Denise Mitchell and Ray Abernathy
Interviewed by Ann Froines
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AFL-CIO Headquarters, Washington, D.C.

I'm interviewing Denise Mitchell and Ray Abernathy, November 3, 2005, in the headquarters of the AFL-CIO. I'm going to start by asking you, can you both briefly describe your positions and/or work with AFL-CIO.

Denise: I'm director of public affairs, and oversee all of the communications work for the AFL-CIO.

Ray: I'm a strategic campaigns consultant, and I consult with AFL-CIO unions on bargaining campaigns, organizing campaigns, and political issue campaigns.

What was your first contact with 925?

Denise: do you mean the SEIU District 925?

Both. 9to5 initially, if you did work with the organization, and 925 the district. I know most of it was with the district.

Denise: I first met Karen in 1980, when—actually the movie was being produced. She was doing a fundraiser in New York—was it a fundraiser? I guess it was a fundraiser—or maybe it was just sort of a movie party, not a fundraiser, in New York. Ray was working with Ira in Ohio, and for some reason Ira said, "Maybe Denise would be interested in finding out about this stuff Karen's doing." So I just went to this thing out of the blue. And learned about the movie, and then was part of a few of the movie things.

You did part of the public relations around that?

Denise: No, not really. No. Just went to some things. And then when in early 1981, when District 925 was being launched, having been a local in Boston before that, but as a national thing, Ray was hired and I worked with him to do the publicity on the launch of District 925.

What did that involve for you, that kind of publicity for that launch?

Ray: The first thing it involved was my sprinting across Wisconsin Avenue at about 6 o'clock in the morning, and tearing my left calf muscle in half trying to get to the airport, to go to Los Angeles for—we did a series of press conferences around the country where we quote rolled out District 925. I remember it because I did the whole press tour just limping. But we did those press conferences—

Denise: Here.

Ray: Here in Washington—

Denise: Washington, I think Los Angeles, I think Chicago.

Ray: Because I remember—what's the guy's name who was in the movie--Dabney Coleman was our guest of honor. I got a picture of him with Jackie Ruff.

Denise: That was a different time.

Ray: That was different? Anyway.

So you were doing it [public relations] to the press at large?

Ray: Yes.

Did it involve doing it to other SEIU locals and helping that process at all of integrating them into—

Denise: I don't think we were involved with that. I'm sure they did something. But we just handled external press.

Ray: We were just staging the press conferences and announcing it to the general press.

Denise: We were outside consultants. We were hired on a fairly limited basis.

Ray: So that was the first really major project you did with 925?

Both: Right.

What were your first impressions of the 925 leadership? Because you had done labor public relations before that, right? So you knew about the labor movement?

Denise: It was just exciting to see these young women really heading something up. It was Karen and Jackie; it was also the original organizing—the [regional] organizing directors, I think Bonnie Laden and Cheryl Schaeffer and…I forget—there was third one.

Ray: Was it Debbie?

Denise: No, Debbie came a little bit later. I don't remember. Yes, it was very exciting to see.

Ray: And it was organized as a national union—the district. That's why we called it a district. It was pretty revolutionary. The very idea of having a national union run by women was preposterous. I guess I had been in labor a few more years than Denise at that point. It just wasn't the way things worked in labor. In the whole union movement,

it was very much like in the movie "Nine to Five"—the women did most of the work, and the men got most of the credit for it, and ran the unions. And that would be national unions, local unions, it didn't really matter. There were very few. And women who were in position of authority in the unions were very often there as tokens. As affirmatives, along with maybe a Latino person or a Black person. They were to be seen and not heard. The kind of watchword of 925 was, a national union for women office workers, run by women office workers.

Denise: Yes. And we made these big broad claims: we're going to organize the nation's office workers, right? And everybody imagined IBM being organized, and banks, and…

Insurance companies…

Denise: Right. The private sector office workers.

Did you work on public relations for any of their organizing campaigns?

Both: Uh huh.

Was there any particular one you remember as being exhilarating, or difficult, or---?

Denise: I remember Chicago. I just remember it being difficult. I also remember Connecticut a little bit. Which must have been the University of Connecticut.

Ray: Yes.

Or was it University of New Haven?

Ray: No, it was University of Connecticut in Storrs.

Denise: There was probably more than at Storrs campus.

Was it difficult in the sense that it was hard to get the press to pay any attention to this?

Denise: It wasn't so much that—we weren't doing that much external press work. We did some. But we also were just helping do some of the communications pieces for the campaign: leaflets, that kind of stuff. And of course these were pre-word processor days. So you were laying out leaflets with what might even be press type or something, and then going to find a quick copy shop, way early in the morning in Chicago. But I think I was struck by how—there was a pretty big gap between what seemed like the pizzazz of the idea, and the actual organizing. The pizzazz didn't necessarily get the organizing done. The organizing was still just very retail.

Very what?

Both: retail.

Denise: It was very much one-to-one conversations, and hard. And I remember being a little disappointed, I think, at times where we had to back off a little bit from the—we're a new national office workers union—and begin to say, "And we're part of this big strong union, SEIU, that's been around for a long time." Because the attraction of the idea—a union for women office workers, run by women office workers—wasn't actually quite enough [to let] people take that big step.

There was some resistance, and they had to really struggle to get accepted as a real trade union.

Denise: Yes. And I think there were some people thinking about, ok, what can this organization do for me, and beginning to think, well, I want to be sure it can deliver. And we began to do this whole series of things called "SEIU Delivers," and pointing to the things we had done. Having a track record mattered to people who were joining the union.

Did you also sometimes do campaigns for collective bargaining?

Ray: Now the challenge was organizing. And it was very slow. For instance, I spent a lot of time working on the University of Cincinnati campaign.

What was that like?

Ray: It was tough because we weren't necessarily responding to an uprising of workers. We had some support at the University of Cincinnati. So we tried to go where there were several people who were in the bargaining unit who wanted a union. It was tough going, in the organizing. Later I worked on a bargaining campaign, after—I guess we won that election finally. We had to run it a couple of times, didn't we?

Denise: Uh huh.

Ray: And then we did, and then we went back and I worked on a bargaining campaign.

Denise: And that's where Debbie—

Ray: That's where I met Debbie Schneider. She was working on that. It was surprising to me, because I hadn't worked in the academic world very much. And I found the employer, the University of Cincinnati, about as rank an anti-union organization as you could come up against. They despised the union. They fought us tooth and nail. I can't remember whether we had a strike or not, in that campaign. I'm not sure that we did. But I remember we did—we created a television show, which was very popular with the workers, that we actually ran on a local television station, and promoted an audience for. The show featured women from the unit—members, talking about what they wanted in their bargaining, and what they…I forget who moderated that TV show for us. That built

a lot of morale, that sort of thing. And it was the type of thing we had done in several other settings, to try to do what we call "bargain in the sunshine"—to put the employer out in the public eye so that people could understand what their ridiculous demands were. I forget what our demands were; they were very modest. But we had to fight really hard to win that election and then to get a contract. But I'm not sure what happened eventually to that unit in Cincinnati.

Someone else can fill in that picture.

Ray: Because we would do that, and help get a first contract. And then the next time, we would be off and helping with another campaign somewhere.

Did you have to travel a lot in this work then? You were following 925 around the country?

Ray: Yes.

Denise: There weren't that many different campaigns. It was 5 or 6 campaigns over as many years. So it wasn't that intense.

Ray: Most of the campaigns were smaller. Although we did the—what was the insurance company in NY?

Denise: Equitable?

Ray: Equitable.

Denise: Oh right!

Ray: We decided to try to get some scale going. We had done public sector organizing primarily. When was that—was that in '85? Somewhere in there—'85 or '86. And we had just been doing mostly universities and public sector and so forth. So we made this decision to—or they did—to go after Equitable, and try to organize the whole company, and to use a lot of corporate campaign techniques, or try to. I remember we had a huge demonstration in New York City. I've still got some of the graphics from it. We got—for instance, the big SEIU janitors' union in New York City, agreed to turn out workers for the rally. And I remember Denise and I were there—it was supposed to be at noon—it was 10 minutes til noon, and there was nobody there. Except a few workers and the staff. And Local 32BJ which represents 70,000 janitorial workers pulled their workers from the building. So we had 1500 people on the street—

Denise: It was a great rally.

Ray: –in a matter of 10 minutes. Yeah, it was great. But it just materialized out of nowhere, because these janitors were…in the buildings, all around there. And we had the support of the big other SEIU local.

Do you think that getting that kind of visible public support, or that kind of other work support, helped in the campaign? That was I guess the tactic, was to try to…

Denise: Yes; it was also borrowing a tactic from 9to5, where they had targeted bad employers. Then take a big employer and use him as an example to also create interest from office workers in other companies. So I think it helped, but then you still have to reconcile that with what organizing a union really requires. And so I think it was always hard to…you could create this great bit of excitement, but then translating that into union members is just pretty hard. It's really hard. You had these poster, "Will the real Coy Eklund please stand up." He was the chairman of Equitable.

Spell his name?

Both: C-o-y E-k-l-u-n-d.

Ray: And he was a big progressive, supposedly a Democrat contributor, and all this sort of thing. What we were encountering in those first years, we kind of didn't know it, but in looking back, was the first real wave of anti-union union-busting by employers. Reagan had fired the air traffic controllers in 1981. And what it turned out to be, in my judgment, was a signal to all employers that it was ok, that it was socially acceptable, to bust up unions, and to virulently interfere with union drives and so forth. I don't think we anticipated, for instance at the universities and so forth, and in the public sector, the kind of resistance we were getting to organizing clerical workers and secretaries. And then when we tried to go into the private sector—these companies were willing to spend anything to defeat the union and do anything to defeat the union. And the workers were easily intimidated. A lot of them were women who desperately needed the second job for their family.
So the intimidation really was difficult to overcome.

Denise: And we were beginning to head into a bad economy. By the time you were in—what, '83, '84, it was pretty bad.

I've heard them referring to the dog days of the '80s. It was a really difficult decade. Did you work on the Blue Cross Blue Shield campaign?

Denise: Just a little bit. I remember when we were out leafletting one day. We didn't really develop it; I think that was mostly Jackie Ruff's idea and plan. I was out leafletting with her and a few other people at the D.C. Blue Cross Blue Shield office. I don't remember too much about it.

Ray: And there was some thought, with Blue Cross Blue Shield, for instance, which had a lot of ties to labor, that we would be able to use that as leverage.

Denise: Oh, yeah. That was the whole idea!

Ray: That was the whole idea, was to go after a private company that had some reason… and we never quite put it together. Although a lot of the techniques that were developed for pressuring employers, were parallel to the development of corporate campaign techniques in other sectors, and helped SEIU, I know, develop its way of running comprehensive campaigns to mitigate against the employer interference in the campaigns.

As PR people, you must have been quite involved in that, developing the corporate campaigns. Because a lot of it had to do with, didn't it, trying to reveal to the public the vulnerabilities of these corporations?

Denise: Uh huh, yeah, some of it.

Ray: Yup. And some of it was in—

Denise: Not so much for District—it wasn't too much of it for them, but some of the other SEIU campaigns: in the Beverly Enterprises campaign, was one of the early ones.

Ray: District 925 was one of a number of initiatives that SEIU was undertaking, to try to bring the union alive, by running campaigns. So there were campaigns going in health care, that were groundbreaking campaigns, right along with District 925. It was like you said, way back when we thought we could do anything. [laughs] Why launch one campaign when you could launch five, right.

Denise: But the other interesting thing about it was the value of District 925 beyond organizing office workers. I remember when the California State Employees Association affiliated with SEIU. It was things like SEIU's having launched District 925 that made them say, this is an exciting contemporary union, that we want to be part of. That understands reaching out to white collar, pink collar or whatever, workers.

Yes. And before that they had just been an independent local?

Both: Yes. They were independent.

Ray: And they had 60,000 members at the time. And while you can look at the history of District 925 and say, gosh, it never really reached more—at some point we had what—15,000 members in District—

Denise: Maybe more. Maybe 20,000?

Ray: Maybe. Maybe 20,000, in District 925. But as Denise said, it was instrumental in bringing the California State Employees Association—they had one bargaining unit. The clerical bargaining unit had 30,000 members. So we brought 30,000 members into SEIU. And District 925 was one of the things that convinced them to cast their lot with SEIU. Which was tremendous to be able to appeal to women office workers, who weren't

necessarily going to come into District 925, by saying, look what we're doing here. And look at the place of women in SEIU.

That's an important point. You're the first who've made it. What were your impressions of the 925 leaders as you got to know them? Did you observe any differences in their approach to organizing or leadership, would you say?

Denise: [laughs]

You can say whatever you want…

Denise: I didn't know that many other—I hadn't dealt with that many men union leaders so it's not—but yes, they were all impressive women. They are to this day! It's amazing how committed some of them are to what they're doing. Karen—it's just amazing to me that she's sort of still doing the same thing. She's still running campaigns. Just—

And organizing people.

Denise: And organizing people! Right. And then bringing about change in one form or another.

Ray: I think another great value of District 925 that transcends the actual number of office workers they were able to organize was the leaders that they developed. Karen Nussbaum is now head of Working America, which for all of us is the miracle of the 21st Century. Because we have a million members in this organization, and it's going to be two million by the end of next year. And that's because Karen Nussbaum learned how to organize the hard way.

Denise: I think she was born knowing how.

Ray: Well, it's true. But she also built up a lot of equity in the labor movement and just blossomed as a leader. District 925 was like a great research and development project. It also attracted a lot of people to the—

Denise: It also created a space for women leaders in the labor movement, where they could operate pretty autonomously and not in some guy's shadow.

Ray: And I really think Sweeney needs to get credit for some of that. Because he was willing to bring people in who—and not just in District 925 but in other parts of the union —that frankly other union leaders wouldn't have in their building.

Denise: Right. The younger generation.

Ray: The younger generation but also for instance Karen, out of the Indochina peace movement. He had enough self-confidence that he was willing to bring people like that in. And then—give them a budget. Let them run their own program, and take their own

lumps, and win their own victories, and be there when they needed it. And I think that was terrific. Look at Debbie Schneider now. When I met Debbie, she was an organizer. And today's she's head of SEIU's global organizing venture, and I think she told one of my friends that she has 3% of the SEIU budget now. And she gets to run that organization on a global basis. Well, that's phenomenal. She climbed up the ladder, with the help of District 925.

Did those leaders use the media differently than other trade unions?

Denise: Sure. Karen's just a master of it. I keep coming back to her, but she has always been really good on the media, and she's a quick study. There aren't that many leaders who were in the media. And the ones who were—you think of Lane Kirkland who would do his set-piece press conferences but hated TV interviews. You think of the style of a George Meany or—there were really very few labor leaders outside of the president of the AFL-CIO who ever got any press. Very few cultivated it. So this was really pretty different. And to a lesser degree Jackie, but also Jackie. And especially Karen.

Ray: They appreciated the media, and they like to work the media. And I still deal every day with labor leaders who won't talk to the media.

Denise: They understood how to use it for their goals. You still see union leaders who don't understand it? And think that if the media can't use what they do, then it's no good to them. As opposed to thinking about how you do things differently, to work for what the media does, but help at—advances your goal.

That's where you two come in, right?

Denise: Well, but people are either open to that or not. There are just a lot of people who just kind of say, still, "They won't write everything I say. They won't"—you know. And it just is very frustrating.

Ray: I remember somebody joking—it must have been 10 years after we started—District 925 generated an enormous amount of publicity. And it accrued to the benefit of the Service Employees Union. I think it was Sweeney who said at some point, "Boy, if we were organizing for ink, we'd be there." [laughs] Because we did—we got tremendous positive publicity out of it for SEIU. And I remember when we—we also tried to tie together 9to5, the National Association of Working Women, and the District. And one of the things we did was, it must have been 1983 or 84 then when we launched the 9to5 Office Workers Survival Guide. And the concept was that we were going to use that guide to generate memberships for the national organization, 9to5. But at the same time, to develop prospects for the District. So Jane Fonda agreed to do a public service commercial for us. Denise went out to her home in California and taped the commercial. And then we launched it, and that was when Dabney Coleman came into Washington to help us—I think that was what he was here for, to help us launch the Survival Guide. And put up the PSAs and get a lot of publicity and so forth. I don't remember the exact number, but we generated something like—

Denise: It's huge numbers—

Ray: 40,000 responses for that [little] survival guide.

Denise: It was more than that. It was like a hundred thousand.

Ray: Was it like a hundred thousand?

Denise: Yup.

By responses, you mean clerical workers—

Denise: Calls. Calls just saying, yeah. We produced these little booklets, and then the booklets became the forerunner of the book that Karen then wrote, that was published.

Were you also involved in the promotion of that book?

Denise: I guess. I don't remember too much. I remember writing the original sort of pitch, whatever you call those things, to go and meet with agents in New York. And Karen and I trounced around New York. It was before Ellen Cassedy was really part of the project, I think, although she ended up largely writing it, authoring it together with Karen.

Ray: That's actually when we first met Ellen, was when she was hired to write the book. I think we had something to do with the concept---

Denise: Yeah!

Ray: –of saying, "Karen, you ought to do a book. And we'll use that as a publicity vehicle. This little thing has been fine, but we need to do something bigger." And that was the genesis of the book.

Denise: And I think things like the book had a lot to do with contributing to the evolution of the women's movement for working class women. And having—there was the movie, and there was the organization, and there was the book—

It was a real consciousness-raising [ ]

Denise: Yes, I think it really was. And reached a different group of women. So that was exciting.

A couple of more questions to conclude. You've already touched on this but I'd like to ask it anyway, because you might think of some more things to add, and that is, do you think 925 had an impact on SEIU, and maybe the labor movement as a whole?

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START of SIDE B

Denise: [It was] defining for SEIU. Here was Sweeney—he had just been elected president of SEIU. It really marked SEIU as a progressive organization, an organization that was contemporary, that reached out to women. I think it really put SEIU on the map, in a way. And then other things built on that. It wasn't the only thing. But I think it was the first of those things. And then the Beverly organizing campaign was also another—a different kind of breakthrough, with nursing home workers and using different techniques.

Ray: For instance, the Beverly campaign—

Denise: But they hadn't done that kind of stuff—

Ray: No, they hadn't.

Denise: They hadn't done national press. Nobody did that. And I think it really—

Ray: The Beverly campaign, for instance, in that same time frame, actually failed miserably. Our partners in the campaign were the [UFCW]. And we ran a magnificent corporate campaign! This was before corporate campaigns were even in the labor movement to any extent.

Denise: Well, ACTWU (Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union) had done J.P. Stevens, but—

Ray: Yeah. Then our partner[s] signed off on a contract with Beverly and settled it behind our back and cut our legs out from under us after a year. But the point about that campaign and District 925 and so forth—they were union-building campaigns because it allowed us to attract staff—we were getting, and we did for a good 15 years, the best and the brightest. When you go down and look at the labor movement now, for instance at the people who are in the Change to Win Coalition, the people who are at the leadership of many of the unions that are the [coming], and so forth, you find this common thread of people who came through that great training ground at SEIU, who first came in the labor movement at SEIU.

Denise: Yes, it attracted a lot of staff, too, who saw this as a different kind of union, suddenly.

Ray: And they're all over the place. One recent writer characterized the latest travails of labor as not so much an Oedipal experience but the collapse of an extended family. Everybody involved on both sides of the debate at one time or another came through SEIU. So District 925 really did have that kind of transcending effect on SEIU. I was part, for instance, of going around the country and making presentations to independent

labor unions, mostly in the public sector, to say, you ought to affiliate with SEIU. And we had to make presentations that were based on our capabilities as a union, our staff, our services that we were—and oh, we're the campaign that is running the District 925 campaign. We're the union that's running the Beverly campaign. This was tremendously impressive, and especially with women, who…in the public sector, there were unions that had women in the leadership, who distrusted the AFL-CIO and AFL-CIO unions, because all they could see were men. So when we would go on these presentations, it was very impressive to be able to showcase District 925. And it really did I think played a huge role in bringing—we used to laugh and say, we brought SEIU into the twentieth century in a period of about ten or fifteen years. And the District played a huge role in that.

Do you think the aims of 925 were realized?

Denise: The aims. Well, I don't know. I don't know what they themselves—what their real goals were. I think maybe their goals were different—

One aim was to organize the private sector, and that they weren't able to do.

Denise: Right. That didn't work.

So maybe the better question is, how would you characterize their legacy then? Again, this is very similar to what impact it had on the labor movement, but—

Denise: Right. I'm not sure we can—

Distinguish.

Denise: Yeah. I think it had everything we've been talking about. The people it brought; the opportunities it gave women in the labor movement; the peer pressure it put on other unions—"SEIU's doing this? Then AFSCME has to have a good women's program," right? It began to set the standard for what a dynamic contemporary union does. So it really did change the labor movement in that way. Just not enough! [laughs] There are holdouts!

Ray: Some of the reasons why that—we all thought District 925 would rival the biggest locals in SEIU. It would be a national local union that had 50,000, 100,000 members or whatever, because the clerical and secretarial workforce was so vast. Not only did we run into the first wave—the private sector employers cut their teeth killing us off. They learned how to beat back unions by beating back District 925. But also, the computer, the PC came along; wiped out probably a good quarter of the secretarial jobs in America. The trade problems that we encountered meant that we probably shipped another quarter —maybe more—overseas. So the whole landscape changed. And I think women office workers were then harder to organize than ever, because they were fearful of losing their jobs when they saw their jobs disappearing all over the place. So there were lots of factors that—

Denise: But you know that—I'm going to say this, because I think it's part of it, and you probably can't use it, and that's fine.

We use whatever. Whatever you say is in there.

Denise: Oh really?

For historians to—you will have a chance a look at this, by the way. I forgot to mention that. And if you want to revise at all, you can. But, go ahead, say it.

Ray: Does this tape not get released until after my death? [laughter] I don't want my death to come quicker…

We are focusing mainly on the legacy, its implications, obviously, for the future, and those are interesting questions.

Ray: But SEIU for instance has—I don't know what their numbers are—they've got 250,000 office workers in their union.

Denise: As part of their public sector.

Ray: As part of their public sector and their health care sector. They have clerical units there, too. How many of those came in because of the leadership—

Denise: Not singly because of that, but felt comfortable--

Or not directly but indirectly.

Both: Right.

Denise: Or they saw women in the leadership in a different way.

Do you think without something like a District 925 continuing, that the labor movement will still be able to make women's voices, women's issues, women's leadership a reality, or have them be heard?

Denise: I think we need something like it. I think there's a little bit of a retrenchment. And I think it's just inevitable that…people do respond to competition, in a way….I'm a little worried about it.

Ray: Our big conundrum right now is that we have—according to everybody's surveys and polling, we have 57 million people out there, who say they would join a union tomorrow if they had the chance. And why don't they join? And that's because 20,000 people a year get fired from their jobs for union organizing. We haven't been able to overcome that. Not to have a symbol out there that says, "Women office workers and

women workers can join unions, can lead unions, and can win," and so forth—not to have something out there like that is disastrous. So we need something.

Denise: I think we may see some more of that with some more high profile nurse organizing. I think there are likely to be other things, and I hope so because we need them.

Just to kind of get the image of workers organizing out there in front of the—

Denise: Of women. And professional women in particular. It needs a profile. It needs a public profile. I think that we still haven't really overcome the stereotype of what unions are, to a lot of people—I forget where I was going.

OK. That's great. We've pretty well covered it. Thank you.

END of INTERVIEW.