Ellen Cassedy, Karen Nussbaum, Debbie Schneider
Interviewed by Ann Froines
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Today is November 1, 2005. We are in the Frances Perkins Room in the AFL-CIO headquarters in Washington, D. C. and this is a discussion among Ellen Cassedy, Karen Nussbaum, and Debbie Schneider who are founders and long-time activists in 9to5, the Association, and 925, the union. Why don't you start by talking about your early work in the actual founding of 9to5 in Boston?

Karen: I was a clerk-typist at Harvard University, mostly supporting my political work. I was active in the anti-war movement and the women's movement, and needed a job. And I soon discovered you could also organize on the job. Where I was working, my good friend Ellen Cassedy also got a job, and so we were both working at Harvard University as clerk-typists or secretaries. We started a small group there, which grew among secretaries at the university which did a variety of things, which maybe Ellen can talk about, petitions, meetings with management, all kinds of agitation. Then, over time, we began to identify friends who were working as secretaries in other places. So we began to have a group that met once a week or so in the evening that spent a year talking about our lives and what we wanted to do. This group of ten people were all working in different workplaces. One worked in a shoe factory, as a secretary, and another in a hospital, a couple of us in universities and some in insurance companies.
It was this huge consciousness-raising activity, which was what was going on all over the country at the time anyway. But our aim was quite specific and that was to talk about how we would create an organization that could organize office workers.

So after about a year we came up with a plan, and put an ad in the newspaper for people who wanted to talk about this. We got, oh, 25 people to some sessions about women office workers. And then Ellen went to the Midwest Academy—she can talk more about that—to learn organizing skills. Then we launched 9to5, and 150 women came to the YWCA on a Thursday night in November. And it was huge. That was in 1973.

Ellen: I just want to note that we were 23 (years old) at the time. The Midwest Academy was the big turning point for us. It was the first session of the Midwest Academy, which was organized by Heather Booth and Steve Max. And I was sent as a sort of a scout to find out what they were teaching. It was a summer-long program and it was very intensive training in the principles of, basically, community organizing. And so I learned how to make index cards for our contacts, and [we] worked with a women's group[that was starting to do some work] about workplace issues, and I learned how to make a strategy chart, where you made a list of who was on your side and who your targets could be. And I think that it was a real eye-opener for all of us, because we had trouble seeing beyond telling our stories to each other, and getting people to come and all gather in the same room. In the Midwest Academy they called that rockpile organizing. You kept putting rocks in a pile until you had enough rocks to do something. And they said, no,

that's not right, you have to go out there and say, "we're going to do this!" And then see who would come and do it with you.

[And] At the Midwest Academy, I read a paper called "Organizers Organize Organizations", which was key for me. I was a real departure from the kind of political work I had been involved in, which was [things like,] either the CR group, the consciousness-raising group in the women's movement where you sat around and talked about very personal issues, or an anti-war meeting where there were 500 people in the room, one chair, and in order to decide how to[o] proceed, you'd raise your hand, and you had to have a loud enough voice to talk, and the whole thing was very disorganized. So this idea that there was a real systematic approach to how an organization could develop, move forward, and develop leaders and so on, was new. I received very explicit training in all that. And that helped us as the organization went public in the fall of 1973.

I want to mention a couple of the principles that were very important to us. [how we moved forward. And w] We had to fight like crazy for each of these principles.

One principle was the concept of having targets, of having an "enemy", having something you were batting against. There was a lot of pressure from women in the larger women's movement, for example, saying, how can we help women become managers. And this was definitely not what we were about. We were not about self-help, or helping individual women make it on their own. [And i]It was very important for us to keep the [that] focus right on the boss – not [. And it wasn't about] on the government, either, but [really, it was] on the leaders of [the] companies.

Another principle [thing] was that we were very, very careful to make sure that whoever spoke for the organization, whoever was a public speaker, had to be. . .had to look representative of our base. So there were lots of people who were ready to speak out, who had the guts, who were confident, who were happy to get up there at the podium, but if they weren't the type of person who would look like our base, then we wouldn't allow those people to talk.

A third principle [Another thing] was that the office workforce was very diverse, in terms of class. There were people in that workforce who were secretaries, who had been brought up in middle class [,] and upper middle class families, and who thought of their jobs as a way [they were going] to get ahead, [and] express themselves, and be fulfilled, and so on. And then there were people who [, you know,] came right out of the Catholic high schools of Dorchester, straight into the John Hancock Company, and they were going to be staying there until they got married, and then that was it. And so it was very diverse. [, and] I think it was very revolutionary that we said, the fact that all these people are WOMEN [women] is what ties us together. It was as revolutionary as say, the CIO [,] overcoming racial and nationality divisions in the workforce. And we were in a constant tug-of-war to make sure that our public face was inviting to the whole range, from [, you know,] those people who were there to express themselves, and those people who were just getting by, and so on.

Another thing I wanted to mention is that we developed a particular style that was light, succinct, friendly, showy, respectful of people who—we just had to accept that most people could not stand up in front of a crowd and talk, most people were terrified of being seen associated with us, most people couldn't bear the word "union," and we listened very, very carefully. We worked very, very hard to echo where they were at, and follow people around and pull them along a couple of steps at a time.

How did you identify those issues that people were ready to move on early on in 9to5? I remember that you used surveys of office workers . . .

Karen: We had been talking a long time already in our own workplaces about this. Ellen and I had been active at this workplace organization for three years already, so we had worked over a bunch of the issues, and knew that what we were talking about was the effect....of women as women on the job. What was the impact of being a woman office worker? And one interesting thing was, at Harvard, when we decided to go beyond our own department, we put out notices around the university inviting people to a meeting about women office workers, and it didn't say a single other thing. And a lot of people showed up. This resonated with people, that there were these unspoken issues, but everyone kind of knew what it was going to be. It all related to being expected to do menial tasks or get coffee for the boss, those kinds of things. We had a great poster in the early days of 9to5, a big poster with a big gray area in the middle, and all it is a picture of a coffee cup upended, with a little bit of coffee dripping out. And this spoke volumes, this was the revolutionary act of secretaries refusing to kowtow to their bosses any longer.

And so all of that was underneath the surface, and we knew that issues that reached the feelings of disrespect, but didn't pound on them directly, but went through some more objective issues, like lower pay than men, or lack of promotional opportunity, that's what you needed. You needed to talk about things that felt objective, and removed, and weren't as painful as telling people, "you are not respected in your work", but tied to those feelings. And that was what was explosive.

And so we would use surveys to get the names of people, to get people involved, but it was always the same answers in every survey.

Ellen: Although I think we learned a lot. I don't think I had ever heard of "job posting"—where you post the job openings—this was news to me. Or the issue of training a man to be your own boss, I never heard of that!

Debbie: I think something you might call a technique, and I am sure it came from Midwest Academy, when I came into 9to5 as a member, was that everyone had to have a recruitment lunch. The work to bring people into the organization was very one-on-one. That's where you got to probe about what issues that person cared about, what resonated from the last lunch you did, is it working here? I think the care to do the really one-on-one recruitment . . .I was recruited....I just called up and said I wanted to join. I was working in a publishing company in Boston. And I was told, well, you can't just join,

you must have a recruitment lunch. (Everyone laughs.) There was actually a training going on—this was five years later, 1978, and the organization had expanded to other cities—and there was a training going on of organizers that were coming from other cities in Boston to learn the basics. And so I had three organizers at my recruitment lunch! And I had called to ask to join the organization. But it was still the right technique.

Who was the organizer, do you remember?

Debbie: I think it was Joan Quinlan.

Ellen: It was like rounds at a hospital.

Debbie: I was game, I didn't care. But it gave you a message about what this organization was. It was going to take you, one person at a time, and put you in a collective action, and I think that's really how you hone your message and your issues, by that amount of one-on-one care. It does the trick.

I didn't realize that. So people didn't just sign up to join 9to5, at that point, as a mass membership strategy?

Karen: Anyone who called, we did try to get a lunch meeting with them. At the heyday, we would have three lunch meetings in a day, and if the meeting was "across the pond," you know, we were on Clarendon Street, and if you had to go across Boston Common to get to the financial district, you'd have to start really early for your 11:30 lunch, then your12:30 lunch, then your 1:30 lunch, but it was exhilarating! You might meet someone for drinks after work. I remember meeting these two legal secretaries from like Hale and Dorr, or something, and we went to get a drink after work. And I didn't really drink hard liquor; I hardly knew anything about it. So they ordered White Russians, or something, so I ordered the same, and (laughing) I was like, totally gone, my first drink. I could hardly complete the recruitment event. (All laughing.)

Debbie: Part of the reason for it, was that the goal was not just to have numbers of members but to have people who did things. And so the whole question of leadership development—I didn't quite get it at my first recruitment lunch—but I was put on a fast track, chair a committee, speak at something. You were trying to figure out, where are people now, what are they willing to do, what would it take to get them from A to B to C to D. If people only want to be a member and never come to a meeting, that's fine, but you have to evaluate that, because it would be better if they came to an action, signed a petition. And just accepting a membership card in the mail, sure they came in that way, but when one would come in, the organizer would call them, try to meet them in person, not just through a phone call, to really assess how to develop them as an activist and a leader. And that is something that is just so basic to everything that we ever did, that when we formed the union some years later, that is exactly how we did it in the union, too. It was our view of how to build an organization. I really do think it came from the initial training at the Midwest Academy out of community organizing.

What were some of the first actions that you took in Boston that were public?

Karen: The first thing we did, we held this big meeting, 150 women came, Lillian Christmas YES(?) was the speaker, a secretary that we had found, and then we said, we are going to bring our issues directly to employers in this city, and we are inviting you to come to a meeting to plan a meeting with the Chamber of Commerce. And so 25 people came to this meeting to plan the meeting with the Chamber of Commerce. And then, remarkably, this man from the Chamber of Commerce came to the meeting a couple of weeks later.

Ellen: We had compiled a report, and a bill of rights . . .we wrote up a bill of rights.

Karen: I thought that was later . . .well, to my recollection we had this meeting with the guy and we said, we demand to have a meeting with the entire Chamber of Commerce to raise these issues, and so, he left, realized what was going on, and he would never come back to meet with us again, but said, we would like to see the issues documented.
And so that was what gave us the idea to write a report. And so Ellen did all this research and found out these amazing things that we actually had no idea about, for example, that office workers earn less than women in blue collar jobs, the size of the office work force, that we were one third of all women workers. So then we wrote up this report, which we then used to have another big meeting . . .

Ellen: A hearing, a formal public hearing . . .All of these things were for show, to put ourselves out there. We didn't really expect anything from the head of the Chamber of Commerce, it was to put our members—these people who had never done anything with us before—in this situation of standing together there in a group, confronting a target, who was not their boss, so it was good, it was nobody's boss. Then we had this public meeting, which gave us a goal of spending several months . . .we broke everything down into these jobs that people could do. This person would help to compile surveys, and this person would hand out surveys, and this person would help to write the report, and this person would prepare little public statements about different industries. So it gave you something to work with to start building an infrastructure of the organization. And then when we had the hearing, we called the press, and we got in the paper, and we had some clippings, so we could raise money, and we could take the clippings to our recruitment lunches. We began to have a reality that we could work off of.

Karen: We're out there, we're trying to tell the business community what's wrong, and as Ellen said, it was mostly just to agitate.
One of the next things we did was support a bill before the state legislature on maternity benefits. And so we marched in front of the state legislature to demand that—oh, it was being pocket vetoed, that was it. We got on television, it was this huge thing. Our members would go at lunchtime, we would hold our rallies at lunchtime, and people would take their lunch hour to protest. We called it "teetering for women's rights", because our members had their high heels on.

Ellen: And no one had ever seen anyone like that picketing in front of the state house. The women we were talking to had never been involved in anything like this ever before. And no one had ever seen them . . .you know, [they had seen] members of the National Organization of Women, or something, [who] must have introduced this legislation in the first place, but here . . .the city was full of secretaries and office workers, and no one had ever seen them have a public face before.

Karen: And then we actually began to work with individuals who wanted to confront issues on the job, and so, for example, I think there was a pregnant worker at a publishing company who wanted maternity benefits at her company. So 9to5 actually got a meeting with the employer, and so that woman and a bunch of other women in the industry, not from her own company, but other women in the industry, met with her employer. We did this with lots of places, and it always followed the same pattern. The employer, unbelievably, would agree to meet with us, and we would present this well-argued case, which, as Ellen said before, would have been worked on for months ahead of time, with people all taking different assignments. And he would say, "I'll get back to you." And, of course, he would never get back to us, then. And that was a whole learning experience, about how you actually force a response from an employer. And that's ultimately what led us to create a union.

In those early years didn't you have campaigns around the insurance industry; you took on big companies over important issues of women's rights. What were some of those, I am trying to remember. You used public policy in some way, didn't you?

Karen: We used the Office of Federal Contract Compliance programs, which under Carter in 1976, was becoming more active. We were able to apply pressure to get the government to intervene to put pressure on companies. So we would go out in front of the insurance companies, or the banks, and do surveys, and get all this highly self-selected data about the company, and then write these reports and call on the government to intervene, which it did! It then targeted the banks as a special area for concentration, all because of the work that our organization and organizations like us were doing. And that created a lot of attention and also real change. We would do individual campaigns against insurance companies . . . I remember one leaflet that had Sherlock Holmes with a magnifying glass, and in the magnifying glass was a picture of the company president. You know . . .rooting out crime in the John Hancock, or something, I can't remember what it was exactly. So you'd do a campaign against these companies. One of the things we found was that women would come to us and say, oh, the issue here is job posting. We don't have access to jobs, something that was really removed from better pay, because they felt that it was safe. And so we would do these big campaigns on job postings. And what would eventually end up happening is that the companies would raise the pay, because they wanted to quiet everybody down. We realized this ultimately, then we started to do big campaigns against big companies actually asking them from the start to [actually] raise the pay.

Ellen: We found that women in the publishing industry and universities were more able to go public than women in the insurance companies and banks, partly because of the

composition of the workforce. It was a different kind of people, and also because it wasn't as autocratic in those places. So, in fact, a disproportionate number of the active members of the organization came from those industries. But we kept our focus on the heart of finance district. I actually think that . . . I know we transformed the publishing industry completely in Boston. Jobs opened up for women, pay went up. It was a thoroughgoing change. But I think we also had an enormous impact on the banking and insurance industries, even though we weren't able to get very many people to come out and be public.

This is something I would like the researchers of the future to look at, especially economically. [What ended up happening there, is t] There was so much wealth in those industries, in the service sector, that they were able to give in on all kinds of things, and [just] meet our demands, [without] usually without saying they were doing so. Sometimes we were able to claim victories. And I think that is sort of a hidden reality that goes into why it was impossible to unionize there. One of the reasons was that they had so much autocratic power, so much control over the workforce, you know, that if you left your desk, it was totally obvious. And in the cafeteria, if two people were talking to each other, it was disaster, and so on. But the other thing was, they just threw money at the problem, and they opened up the ranks of the higher jobs—not the very top jobs—but up to the very top. And so, this was a movement that created enormous changes, but didn't result in an institution or organization being able to take the credit for it.

Debbie: One of the campaigns we had . . .I never thought of it in the way you are talking. We did a campaign against a thing called the Boston Survey Group, which was . . . I would love to know now, when researchers look at this, they should figure out when it started. It was an organization whose only task was to compare and set clerical salaries in Boston. And it was all the top private corporations. They would come to their meeting with keypunch cards, like a little box of keypunch cards. They were the HR [Human Resources] directors of their corporations, and set clerical salaries. They would compare them and set them. And it's illegal to do that. So we got the Massachusetts [Boston] Attorney General to go after them for doing that, but you can imagine the situation where they really had the money to raise wages as long as they didn't get out of competition. So they had to collude to make sure that, if they were going to raise them, they raised them up together. And it is a very interesting point, in terms of the target being such wealthy companies, that in order to resist organization they had the ability to take care of some of the issues.

And then the clerical workforce changed so radically during this period, too. But if you think about women in publishing—that's where I first started working—really the status of women in publishing changed in that decade just enormously.

Ellen: I'd also like to bring up a more abstruse analysis, which is the whole change that was going on in the American economy then, where the industrial sector and workforce were [was] declining and giving way to the service sector. And American families that had been supported by only one worker were now being asked to have two service workers in place of one industrial worker. We studied the work of this economist Harry

Braverman very closely, who had [and] documented that big change that was going on. And so, you know, when I think about it, I think we created a wave of a sort, but we also rode a wave, where the American economy was begging women to leave the home and come into the workforce. And we helped to facilitate that by saying, all right, if women are going into the workforce, here is what we need. We need job posting, and we need such-and-such wages, and we need respect, and we need a little bit of mobility, and so on. And that made it more possible for this enormous economic change to take place. This is a good thing and a bad thing. What you have now is families where you need two or three jobs to support one family, and what you used to have was a one-wage family.

Tape 1, Side B

Karen: So it is our job to turn discontent into organized power, and it's their job – the employers -- to dissipate discontent. And that was what was going on. You know, we were trying to make the best of the tools that we had, and they were trying to make sure that they went as far as they needed to and no further. And so they were willing to cream off a portion of the workforce and create professional jobs with opportunity and higher pay and status for women, and get those troublemakers out of their hair, and integrate them into the system. And create a chasm between them and the rest of the women's workforce. And so the thing that you talked about earlier, about what we all have in this together as women, began to be sundered.

Ellen: That is not just chronological, that was a constant tension, I think. From day one, there were women who started being peeled off . . .

Karen: Right. And it is related to the whole dynamic around automation, which was also going on at this time. When we identified automation as an important issue for the clerical work force, we were quite explicit, we wrote fund-raising proposals about this. We said we've got a window of opportunity that will last five years, and in that time everyone will go from worker on a typewriter with paper to an automated worker, a woman who works on a computer. It is in the period of time that each of those women has to [go] undergo that transformation that she will be open to organization and making change. But once you've gotten a new job under the new conditions, the story's over. And pretty much, that is what happened. We had this huge flurry—storm of activity—with legislation on VDT (video display terminals) regulation in 32 statues. VDTs, we don't even call them that anymore [now they're called computers or personal computers]. Health and safety concerns and organization all over the place. And we would meet with the top people in these computer companies, and we were engaged in this whole debate with the computer industry. Paul Strassman, a vice-president at Xerox became very interested in us, respected us, and his role was understand what our demands are and meet them so the computer industry can actually accomplish the goal of automation. And meantime, our goal was how do we keep the irritation in this conflict as long as possible so that people learn the lessons and choose to establish organized power around it.

When did you first begin talking about the need to form unions, since initially you had decided you couldn't talk union to the women workers. What change happened that precipitated this discussion?

Ellen: My view is that we, the organizers, were talking about unions from day one. Part of the function of the organization was to be a demonstration project with unions as the audience, saying, have you ever thought about this, have you ever thought about office workers, have you ever thought about service workers, women workers, we're here, we are possible targets for organizing. But that didn't mean that we could use the word "union" right then, nor did it mean that if a union suddenly woke up to this reality, OK, we are coming in to organize, that there would be any success there. So I think we saw ourselves as a bridge, or an intermediate stage, that was sort of softening up the labor movement to understand women workers and also softening up women workers to understand that collective action and unionizing could be for them.

Karen: And it was experiences like going to meet with the boss of some company who then would refuse to ever follow up with you that taught the organizational lesson that it didn't matter how smart you were, or how well put together your presentation was, unless you actually could command a response from an employer, you were never going to get anywhere. And that there should be a law that [en]forces them to talk to us. We [we] would say to people. Well, there is a law, and it is called the National Labor Relations Act, and what you need, to be able to force an employer to negotiate with you, is to have the majority of the people on the job to vote to operate collectively, to have a union. We, at that time, were taking classes, union classes with a labor educator named Frank Lyons. I think all four of our staff would go to these classes on Tuesday nights, where he was teaching a stewards' course or something on union history, and how unions operate, and he met with us by ourselves at times. At one point he said well, what are you going to do when these office workers want to unionize. And we said, well, we'll just call up some union and get them hooked up with a union. And he said, well, you are fools if you do that! You are going to do all the work, and then let some union take the members. You should start your own union, and so we said, oh, OK, we'll start our own union. We didn't know what he was talking about really, but we were completely open to suggestions, and it also didn't occur to us that we couldn't try anything. So we did, we decided to approach unions. Our framework was that we represented hundreds of thousands of women office workers--although they were [not] actually our members—and that we knew how to organize women office workers, and that we should be given funding to do it, and our own organization, our own charter to start our own local union to bring these women in.

And we approached ten different unions to talk about giving us this deal. And the responses ranged from the guy in OPEIU, who said, yeah, I'd organize office workers myself if I could only get a girl in here to do the typing, which to us, you know, was the very nature of the problem. And the guy from the Teamsters who said, you can't organize women because they think with their cunts, not their brains—that was a high point. And there were others who said, yeah, we'll hire you as organizers but you can't have your own local union, and others who said, yeah, you can have your own local

union, and as soon as you get some members, come back to us, and then we'll talk about giving you money. And the only union that really was willing to take a chance, that could see what we were trying to get at, that had the vision and creativity to help us do what we wanted, was the Service Employees Union. And it was their general organizer John Geagan who really had a special feel for identifying talent and new ideas, and was willing to take a chance , that gave us the opportunity to get a charter, to get some money and to start our own local union.

Were you still all working in the Boston area at this time?

Karen: You had gone to New York by then, right?

Debbie: No, I was still in college then.

Karen: Oh my God, you weren't even in 9to5 then! This is 1975. Yeah.

Did you have chapters in other cities?

Karen: No, we started 9to5 in 1973, the whole thing felt like a lifetime between each incarnation but it was really kind of fast. By 1975 we had created the union. And I think there were two other organizations, no, there was one in Chicago, one in New York, and one in San Francisco that were like us, that had all popped up at around the same time. Working women's organizations. We started the union in '75, I went over to work on the union, and Ellen was the new director of 9to5, and we ran them as parallel organizations for another three years. Then in 1978, by which time we had already gotten our heads beat in on the union for some time, we decided that we would make 9to5, the association, into a national organization, and so I became a national organizer for 9to5. We started about a dozen chapters.

But you already had the union when you started them?

Karen: Yeah, we had the union that was still operating in Boston only, and by 1981, we decided to expand the union into a national union, and did that as well.

Ellen: I guess in thinking about this for today I started to have some new thoughts about this. I think SEIU, the Service Employees, was very forward looking. They were the union most able to take the step beyond what other unions were able to do. But just imagine, if they had been able to take a step even farther, to fund what we were doing then. Today, the AFL-CIO is basically doing that with what Karen's doing today [the AFL-CIO's Working America project, which signs up individual workers into a national association], and SEIU has an association [thing] that is sort of like 9to5, [in] that you can join as an individual, and it connects you to a network of people that are for collective action and represent certain goals, and so on. But you don't have to go sign up cards in workplaces. And I think about myself. I'm not in the labor movement anymore, why is that? It is, in part, because there was no place for the skills that I had developed, the style of leader [who] I was, or Janet Selcer, or Helen Williams. We had this tremendous ability to organize a city-wide campaign to blow up some issue or something,

and the labor movement didn't want that. And I think it is too bad. I think an opportunity was missed for the labor movement to take . . .they took a certain stripe of what we were able to do, but they weren't interested in a whole lot of stuff we were able to do, the PR stuff, the ability to nurture one by one by one. I think that was unfortunate.

Karen: And even at the time we thought what we are doing, the labor movement should be doing this, unions should be creating these organizations out in front that bring people in and create a bridge into the union movement, but they weren't. They weren't doing that. They had done it in earlier times, in the 1930's and so on. And even when they supported us, it was only at the minimum. It was like alimony, only what you could basically make it on.

Ellen: And there was the demand, how many workplaces have you organized? And it was impossible to organize, so that was very hard for us. There were all kinds of other things that we could do, that they wouldn't pay for.

Karen: Right, if you'd ever actually had resources both to do the public agitation side of it, or an organized base inside of SEIU, which is what they did with every other union leader they were interested in. If they found a union leader they liked they would find some group of workers that they didn't like the leader of anymore, and you know, make a switch. They wouldn't do that for us either, the standards for us were always higher, to keep us stringing along.

Debbie, what was the first union organizing campaign you were involved in then with 925?

Debbie: Well, I was with the women's organization for several years first. When I first came to the union to do union organizing it was in Cincinnati, Ohio, and I organized the university clericals there. I'll step back one. When the union was first formed in 1981, I was working for the women's organization in New York City which was called Women Office Workers. And I was an organizer with women office workers in New York City when the union was first formed. We really wanted a part of it . . . District 925 in 1981. And I had spent a couple of years doing three recruitment lunches a day down on Wall Street, in the financial district, in insurance companies and banks, publishing houses, law firms, and those of us who were active in the women's organization were just dying for the union to come. So we left the women's organization and became the District 925 Organizing Council. There were six of us and some of us had been organizers for the women's organization and some of us were leaders in it. The way you talk about it, you're in your twenties, you think . . .it is hard to describe the amount of energy and momentum that existed in this organization at that period of time. How this built this feeling that you could do anything, that we could take on the Boston Survey Group. I , as a rank-and-file clerical worker, chaired the committee, learned about anti-trust law, that you could take the big guys on. There was media, there was just so much energy around it! And so we thought, you know, that this was a straightforward proposition, the six of us were going to chart out where the clerical workers were in New York City, and figure out a strategy for getting them into the new District 925. And when District 925 was first

formed, we had one organizer for the east coast, one for the west coast, and one for the midwest. (All laughing.) And an 800 number that Jane Fonda had done a TV public service announcement for. We had tons of calls coming in and the organizers were running up and down the coasts trying to turn something into a union campaign.

The east coast organizer would stay at my apartment in New York when she was running up and down, and meet with our little group to help us strategize, and then we each went and got jobs in the places we thought were targets. And I worked in the insurance company AIG, which was the biggest insurance company in the world (all laughing harder). I was there by myself. They wanted to give me a front office job because I spoke well, and looked white, but [and] I insisted that I didn't handle the public or bosses that well, and I didn't want to be that receptionist. Finally, I did get back in the claims area, and I thought we were going to organize that way. It was very, very naïve. So that actually was the first campaign I worked for in District 925. Then I moved to Chicago and organized Cook County clerical workers in Chicago, that was my first taking through--build a committee, get through the election. We won the first unit by one vote, it was the County Sheriff clerical workers, 1980.

Did all the Cook County clerical workers get organized by 925 or just sections?

Debbie: It was an ugly situation. The county was a Democratic patronage county, patronage still reigned supreme in the county. Harold Washington had just become mayor, and so the city was changing. But the county was holding on for dear life. And it passed a collective bargaining law, just for the county, which allowed any union to get on the ballot by showing one card of support. It was intended to create total chaos. Normally the standard is you need thirty percent to file, and ten percent to intervene. But they allowed one card to intervene, so there were ten different unions. And mostly people ended up voting no union in that case. We won two units in the first round, and AFSCME won one. Today they are pretty much all organized, by SEIU and AFSCME.

Were there other memorable campaigns in the early years of District 925 that you want to talk about?

Karen: We had no strategy. The strategy was just organize anyone who seemed available. So our very first campaign was a tiny, independent publishing company which we—and even there the only people that would organize were six of the professional employees—we couldn't even get the clericals in the place to come along with them. It was a training ground for us. I learned how to organize, I learned what the labor law was, how to negotiate a contract. I didn't know anything. We knew nothing going into any of these campaigns.

Ellen: After that, using that as a stepping stone, we went on to Allyn and Bacon, which, at the time was a pretty big publishing company, and won a drive there.

Karen: Yeah, then we went on and did a number of campaigns in universities all over Boston, and I don't know that we won a single one of them. Oh, we won at Brandeis, of

course, that was my first big campaign, the Brandeis Library, and the Boston University Library. So we did a lot of these campaigns, won in some places, didn't in others, but ran big campaigns in almost all of them. But then we also did some places like the Arthur Murray Dance Studio, which was a bizarre campaign (laughs). And then we did big companies that were like way too big, then we decided, let's do some smaller companies, and then we did a radio station. Oh, good, this is the right size, about 50 people, then we found out the radio station was owned by General Tire or something, some huge multi-national corporation, which brought in the biggest union-busting firm in the country, Alfred DeMaria to actually be the lawyer at our hearing at the NLRB on the size of the bargaining unit. What we found was that no employer was reconciled to have the clericals organize, unlike other industries, where there was still some organizing going on in the 1970's. But for us, any campaign was like this enormous breakthrough. You weren't going against a single boss, you were going against the united power of the entire industry. And that was especially true in the private sector, and it was even true among universities that acted like they were private employers, although they may have had public funds as well. So we did a lot of those campaigns, we had some wins, we often came close, but we didn't win enough to have a stable membership base.

Debbie: In Boston—I only know this because I went through all the papers for the archives—and in the 1970's, you won a bunch of very small places that you got contracts. They were not strategic, some were like, some dental firm, and I think that was right before the real rise of the union-busters which came at the end of that decade. I think in the '74-'78 period you were actually able to get majorities, and get first contracts. And then in the '80s, they mostly destroyed the unions, even in those places.
And the rise of the union-busters really came right when we founded District 925, late 1970's. You couldn't go anywhere without them, it was really a new industry.

Our first big campaign when we became the national union, which I really feel was a step up in our sophistication was the Equitable Insurance Company campaign in Syracuse, where we really did it by the book on both sides. We did the ground up part, one on one, built committees, get the group to all be for the union, be together. And then a very sophisticated corporate campaign to win a first contract out of this Equitable. But I think in certain ways, it was very strategic, because in that industry, it was an important leader. It actually had a CEO who cared about his public image. It had a lot of elements that you would, in a sophisticated way, say this should be the target. I think we didn't quite get the automation part of it, how easily they could shut that office down. That was my first view of the union, watching that Equitable campaign, and I was so impressed with that campaign. We got a first contract, and then the day the first contract expired, they shut the office down.

Karen: Actually, we had something like an 85% win record. But we couldn't win big stable workplaces. And even in Allyn and Bacon, we won at Allyn and Bacon, but lost the members there some years later.

Ellen: And then the company merged with some other company, moved out of town, so on and so forth, yeah.

As a union, however, you were still a woman-led union, with your own approach to organizing, your own distinct culture, can you say a little bit about that? How did you make that flourish? What did it mean to you as union organizers?

Karen: I'd like to say that it didn't feel like a deliberate effort. When we started 9to5, we started out as women workers to organize women workers, and we created our own culture. We did what we thought was natural, what would work, and what would appeal to our base. We followed our own nose, and created something that would really work for us. And because we were all women, it was quite natural that the leaders we appealed to were women. And that worked. And when we moved into the union, it was really the same. We didn't have to fend off other influences, we still had the freedom to build an organization that would appeal to our base, do it in a way that we thought would work. And it continued through the whole union experience. And it only became challenged when we had to leave 925, if you had to go into somebody else's union to do the work, or if we ended up merging in some places ultimately. Or if you had to work inside the Service Employees Union on other issues. Then that was a very different culture. But for us, it never was hard to find women leaders, to recruit women staff, to train people to do jobs at all levels, to create jobs that were possible to do to and still be a responsible and fulfilled family member. So it wasn't like this set conscious strategy, this feminist theory of organizing. It was just like, how are we going to build an organization that works?

Debbie: I couldn't agree more about that. This was a practical organization, and so we didn't have to say to each other, we have to hire women because there are women in the workforce. We never actually had to have that conversation. We hired a male organizer because he was a good organizer, and we didn't have to have that discussion about whether it was appropriate to hire a male organizer. I know when I came into this organization, whatever adjectives you used at the beginning there, Ellen, were [ ] with me, because I was trying to find an organization I could do good political work in. I tried lots of places that seemed false, and I got to 9to5, and it just seemed real. It was practical to the max, and so I couldn't agree more with Karen that . . . we didn't have a theory, we were just trying things that worked, which are sort of the basics of building organization. And I think we've had an impact that has spread beyond 925. We've raised a whole generation of women leaders who've gone off and taken those kinds of practical skills and confidence that came from that organization to apply elsewhere. And I know that in SEIU there are lots of former 9to5ers that are all over the place doing this work. And a lot of the work that SEIU has become known for, has a lot of the same basics, and the same sort of natural energy around building organization that I think we didn't discover, but worked for us, and then spread.

Tape 2, Side A

Karen: What is hard to communicate is what Debbie was talking about earlier, the unbelievable energy and sense of expansion, and ability to take on the biggest dogs, and this sense that we could do anything. And the impact we could have, we had enormous

leverage; here we were, a tiny, under-resourced organization run by twenty-somethings that could figure out a way to get into the newspaper every single week, and lead a whole debate, and go testify before Congress. I testified before Congress all the time, even though we were operating on a total budget of $130,000 or something. There were years I earned $50 a week. My first year in the union I earned $7000 a year. Even in those days, that was very little money. But we were doing these enormous things, and so we had 9to5, and in the late '70s we decided to become a national organization, and we spread to another dozen or 15 cities. I would go around the country and I would write up a leaflet "Working Women in Worcester." Then I would go to Worcester, and I would meet with a bunch of women, and we would talk about building a 9to5 chapter there.

We had one in Worcester, MA. and we had one in western Massachusetts, and we had one in Rhode Island, one in Hartford, and that was just in New England. We set up half a dozen organizations, oh, Rochester, I went to Syracuse, I went all over the place. And it took nothing to create an organization and leave a chapter behind. All you needed was this fact sheet, "Working Women in Syracuse," that gave a few of the statistics, and you could find these people. . . Albany, we were everywhere.

How did you find them?

Karen: You know . . .I don't remember. You would hear about someone, then someone would tell you about somebody else, and they would get a few of their friends to the meeting. People would contact us.

Ellen: So we had unstaffed chapters like those, and then there was staffed chapters. How many were there?

Karen: At the height, there were probably about 20, but that comes in conjunction with the movie, the "Nine to Five" movie. I had known Jane Fonda during the anti-war movement. The war ended in 1975, that's when 9to5, the Association, had already been operating a couple of years, and we were just kicking off the union. Jane knew about our work, and wanted to make a contribution in the way she knew best, and that was to make a major motion picture. So there is a long story involved in that, but the upshot of it was, that Jane then got totally immersed in these issues, and then she did a national tour around the country, talking about the movie, the process of making the movie. And we would do events with her, in cities around the country. And a thousand women would come out to these events to hear Jane Fonda talk. . .

Ellen: In their lunch hour. . .

Karen: Sometimes in their lunch hour, sometimes in the evening. It was amazing, and then the movie came out in 1980, and it was the biggest hit of the year. It was an enormous success, it was just huge. And so you would see the name of our organization on the movie page. It was so astonishing. And then we did benefit performances of the movie all around the country. Then we did the movement-behind-the-movie tour; I went to 20 cities and we would book the morning local television show—in those days, every

city had their own local television show—and I would be in the television show after the person who had the recipe for shirred [sheared] eggs, or whatever. Then you would do interviews with local newspapers, and you would do a lunch meeting with an organizing committee, and then you would do a rally at night. And a couple of hundred women office workers would come out at night. And then we chartered a whole bunch of new chapters around that. So that is when we had the decision that we would have the creative confusion of calling everything 9 to 5, that we would have 9to5, the association, that would have the character and concerns of the working women's movement;the union 925, which had the power of unions; and "Nine to Five," the movie, which was the glamour of Hollywood. And we wanted people to get all that stuff confused; we didn't care if they knew exactly what they were talking about. That was the power of it.

So we sailed into the '80s with this enormous momentum. So many women, whether they actually ever became a member or not. . .now we hear from these women who say, oh yeah, I was in Boston when you had 9to5, and I always thought you guys were great, and it really affected me in my workplace. That was happening all over the place. And so we moved with all this hope and momentum, and growing numbers of women organizers and activists being affected by *what* we were doing, and *how* we were doing it, and slammed right into the recession, the Reagan era complete clampdown on unions, and the total freak-out in the labor movement over the enormous loss of members, with no strategies to deal with plant closings, and take-away bargaining on the part of employers. The intent (was) to eliminate unions as a factor, and take unions out of wage-setting. And, this complete transformation of the workforce, as Ellen was saying earlier, from manufacturing to service, and the ascendance of whole industries that had never seen a union, and didn't <u>intend</u> to see a union.

The end of the Carter Administration also meant the end of federal grants, like VISTA, which had supported many grassroots organizations in the late 1970s, including 9to5.

The '80s were <u>really dark</u>. It was a very, very bad period, and it was . . .there was no place, really, to turn. We as an under-resourced organization that lived by having a strategic edge, didn't have the ability to overcome the tsunami of repression that hit worker organizing.

<u>Ellen</u>: I would like to add something to that, which is, while all that negative stuff was happening, I think we tend to be too dismissive about the fact that we had won a huge amount of what we had set out to win. We had not won the institution, the organization. But the idea that it wasn't OK to discriminate against women any more, and it wasn't OK to ask women to get your coffee anymore—all that stuff we had won, and nobody was interested in talking to us anymore because they already knew that. It wasn't new. In 1973, it was new. By 1983, oh, yeah, we don't need to hear from you on that because, of course, we all agree with that, and you know, it's not an issue. And I think that there is a lot that is just very natural about the lifespan of a movement or an organization that you see throughout history -- for example, in the early-20th-century European workers' organization, the Bund. [in the . . .bund.] You know, historically you see these movements that get going that never make it as organizations, but they achieve their

goals. And I think that some of that happened to us, and we took it very personally, and felt like, oh, God, why can't we make headway here. In fact, we had already done it! And it was time for some new incarnation. I think after that, we didn't find that new incarnation. And I've spent many an hour trying to figure out what that incarnation could have been, and what we could have done, but, in some sense, it was just the way it goes.

Karen: We rode a wave of consciousness, and took it as far as we could. And then we believed that our institutional base was going to be unions, but unions were overwhelmed by the problems that they confronted, and either unable imaginatively or practically, to figure out a way to move into the next era. And it took unions another fifteen years to actually figure that out.

Nonetheless, you did build the national union (925), right?

Debbie: In that decade we retreated from the private sector. It was too hard, and really, the union-busting industry made it pretty impossible to organize there. And the whole social context of the time. . . We retreated into organizing workers who wanted a union, needed a union, and made big improvements in their lives through the union. In certain ways, those of us who were organizers during that decade, if you step back, you knew it was a dark decade, and, you know, you start bargaining benefit concessions, and so on and so forth. But we went place after place meeting and organizing public sector clerical workers and professional white-collar workers who made huge differences in their lives. Who, through collective action made collective improvements, who had the sort of personal experience that we had had in the association in the '70's, leadership development. All of that continued, but we didn't take on the targets we had set out to do in the '70's. That felt very dark, and I think the work of building the union in each of those workplaces was good and important work that still exists today. And for the members who were organizing in those days, I don't think they felt disappointed that the union wasn't meeting its goals.

Karen: Within SEIU we had as good or better a win record as any union. We built a 10,000-member union from nothing; we had successful contracts. We rarely, if ever, had a de-cert. We ran a great organization that people loved for the most part . . .

Debbie: And we attracted talent to the labor movement that wasn't going to find another way in. The manufacturing unions that were just in complete crisis at the time were certainly not welcoming new ideas, new people, new thoughts into their organizations. 925 was an entry into the labor movement of talent that wouldn't have come in any other way. I think that is really true.

Ellen: It is great to hear you say this. And I see that you were flexible—okay, it's just not going to work with private industry, so we're moving into public industry clericals. What if—two things. What if you said, hmm, clericals, we're not tied into that, maybe we will move into hospital organizing, you know, was it necessary to stay with office workers? And then my other question is, should we have been CLUW? Should we have

been the Coalition of Labor Union Women, and started a women's movement in the labor movement?

Debbie: Well, on the first, we actually did move out of clerical work. Librarians were some of our greatest union members, and greatest organizers, and then in the last decade, we moved into child care organizing. We didn't go into home health care in 925. So it is a good question though, if we had moved faster somewhere else. . . part of it was you felt we had a lot of talent, a lot of drive, a little bit of resource, and if you it someplace where it wasn't as hard, could we have produced there. The thing that we had, was we were 925 and we knew office workers. That is what got us the jurisdiction inside of SEIU to move; we couldn't have moved to health care because they wouldn't have let us in. I don't know, Karen, what your thoughts are on that . . .

Karen: Jurisdiction was important. When we first came into SEIU as a national organization in 1980, first [President] John Sweeney made the deal that we had a national jurisdiction—we could organize private sector clericals anywhere in the country. We had first dibs. I think he got pushed back on that, and, effectively, never allowed it to happen. We never really got the resources; we got run out of town in some places. And all we had left were some public sector campaigns, in what you could reasonably[e] refer to as an office setting. That's where we were. Also, we were determined to make this work. This was our mission. We couldn't ever move off that mission and keep the integrity of the organization. We couldn't have stayed together as a leadership group; we wouldn't have been allowed to do it. And effectively, that is what ended up happening. We did just splinter off.

Ellen: I have a similar critique of the association phase, where I sometimes think that [, um, you know] one of the things that kept us going was, we were kind of rigid. You know, we had this one thing that we did, and we were pretty isolated, and we were pretty intolerant of anybody else's style, and [ou know,] kept [,] people like Gloria Steinem at a great remove. I remember actually one time, we decided that we were going to have Gloria Steinem come and speak at a women workers thing. She came, and the heart of her talk was, people ask for a bigger slice of the pie, well, I'll tell you, the pie sucks! And we thought, ooh, please, don't talk this way, God (all laughing), you know, what is going to happen now?! But I sometimes think it would have been better if we had been able to be more flexible, and we had been able to make common cause with even a broader range of women than we were talking to, because having 300 members, or 700, whatever it was we had in Boston, that was tops. We couldn't get beyond that. But if we had opened things up a little more, and drawn on the insurgent consciousness, if you will, of women who didn't quite fit our category. If we had been able to move more, could we have done more? So it is not just about the union phase.

Debbie: The question on CLUW, I would say, no. I don't know what Karen would say. We felt we wanted a base, we wanted a political base inside of SEIU, and we were very committed to building that. And you needed dues-paying members who paid them to your organization to do that. I would say we were never tempted in the CLUW direction.

Karen: Right, and we couldn't figure out [ ].

Debbie: And right now I wouldn't say that I regret that.

Ellen: But it is interesting to think about . . .

Karen: Our view was that the only way to exercise power in a male-dominated union movement, was, as Debbie says, have your own base. That is what gave you power. It wasn't your good ideas, it wasn't your cute demeanor, or whatever. . .

Debbie: It wasn't being able to talk about issues really well, or do leadership development, things that CLUW sets out to do.

Karen: Our intent was to transform the labor movement, it wasn't just to build a functioning local union, that dealt with its own members well. But to get there, to transform the labor movement, you had to have a power base that could be respected in traditional terms. And, to us, organizing other people at our level didn't seem appealing, and then CLUW itself, so quickly became a bureaucratic organization that was captured by the AFL-CIO as opposed to changing, transforming the AFL-CIO, that within moments, it didn't seem appealing to us. And it was really run by women a generation older than us, who had it in their image, and really had very little to do with our image. CLUW did some things well, but, on the whole, it didn't achieve the goals of building a formidable women's movement inside unions and electing significant numbers of women to top leadership.

And it is interesting to compare it to the Canadian Labour Congress, for example, where women of the same generation and the same aspirations -- to really make a place for women in the union movement and to have the union movement be relevant to women workers – [,] chose not to create a separate organization, but did work together to influence their own institutions to change. And they were very successful, they were much more successful than we were, in every measure, we—CLUW was, in every single measure. And that is an important difference in strategy, but, frankly, we didn't have an interest to pay attention to either experience during all those years.

Ellen: So I am wondering if that is something that might happen in the future, as it remains true [,] that the labor movement, like every other institution in America, is totally dominated by men.

Karen: I hope there will be a younger generation of women who will feel like, we totally failed them, and that now they have to take things into their own hands, and create something that works. I don't know if that is what you mean . .

Ellen: Yeah.

You have mentioned that one of the legacies of 925 is the creation of a lot of women leaders who are now working at various levels in the labor movement, particularly

in SEIU locals. . .What continue to be the obstacles to women developing leadership roles in the union? Why is that hard now?

Karen: In part, I think that women of our generation showed their talent, and got absorbed by unions, under the terms of the union. The union did not need to change to say, oh, there is a lot of talent in these gals, let's bring them in. So mostly what happened was that women leaders learned how to succeed in the existing organization; you had to, or else you would be expelled or dismissed. And so there are lots of very good women leaders now who run good organizations, but don't run organizations that are particularly women-oriented or do a particularly good job of developing women leaders, or have an ability to change organizations around diversity. And so they got bought off, we got bought off. We didn't really come in with a strong enough agenda. I don't know what would have changed that.

Part of the problem is society as a whole. There is still a lot of discrimination, so it is an extra problem for women, who are mothers, to participate in any movement.

Ellen: And why should the labor movement be different from television, education, government, and every other institution of American life.

There aren't that many househusbands out there.

Ellen: Yeah, that, and I think about my daughter, who is 20, and she is somebody who really can't speak in a group, but she talks about leading from behind. And you see her with her friends and see how much authority she has, in a way that is completely different from being able to stand up in front of a group. There is something about a women's culture, or the way women are comfortable interacting, that is not reflected in how people organize unions or run unions today.

Karen: You know I look back in history at these upsurges of women workers who saved the very fate of the union movement at different times in history, whether it was textile workers in the 1880's or garment workers in the 1910's, the teens, or the telephone workers and teachers, and so on, at various low points in the labor movement. And then these massive groups of women workers, through acts of great heroism and militance, organized huge sectors of the workforce, and never succeeded in getting an institutional. . .never got a place at the table. Never actually changed the role of women within the overall institution of labor. And it is kind of a mystery, about why this keeps getting re-churned in exactly the same way every thirty years or so. How do you solve that dilemma, how do you change that so that there are institutional demands that ultimately are won. Partly it's that you can't do it just in the labor movement—look at other societies, like the Nordic countries. There have been huge demands on the political system that have established equality in a very different way than you have here. And not just formal equality between the sexes, but also the kinds of family supports that make it possible for women to actually play a role in society. None of that exists here, yet.

And a lot of women's energy, I think, in subsequent generations to the 1970s has gone into individually making it in different fields that used to be totally male-dominated, because we do see that happening--the women fire fighters, the women in the army, all these individually heroic things. But organizing . . .?

Debbie: The organizing that is going on today, it is women workers organizing. It's the organizing that is putting any life to the labor movement. And the question that Karen asks is a really good one: they are doing the work to build these unions, right, from the rank and file leader to the organizer, to the lead organizers, maybe even the head of the local. But maybe in the end they don't care as much, they don't have the ambition to be at the very top of the organization in the same way. I don't know. . . the men care more about doing that. The women are still doing the organizing. That is who is being organized, who is doing the organizing, at least in our organization—huge numbers—child care workers, home care workers, the janitors, it is all women, and the organizers are, the researchers are. But what it takes, then, to decide that you want to take on the organization, you know, I think that people just don't want to do it that much.

Ellen: It is complex, I wouldn't want to sign on to what you said, I just don't want to. I mean, I think, that Kim Cook's transcript is very interesting, where—she is now in a local where there are men and women—and she said that it has sort of slipped to the point where the men feel comfortable talking and the women don't. And she, a woman, is leading this situation.

And I was referring to leadership not necessarily nationally, but just speaking up, being the leadership at the local level.

Debbie: I think that exists. I think the problem is that the organizations are being led by men nationally. Now our union may be somewhat different than others, but there is plenty of women's leadership at the grassroots and local level, but when you get to the heads of national unions, the heads of the labor council. . . you know, I had to sit for years and years and years through the '80s and '90s as the only woman on my labor council executive board. And it never got better. And then the labor council would say, well we can't choose who is the head of the local. I am not asserting a point that women don't have the ambition; I think women have lots of ambition. But there is some reason, that in the end, while all these waves of organizing that have brought all the workers into the union, have been women workers that have done it, that it doesn't stay in the institution. And I don't think we know why.

I think it has something to do with, on average, women seeking more balance in their lives, around work and family, than men do, on the average. But I don't know if that would account for it statistically.

Karen: And men control the organizations now; they are in control of the bigger organizations, and so waves of organizing have utility, but it does take a lot to go challenge beyond what . . . You join the union because you want a better contract, and so to conceptualize, well, I am going to take on the whole organization, becomes less

interesting, especially in the absence of a social movement outside that is encouraging you to do that, and is tied to a social agenda that is meaningful to you. So I think that's part of what happens, too.

That seems like a good ending spot, unless there are things that are pressing to come out at this point. Exactly 90 minutes.

Debbie: Good time-keeping, Ann.