Robert Welsh and Jonathan Hiatt
Interviewed by Ann Froines
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AFL-CIO Headquarters, Washington, D.C.

I'm interviewing the two of you today in AFL-CIO headquarters, Washington D.C., November 3, 2005. If first Jon and then next Bob could just briefly describe your positions now in the AFL-CIO.

Jon: I'm general counsel for the AFL-CIO.

Which means--?

Jon: Which means I direct the legal department and the legal affairs at the Federation, and then I head up the organization of the union lawyers that represent the AFL-CIO unions around the country.

Bob: And I'm the executive assistant to the president—chief of staff of the AFL-CIO.

And that means basically you're—

Bob: I close my door each day and hope that things will go away. [laughs]

You're sort of the link between the president and everything else that's happening.

Bob: Sort of the circuit breaker. [laughs]

Jon, what was your first contact with 925? In Boston.

Jon: I'm not sure I can tell you what my very first contact was.

The one you remember.

Jon: I represented a number of small SEIU local unions that were getting started back in the 70s. Locals headed up by former community organizers who had gotten charters from SEIU, [all] from the International, to organize health care workers, home care workers, jewelry workers, clerical workers, and others. One of these locals headed up by former community organizers was an outgrowth of what had been 9to5 , and was headed up by Karen Nussbaum and Jackie Ruff, in the form of SEIU Local 925, and their charter was to organize clerical workers. I was the Local's attorney.

What kind of thing did you do with them? Do you remember the first work you had to actually do for them?

Jon: There were a number of the employers, several small publishing companies, I think, whose employees they were organizing. I helped them with collective bargaining, with grievance handling, with some of their own governance issues—getting a local off the ground. And then also with university employees, a little bit later on, not right at the very beginning. There were a couple of major organizing campaigns: Harvard and Tufts University employees, Boston University clerical employees or librarians. And actually a third category that they were very active in was library employees—university and public library employees around the Boston metropolitan area in particular.

Ok, great. And Bob, what was your first contact with 925?

Bob: John Sweeney was the president of SEIU. He took over as president in June of 1980. I had been the executive assistant to the president—the predecessor, George Hardy, for about 7 or 8 years. I negotiated the affiliation agreement with Karen Nussbaum and her [folks] to bring 9to5 into SEIU as one of our local unions—a national union of clerical workers, the idea was. 9to5 , the predecessor organization, had been ongoing for several years at that time. They had been one of the major organizations to try to transition much of the feminist activity into the workplace, not just around discrimination issues but around bargaining, and moving toward a collective bargaining model. And Karen knew that SEIU had a fairly progressive reputation nationally, although I think her relationship at the local level in Boston, and Jon should speak to this, was different. There were lots of different actors in Boston at the time [as] part of SEIU.

You mean the relation of 925, with other SEIU locals?

Bob: Other SEIU locals, yes.

Were there some specific controversies that came up that you remember?

Bob: Oh yeah.

Jon: What year did you negotiate—

Bob: What year did 925 get chartered?

Early 80s?

Bob: It was early 80s but I'm not sure what year it was. I think it was '82 or something.

I have to look [up this] anyway. Was it a complicated negotiation bringing them in?

Bob: SEIU brought in a lot of independent organizations as unions. We brought in dozens and dozens and dozens, from very small ones to very, very large ones. Unions like the California State Employees Association—80,000 members. At the time, 9to5 had a couple of contracts in Boston, as Jon said. They had a couple of publishing houses, I believe; they were organizing at the universities, I think at Tufts; they were—the key

person I dealt with in addition to Karen was their attorney, who was here. I can't remember his name. [Tom Asher]. He was the premier 501c3 attorney for the left wing. Karen knows the answer. But he and Karen and I negotiated this. 9to5 was given the charter as District 925, not Local 925.

They had a national jurisdiction.

Bob: The idea was they had a national jurisdiction, but that they would create chapters of District 925 in different places. And they had—their idea was to build on the 9to5 chapters, and try to transition those chapters into unions. That's a very long story about why that worked and didn't work in different places, and today you can look at these organizations and see where they are. But at the beginning, you know, it was folks like Karen, and Jackie Ruff, as Jon mentioned, who's also an old colleague of ours, was active. And others. And 9to5, as we always called it, always ran sort of parallel to the union, in many ways. Eventually SEIU in 1984, at our convention in 1984, we created for the first time formal industry divisions to represent the major bulk of our membership. The biggest one was our public sector division. We had a health care division, a building service division, [with an] industrial and allied division; then we had a clerical division. The clerical division was primarily District 925, but it also had other unions that represented clerical employees, especially university clerical and school secretaries in the city of Boston itself. Jon will remember this—there was a long time union of school secretaries in the Boston city schools, both at the administrative building in the school system, but also in the schools themselves, who bargained for years and years independently. Karen came into SEIU just as SEIU was sort of exploding into a broad and aggressive organization under John Sweeney. And we had at the time an immense amount of optimism about the organization of women, what I believe at one point in the early 80s we called the pink collar workforce, and thought at the time that the future was hundreds of thousands of folks joining the union through this mechanism. But that was the original plan. I can't remember the year exactly.

It says '81-'83 in the timeline, District 925 charter, District 925, SEIU, national jurisdiction. So it was definitely very early 80s.

Bob: Well, of course, the things that John Sweeney did...

Since your time is limited, I'd like to get to both of your reactions about how to characterize 925's approach to organizing. Do you think it was different than other locals, in your experience?

Bob: It was much more attuned to looking at the workforce through the eyes of women workers. And the fact that they had issues, and priority issues, that were not always the same as male workers. And that whole debate inside the labor movement I think was a healthy one. Issues of respect and dignity. Issues of work flexibility. Issues of sexual harassment and so forth. Those were all issues that were in the debate about the workplace at the time. But traditional unions were often sort of ham-handed, or at least seemed that way—I think many of the unions did a very good job—the United

Autoworkers, as an example, did spectacular work in this area, as did some of the building trades, in fact. But 925 certainly believed, because it was a union for women workers, run by women workers, that it had the ability to see the world in a different way, and that that would lead to building power through the affinity of women to the organization, certainly.

Jon, you met Karen very early on. What were your impressions of her as a leader? Do you remember?

Jon: I remember she was a natural leader. I believe I knew and worked with her certainly before the SEIU charter, when they had already set out the union version of 9to5, which I think was just called Local 925--

Bob: Right. That's correct.

Jon: --before they affiliated with SEIU. And I think I was already representing them when they were independent and before the affiliation with SEIU. And Karen was someone who had tremendous personal magnetism and really a very well thought-out, developed world view and understanding of the working women issues. She had her own personal experience to—she just drew on that a good deal, and very effectively. She was also very good at mobilizing community support, which was before—I think she was one of the pioneers, at least in this generation, of people who went back to really trying to bring—work in community alliances into the labor movement. She was very effective at doing that.

Bob: I think Karen's major contribution, it seems to me, when the history is written about social movements and so forth, is that she saw issues that were critically important for women—she saw them first of all as being solvable by solving workplace issues, at solving it through unionization and collective bargaining. There was a lot of work going on by lots of good folks, but they were doing things like public policy, passing the Equal Rights Amendment—important work in the public, but traditional political work. Or they were very much focused, I believe, much more on individual issues—discrimination against individuals, and so forth. Karen clearly saw that what was needed, among other things, was to create the unionization in the areas where women were predominantly the workforce. And the clerical workforce was the first wave of that. It wasn't the only one. The other big movement at the time we were involved, was among registered nurses. And we had many of the same kinds of activists as at SEIU and other unions who were organizing there, but in a sense nurses was an easier thing to think about, because they were professionals, they were certified, they were trained, and so forth, and so they came...And other workers in the hospital industry were organized. It seemed to me that Karen's contribution here is to look at these issues and say that what we need here is a union, in these workplaces. A union that is for women and about their issues, and can be a different kind of union. And that certainly was the idea at the time, 25 years ago, when we talked about it.

Because the two of you were at the high levels of SEIU, you are each in a good position, I think, to comment on maybe one of the controversies about bringing 925 into SEIU. How did other locals view them? I think this is part of the history that they are interested in getting at—their position within SEIU.

Bob: I don't think there was any controversy at all about bringing them in. First of all, they were organizing workers that were not being organized by anybody else. When they went after Equitable Life Assurance Company, one of the big champions they had in fact was the head of the Eastern Conference of SEIU at the time, Walter Butler. And Walter was a big champion of this—he got them involved in the damn Equitable Life Assurance fight. [laughs] So there clearly were folks who were champions of them.

I think that there was probably a little bit of...interaction in the Boston SEIU labor movement, because Karen—it wasn't that Karen was organizing clerical workers—Karen was a new generation of activist, coming out of the New Left, essentially. And folks came to SEIU from many different places. I came out of community organizing through religious community organizing; many other folks came through anti-poverty and welfare rights and so forth; through the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement, and they got involved with the unions in different ways. And Boston was a place where there were lots and lots of activists who came this way. And I think that, looking back and thinking about the people she—at the time, they sort of bumped elbows with—I think of Eddie Sullivan, who was..

Who was a traditional trade unionist.

Bob: Eddie Sullivan was a traditional smart tough Irish trade unionist, who I admired greatly. He happened to represent all the universities in Boston, who were the janitors, and some food services and so forth. Never tried to organize clericals a lot—he didn't think they were possible to organize. For one thing he thought they were very much a workforce that was transient, that were a lot of students and so forth, and he'll stick to the Irish guys who were cleaning up the classrooms at the end of the day. So I think some of what happened was a generational interaction between some leaders, and had nothing to do with the fact that they were organizing clerical workers. The idea of women leaders in general, at the time, was a big issue inside the labor movement.

As it was in the New Left.

Bob: And in SEIU we had a lot of the same kinds of fights. Having John Sweeney, when he was elected for the first time, put the first woman vice-president on the SEIU executive board: Rosemary Trump. A Boston activist, in fact, ran our local in Pittsburgh, a social worker, coming out of that background, he promoted her as a vice-president, a senior vice-president, and so forth. A woman like [Eleanor Glenn], who comes out of the old left, in Los Angeles, a passionate Marjorie Morningstar—she's the model for Marjorie Morningstar. A lot of African American women coming in.

But at the time that Karen came in, she sort of intersected the generational New Left and the women's issue at the same time, and in some ways became for a little bit sort of the paragon of that. Which is unfair to her; she was somebody trying to build a little clerical union here—she didn't have bigger ambitions and so forth at the time.

Jon: There were other layers to that too, which was that because Karen made her mark and had become known before the transition to the union work as the head of 9to5, I think it raised questions, both genuine questions and disingenuous questions among some of the traditional labor people [about] was this person a real trade unionist or not. I think one of Karen's strengths was actually keeping 9to5 going, and using it as a..

Bob: Ballast.

Jon: a ballast to the union work that was going on. In fact, to some degree it was a model for what the union itself did internally later on in other industries, and some unions were already doing. But because of that, I think it gave an excuse to people who were raising questions, both sexist driven but also not sexist driven. But a lot of what Bob's describing I think was as much a generational thing as it was anything personally about Karen or even about the women's movement. Because there were a number of other new generation trade unionists who were starting in Boston at that time, from New Left backgrounds, and were equally—maybe not equally, but certainly there was the same kind of tension between them and the Eddie Sullivans.

Bob: Sure. And Bill Pastreich.

Jon: Gerry Shea.

Bob: Gerry Shea.

Jon: And some of these people did—

Bob: Nancy Mills.

Jon: --did better than others in terms of trying to bridge that gradually.

Do you think 925 had an impact on SEIU as a whole, over time?

Jon: Bob?

Bob: It certainly was part of a mosaic of change that brought in lots of new blood and lots of new leadership. It was a component of that. There were larger and more components of it. The two most important of those was the merger of 1199—the long fight to get 1199 inside SEIU. And that's a very long story by itself. And the affiliation of dozens and dozens of independent public sector unions, from the very large ones, like the California state employees, to the smaller ones. But I think the essential point to make about 925, it seems to me, from a historical point of view, is that the model that it had,

which is an organization for clerical workers—an occupational model, not an industrial model—it's not a health care union, it's not a public sector union, it's an occupational union. It started out that way—it moved beyond clerical workers to other things. But that model in the end didn't work. But it was hard to organize folks as clericals, without thinking of them essentially as industry. And in fact 925's successes were almost entirely in the public sector. We had lots of unions that had many, many more clerical workers in them than 925 did.

Jon: Let me make two points though, and see what you think about this. One is, that they were trying to organize, as you pointed out earlier, among employers where there was tremendous resistance to unionization. Not that there wasn't in general, but this was late '70s, early '80s. It wasn't as taken for granted that there would be across the board employer resistance as there is today. But in their industry, in their sector, it was almost universally that they were up against tremendous employer resistance in units where employers felt that their managerial prerogatives had been the rule. So I think they were up against what today would seem to be very typical, but not that long ago--

Bob: I agree.

Jon: --still 20, 25 years ago, was more than the norm.

Secondly, they were doing that at a time that unions, and particularly SEIU which led the way, hadn't yet developed some of the organizing tools that today would perhaps make the kind of organizing that they were doing much easier.

Bob: I agree completely.

Jon: What we loosely call the corporate campaigns. Equitable was an amazing—it was just such an exception to the rule...Whereas today, Equitable, big deal, there's a whole research department that goes into motion, and you don't just deal with the workers on the ground, you deal with finding the vulnerabilities of the employer and so on and so forth. Whereas partly because this was the 925 orientation, but partly because it was the main model that unions had at the time, and SEIU had at the time, they were just doing the on-the-ground organizing, the retail organizing among the workers. And today it would be more of a combination of the two. And it might have taken off more today.

Bob: I think the other variable here which has to be thought through is, did the model fail because it was under-resourced and not given a chance, or did it fail because as Jon said, it certainly met—at least in the sense of two sides of the same coin—it met an enormous amount of opposition. The Equitable fight was a classic one. We threw a lot of stuff into that; John Sweeney was personally involved, meeting with what's his name, the president of Equitable Life at the time, I forget his name. We had a big public campaign against Equitable; it became for a year or so a very high profile symbolic organizing effort.

Is this the one in Syracuse?

Bob: Yes. The Syracuse—

They won the election, right?

Bob: Yeah, they won the election.

And then the company closed the office.

Bob: Sure. It was a claims processing unit of a couple of dozen people. But it was a hot shop that we got and we said, oh, great, we'll do Syracuse—and this is because of Walter Butler, by the way, the head of SEIU in the east coast, was in Syracuse, that's where he was from, and I think he started this up. But I remember when the movie "Nine to Five" came out. And we did a reception here in Washington with Jane Fonda and so forth. And I thought to myself, if you could just catch the wave here. If you could really get a popular movement of women feeling that they could self-organize in their workplaces, and really standing up and taking control and doing this, then maybe we could provide enough of a structure and leadership and a little bit of resource to it, that would allow you to take that wave and move it.

But SEIU had lots of other demands on its resources at the time, and we were a low per capita tax (?) organization. So we really gave—every dime was an important investment for us. And at the time, the return on your investment was much greater in the health sector and public sector fields, and later on, in the late 80s, after we had revised our janitor's work, in the janitorial and building service area. So I'm not sure if it's fair to say that this was a failure of a model or anything, but it certainly, inside the SEIU system, it didn't blossom in dozens and dozens of places. We ended up having 4 or 5 or 6 925 chapters that survived. And there were almost no other unions, except for the Office and Professional Employees Union, that really had this jurisdiction.

That relationship is probably worth a footnote in all this, and someone ought to interview whoever can recall this from the OPEIU side of things, who was head of OPEIU at the time. But I know that OPEIU was not happy that SEIU was sort of getting into their business. And OPEIU itself, to us, was sort of an old-fashioned union that didn't have the ability to do this. We were bigger and so forth.

I think I'll move to [ ]—

Someone's voice: Excuse me, Mr. Sweeney's going to call back in about 5 minutes to talk with you, Jon.

Ok, this will be a final question then. How would you describe the legacy of 925? ... It's related to what you've been discussing about whether their aims were realized, but...

Jon: While I'm thinking about that, I'll mention one other thing which—

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Jon: --should be understood is the associate membership piece. As unions in the mid to late '80s and early '90s were experimenting with different forms of associate membership, the SEIU worked out what at the time and really I think was one of the larger experiments of affiliating 9to5 as an associate membership organization to SEIU. And having the members of 9 TO 5 en masse become associate members of the union. That too was I think something that never reached its full potential. I haven't talked to Karen about this in a long time, but it would be—especially given what Karen's doing now and so on, so she's been thinking about it a lot. I don't think either we or they did a particularly effective job of figuring out how to...a lot of effort went into it, but we weren't all that successful in figuring out how to really make the most of the associate member relationships that could be bringing more people in from 9to5 into the labor movement that way.

Bob: I would answer the legacy question by saying that 925 was probably a primary, or certainly one of the major avenues of entrance for young women activists into the labor movement. And it changed the labor movement because of that. It was a way to diversify quickly, because people were actually being given real responsibility as organizers and leaders, as opposed to coming in and doing policy and research and so forth. These were front line organizers. And she created a generation of folks who felt that they were labor activists, was what their calling was. And I think that when Bill Clinton was elected president in 1992 and they came in, Bob Reich stole two of our best staff—they stole Karen Nussbaum to become head of the Women's Bureau, and they stole [Gerry Palast] to become the assistant secretary of labor for legislation and government affairs. And if you look across the labor movement at where would you would tap high ranking experienced women leaders, there were only a small number of unions that you could look to. Because the other unions, not that they didn't have a lot of women leaders, but they were older unions and it took a while for women to go up the ladder. Here we were essentially opening up to a bunch of very young women, and quickly giving them responsibility and quickly moving them at a very high level of responsibility.

Jon: And what I would say goes back to one of the first points Bob made, which is that it also took a lot of issues that had been seen as women's issues that had been until then largely in a framework of individual rights, and it helped have them redefined or at least refocused as collective rights. Including glass ceiling issues, comparable worth issues, other wage disparity issues, harassment and other discrimination issues, all of which had been, in a policy context and media context, seen largely as individual rights, and the push for them as individual rights. I think one of 925's major legacies was helping to redefine those issues as collective rights.

Do you think those kinds of issues will still continue to be defined sufficiently in the labor movement without something like 925?

Bob: I think in fact one of the legacies is that they are. That in fact, 925 was not the catalyst, but it was certainly part of a series of things and became a catalyst to changing the labor movement to take into account the different needs of different kinds of workers in bargaining and so forth.

Although to this day, many unions are still very much...have focus on priorities that are much more shifted towards full-time male heads of household, staying in a job for 20 or 30 years, as opposed to a labor market where you move around and have to leave for family responsibilities and so forth. But all of the issues that SEIU pushed—flex time, and family medical leave—all those things were done because we were being pushed, by lots of activists and leaders inside of our own organization, a core of whom came out of the 925 experience, others came out of health care backgrounds or public sector backgrounds.

Jon: I would add to that that the labor movement in many ways is a microcosm of society as a whole. And one area where I think it's particularly true is how what had been seen 20 or 30 years ago as women's issues, are somewhat more, though not enough, seen as workers' issues and/or societal issues. And I think Karen and 925 get a lot of credit for having in the labor context pushed a lot of the women's issues to be seen, even by the more traditional unions, as worker issues. There still is a long way to go, but it is a lot better in that respect than it was before efforts like 925.

Bob: Right. A good example of that is when we did the lawsuit—I think it was an LA County lawsuit?

Jon: Uh huh. With Winn Newman.

Bob: With Winn Newman. Trying to apply—and Jon should jump in here quickly—I'm not an attorney—to gender issues what had been done with racial discrimination. It was a visionary kind of a strategy. But it was taking a lot of the work that women had been doing at the time in this area, and trying to move it into a union context. And having the union be the organization which was the advocate for folks, especially in the employment discrimination area.

It sounds like a good place to end, if you really need to go to your call.

Jon: [I believe so.]

Five minutes have definitely passed. Thank you so much.

Bob: Thank you.

END of INTERVIEW.