaining table and with their legislatures, people, I think, felt comfortable following that recommendation. I think that for some of us it was a very hard personal decision. But I think that analytically, it was not difficult.

You can say it freed up some people, to do some [other] interesting things in the labor movement, other capacities?

[laughs] You could.

Ok. Thank you! All done.

END of INTERVIEW