

Anne Conway
Interviewed by Ann Froines
Cleveland, Ohio
December 7, 2005

I'm interviewing Anne Conway, December 7, 2005, in Bay Village in Cleveland, Ohio. Anne, tell me how you first encountered 925. Where were you working? What was that first meeting like?

I was working at the administration building of the library system where I work now. We had a staff association, which was in-house, and very much supported—we met on company time—very much supported by the administration. And people were beginning to see that we needed some help. The staff association was sort of a social thing, and not much real change was happening. I don't know how the initial contact was made, but I was called by an organizer, Buck Bagot, and he wanted to know if he could come and talk to me. At that time I was serving on what we called the personnel relations committee, which was, I suppose, analogous to a grievance committee, although we had no power to address grievances. So he came to my workplace and we went into the cafeteria and talked. He told me about District 925 and how it was started and what it was trying to do and everything. I remember after that meeting, I shook his hand, and I said, "Well, thank you very much, you know, I know that nothing is ever going to come of this here (laughs), so, goodbye."

Why did you feel that way. Do you remember?

I felt that it was a great organization. I didn't feel that anybody would be interested in having it, and I didn't feel like it would go anywhere.

Can I just ask you to spell his last name.

B-A-G-A-T, I think. Anne will know. And I have no idea whether Buck is his actual name. That's all I ever heard him called.

What were some of the issues you thought the staff there had, that would lend itself to unionization?

There were a lot of issues that had to do with classifications. Job descriptions were very fuzzy, it was a very sort of paternalistic kind of administration. If there were technically grades and not steps but there were job classifications, but if you got to the top of it and they liked you, they would just put you in another one. There wasn't any structure, really, to it. And there were things like there were new buildings being built, and working conditions were an issue. Pay was an issue: sometimes they gave raises, sometimes they didn't; sometimes they gave some people raises, sometimes not. There'd been a huge amount of chaos in administration just prior to that time. This was, I guess, '82? And you had directors coming and going, and policies, and it was just kind of a

mess. And the staff felt like we needed something with more clout than a staff association to speak for the staff in the midst of all this.

So there must have been a first meeting or a first get-together at some point, you began to talk, or form—were you on that original organizing committee?

Yes, I was on the original organizing committee. They had been talking to different people around the system, and getting together. They had met a few times with some other people. And when I saw the other people that were involved in those initial steps, they were people that I respected. They were people who'd been in the system a long time, people whose opinion I valued, and I thought, maybe this'll go after all. (laughs) So we began to meet. We would meet on Sunday nights at people's homes, and just strategize, you know, how to get the word out. And it was so good to have somebody to let us know the effective ways to do these things, so that it actually had some impact.

Were there any other organizers from the union involved, besides this fellow Buck?

He was there at the first. Kim Cook was there some of the time.

Someone named Tom [Hoffman]? I forget. Maybe she didn't mention [].

Possibly, but Kim Cook is the other one that I remember, and then of course when the office was here, then Anne was around, and all the rest of them.

Had you had any other experiences earlier as an activist or an organizer?

Not really. My parents were kind of—not in unions—but activists in their own way, and always right out in front, getting things done, in whatever venue they found themselves. And so there was that family history of...

Tell me a little bit about your background.

I grew up near Mansfield, and my father was in the Air National Guard. He was full time in the Air National Guard when I was growing up in the '50s. He just passed away two weeks ago...So he would be in and out, and gone for periods of time for that. And my mother was at home with us when we were little, but when we were in grade school—there are three of us—and when we were in grade school, she went back to college, and finished her degree, and started teaching. And it was so revolutionary that they came out from the local paper and took our picture. (laughs)

You mean that a woman returned, did some college...

They posed her at the kitchen table with all her books and us in the background, you know, cleaning up after dinner. (laughs)

Doing the chores.

Yes. So that was kind of the...she was unusual for her time, for the '50s, to go and do that. She was always a leader in the church and wherever she was, she was always right out in front making things happen. So I had two good examples to follow.

Can you describe some of your own experiences as an office worker? Had you started working just for the first time at the library, or maybe had an earlier...

That was actually my first full time job. I had worked different college jobs here and there. I had worked as a temp for a short time, for about a year in Indianapolis I did temporary office jobs, and part-time kinds of things, and then I was home with my children for a little while. And then this was my first full time job, which I now have had for more than 25 years. It's been quite a little trip. But especially when I was temping in offices, I saw all these people going to work every day, bringing home so little, and having so little say about what went on while they were there. And I could leave because I was the temp. All I had to do was call and say, "This isn't working for me anymore," and they'd give me another assignment. But I saw people who were there, and would be there for their whole careers, and I thought, "That's just no way to work."

That's not for you.

No.

Since you're sort of the generation, or you were a young adult when the women's movement began, how did you feel about the women's movement? Do you remember having any reactions to that, or did you participate in any way?

I don't remember. I led a very sheltered life. Went off to college right after high school, to Ohio Wesleyan University which at the time was like the complete opposite of an activist kind of a place. And then married when I was still in college, so that took me further out of what was going on on the campus. So it was not until I began to think about an actual career—I got a liberal arts degree and then had babies. This was pretty much what was done in 1969. So it wasn't until I started to think about, you know, "Wait a minute. What would happen if I had to be responsible for supporting my family." And not—I've been married for 43 years, so, it's not that it's—or not 43, what am I saying—39 years...So it wasn't that I feared for the stability of our relationship. It was just that things happen, and I had no skills, and at that time the minimum wage was still different for women than it was for men, and there were just not that many opportunities. And then I began to look around me at things that were going on. But growing up, I was very sheltered from any of that sort of thing.

Were you aware at all of labor unions, or of workplace struggles growing up? I guess if your father was in the military—

My father was in the military, my mother was a teacher but that was really before the heyday of teachers' unions. She started to teach in about '61, I think. And for a whole

year of teaching, she made under \$5000. Which even then was virtually nothing. So that was before unions got to be an issue in education even.

[The public] sector in general, yeah. Well, describe any memorable moments from that first unionizing drive that you were involved in at your library.

The Sunday night meetings were so energizing. There would be 30 or 40 people crammed into somebody's family room. And we had all these ideas, and all these things were happening, and you were able every time to say, so-and-so signed a card, and we've accomplished this or that. Things were just happening very, very fast. And we had an election, which we lost by 8 votes. Which was absolutely crushing. It was horrible...I'm trying to think of the years.

That's ok. I can fill that in.

That is probably on the record somewhere. But in any case, that was in the fall. And we went ahead, and negotiated a contract independently the following year, early in the year. And the staff association hired an attorney. The person who was the director at that time, even though the public employees collective bargaining law was not in effect yet in Ohio, went ahead and said, yeah, sure, let's negotiate a contract.

And they were willing to sit down with you?

And they sat down with us, and we negotiated—you know, they had a lawyer, we had a lawyer, we negotiated a contract. Several things in that contract still affect the operation of the library in significant ways. We have a significant number of supervisors in the bargaining unit. At the time, it wasn't our job to say, we don't want these people in the unit. We laid out a very comprehensive unit, and they said, take out these few positions here, and fine. They agreed to the unit. They agreed to compensation for Sunday work which is still in effect, and makes it very expensive to operate on Sundays. And negotiated actually what was a pretty decent contract, in the spring of I believe '84. Immediately after that, the library made the decision to open virtually all the branches on Sundays, and people just went up in arms. Now, people are standing in line for Sunday work. But at the time, it was a really huge issue, and I think that was the galvanizing issue. The staff association executive board had kind of kept in contact with Anne, [] just watching what was going on, and we decided at a certain point that we would go for another election. And that occurred in January, then, when it won 2 to 1. It was really a mandate from the staff to organize and to go ahead. So our second contract then was negotiated as a chapter of District 925. It was just kind of an amazing time. (laughs)

When did you become a leader in the organization? Or how, I should ask. It's more important than when.

How I got started in the staff association: it was very popular to be an officer in the staff association, because you met on company time, and you got all these perks. So a person in my department was on the nominating committee. And he said, "We're just filling out

the slate. Would you run for” what they called the personnel relations committee, “but don’t worry, you’re new, not very many people know you, so you won’t have to worry about actually getting elected and doing anything.” Well, famous last words. So I was elected. So I was on the board in the staff association. I was involved almost from the beginning in the organizing, and I was elected vice-president when we had the first union election, as a chapter of District 925. I went away on vacation, and I came back and there was to be a union meeting that was Sunday night, the day that I came back from vacation. And a person who lived in the same town called--the meeting was across town—she said, well, why don’t we ride together. So, sure, no red flags went up. On the way over she told me that the president had left town with another man and quit her job and was gone (laughs), so all of a sudden I was the president, and filled out her term and then was elected to my own two terms. So it just sort of came at me (laughs) kind of suddenly.

You know that program, Commander-in-Chief?

Yeah, something like that!

“Oops! What happened here!”

This is not what I signed for! (laughs)

Did you feel any nervousness about assuming this responsibility? Did you feel up to it?

I did not. But I had a tremendous amount of support. And the District 925 staff was great at fostering leadership skills, and guiding us through what we needed to do, and not dictating, but guiding us through. Talking out the problem and seeing where we wanted to go, what was the best way to approach whatever it was.

So in effect you were really the first president that functioned for any length of time in that organization.

Yes.

Helped build it.

Yeah, and the other person, the person who left had been on all the organizing committees too, and everything, so actually we were kind of in the same place, but she’d been around the library a lot longer than I, and knew everybody, and the ins and outs of everything. So I felt like the new kid.

So then you worked primarily negotiating contracts. Did you have certain actions around the effort to get the contracts? Were there struggles associated with getting a contract?

Not at first. At first, negotiations might take a long time, but it wasn't a big...we didn't have to do informational picketing or anything for the first couple of contracts. We were just...things worked out.

Did you feel—you were now—you had the triple day: kids, full time job, president of a union—what was that like for you, in terms of your hours and your time?

During those times, my husband used to call me “the big woman” as opposed to “the little woman.” (laughs) Because I was always going off somewhere. But he was very supportive. The kids thought it was kind of cool...

Did you have to take them, sometimes, when they were little, to meetings and things like that, or by that time—

Yes, or we had meetings at my house. So we all knew each others' kids. The family was very supportive. It was not that much of an issue, really.

Can you describe in any detail the kinds of trainings you did receive, to be a union president?

Well, thinking back...a lot of one-on-one, on-the-job, mentoring through the problem. Later on then, as District 925 got bigger and had more resources, then there would be meetings for officers and some more specific kinds of training. But at first it was a lot of one-on-one, just walking us through everything. (laughs)

I know one of the things that some of the people talked about doing as union members or union presidents was going to other sites to talk about what it means to be in a union. Did you do that too?

We did that a lot. We did Cincinnati several times, Dayton...Once we tried a Blue Cross Blue Shield at the time—it's now Med Mutual. But we went door to door to Blue Cross Blue Shield employees' homes, talking to them.

So even though you were president, you did that kind of organizing yourself.

We did. We did. Yeah. A lot of member organizing.

What did you learn about yourself during all of this, since this had been quite...

I was surprised that I could actually do some of that stuff. You know, knocking on a stranger's door, and you know, they weren't always glad to see you (laughs), and I lived, you know. I'm I guess basically a shy person and that wasn't something that I would have readily volunteered for, but it was just kind of assumed that we were all going to do that. And so we did!

Looking back, it seems kind of amazing?

Looking back, I'm thinking, wow! I really did that! And calling people on the phone. Standing up and giving a report at the convention when John Sweeney is in the room, you know. (laughs) And here I am reporting to an actual famous person...Just doing the things...Going to a reception at the White House for the 75th anniversary of the Women's Bureau when Karen was with the Department of Labor, and just...just things I never thought I would or could do. With the right person there to say, "This is what we're doing, come on, I'll show you," it was surprisingly easy.

What did you learn about yourself, would you say, as a result of...

That there was more...I could do a lot more than I had given myself credit for. I think I limited myself a lot as a younger person. Not that I regret any choices I made, but I might have made other choices, had I realized that I was capable of doing them. My daughter, for instance, is a doctor. I would have never have even dreamed of nursing, or dental hygiene or any other health profession. She decided, and put herself through medical school, and is a doctor, so....

Of course probably it's the times changed quite a bit.

Yes. The times have changed a lot. But still, I think if I had had that background from the union work that I did, as a younger person, I would not have limited my choices the way I did. It was a very expanding kind of experience, if that makes any sense.

What would you say about the kinds of leadership you encountered in the organization? What did you think and feel about the women who you came in contact with who were the leaders of the organization?

Almost to a person, people who really cared, who really valued everybody's contribution. Which I think was the big piece that was missing from my job, was the feeling that each person's contribution was actually valued and meant something to the organization. So I think that was the biggest thing, that kept me doing it, was I felt like it was a place I was needed. And it was a place where people were glad that I was involved. And I think they were really good at making each person, no matter how large or small your role was, that each person was valued as part of the organization.

Can you say anything about the roles and development of men in the organization? Their experiences, what do you think that meant in a mainly women's union?

There are men who are officers in the local unit who were officers when we were beginning in the early '80s. They're still involved, from the library. And I don't know whether a man who works for a library is really representative of other men union members, because it's a female-dominated organization. Very often the highest people in the organization are women, and they're used to working with women and for women, so it's not such a big deal for them. I think they felt comfortable participating and sitting in the rooms full of women, and talking, and having their role, and not being in charge of

things. But I think that was a combination of the nature of District 925 and the nature of the library as an employer. Because they were used to that.

Did issues about diversity, especially racial and ethnic diversity, come up in your years of organizing and being a union leader?

The union was a lot more diverse than our workplace. And that's still an issue in the library. It seems to be very difficult to make the workforce in our system, anyway, representative of the communities that we serve. And I don't know why that is. But we did, at the time there was a chapter in Cook County, in Chicago, city workers, a very diverse group and very different from library workers. We had people from Seattle, there were more Hispanic people. At the time, gay and lesbian people were very undercover in county library, and so had the opportunity in the union to meet people who were openly gay or lesbian and really—

The caucus.

Yeah. And to work with them...I don't know what the effect on the membership might have been. But the effect on us as officers was it really opened a lot of horizons for us, to be involved in the larger union, and working as equals with people that we might not even have met...

Otherwise.

Otherwise, right.

It's amazing, when you look at these pictures of the SEIU conventions. It's probably the most diverse union in the country.

Did you consider 925 a family-friendly organization? I know you weren't a staff person, but you certainly were working closely with the staff.

I saw the staff working really, really hard. But I also saw their families. And their families seemed like my family, supporting the work. Not that I would have known very much about anybody's relationship or anything like that. But it did seem possible for people to work and dedicate themselves to this, and also to have a life outside of it. But it was very intense work in those early times (laughs), so it can't have been easy for them.

Did you ever consider working for the union yourself, or did that ever come up?

I did not. An opportunity didn't come up. I invested quite a lot in my library degree. And--

Oh, I see. You had gotten your degree before you started working in the library? Or had you done that after?

Yes. I'd been working part time at a college library while I was getting my degree. And then, when I had the degree, my first job in this library system was a professional job.

I see.

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START of SIDE B**

--some about whether librarians are really "professionals," you know. And from what I could see, from where I was working as a librarian, was, we were very skilled workers. But we were workers. We had a very specialized skill set to contribute, but we were workers in a large organization. And that put our interests on a par with the clerks and the maintenance people and everybody else in the organization.

Was there ever any kind of debate with the NLRB or who decides who gets to be in units, as to whether someone with an MLS degree should be in the unit?

That first contract we negotiated has kind of been the cornerstone, I guess. It was negotiated just as the public employees collective bargaining law went into effect for Ohio, so there wasn't anybody to say, when we started out. And then, the unit was already there. It was officially constituted, it was written down in the contract, the contract exists, it was a valid contract, so, it just stayed. And from time to time the administration every time would propose taking certain positions out of the unit, which of course the negotiating team would never agree to, and there was never a movement from within the bargaining unit to pull out any class of employees.

So you librarians felt quite comfortable in the unit.

Yes, and there are many librarians who are officers. It's definitely still a comprehensive unit, as far as I can see. Of course, having been out of it for ten years...

I wonder, do you know anything about whether that's true in other states where librarians are organized?

I don't know. I don't even know that there are very many.

Organized libraries?

Not like Ohio, where District 925 really went around and got a lot of libraries. But I really couldn't say whether that's...

In your view, were the aims of 925 realized?

I think a lot of them were. It was to be a different kind of a union, to be a really member-driven kind of a union...and not to be all about strikes and negotiating cushy featherbed jobs (laughs), the sorts of things that the perception of a big union, 20, 25 years ago. So

yeah, I think so. I don't know what's happened since the organization grew, and then became part of 1199. That all happened after I left. And looking in from the outside, I can see maybe some differences in approach and what's going on, but I think we felt back then that we had done what we set out to do.

How would you—this is a related question, but gets at it sort of a different way—how would you describe the legacy of 925. For example, do you think it had any impact on SEIU as a whole?

I don't know. When I used to go to SEIU conventions, I would see that it was respected in the organization. But I don't know...I would like to hope that it did. I think SEIU, quite apart from District 925, already had a different type of take on things than the United Autoworkers or any of the big old-style unions. So, I really couldn't say.

Is there anything at all that disappointed you ever about working with 925?

I was like a true believer, and I was... (laughs), you know, I did everything that was asked of me, and I just felt very good about the organization.

Nothing wrong with that!

No. (Laughs) No, it may have been kind of idealistic and unrealistic. But I felt very good about being a part of the organization for as long as I was.

And tell me the story about what your thought process was when you were faced with being promoted into a professional position that would take you out of the union. Is that an interesting story?

It is, kind of. I mentioned before that there was a lot of chaos in administration. Well, it came up again, about 10, 11 years ago, and heads rolled, and all kinds of things happened. And as a consequence, some positions were vacant. And one position—I was working in a branch as the adult librarian at the time—and a position came open at the regional library which was out of the bargaining unit, and it was a management position. And they asked me if I would temporarily take that position. This was in February of '95. If I would temporarily take that as an acting assignment. And I had had acting assignments before, and I thought, this is good for my resume, I need to look out for my family, my kids were graduating from high school and in college. So I took the acting assignment in February of '95. And come October of '95, I was still there, acting, (laughs), when it was decided—a lot of other things happened which were extremely complicated—but I was given the choice of either taking the assignment that I was acting in, taking it as a permanent assignment; another management assignment; or returning to my former position after ten months. And looking out for my own professional and personal interests, I did take the job that I had been acting in for all that time. So that's how I ended up there. But it was a difficult decision. When I took the acting position in February, we were in the midst of negotiations, and I was on the negotiating team. The director had said to me, "If you feel like you can do it, you can stay on the negotiating

team and be acting in this managing.” And I could not. So I resigned from the negotiating team. I was still on the national executive board, but I was not involved in the local for that period of time.

It seemed too confusing, too much a conflict?

Too much of a conflict. I was writing performance evaluations. I was managing the facility. I was doing all these things that had a little more weight to them because it was a management position. And I felt there was too much conflict going on, for me to actually do the two things at the same time. But it was a very rough decision. I remember the last executive board meeting that I went to, and we were all crying. Yeah, it was tough. But it was something that I felt I needed to do, for myself and my family.

Yeah. And in a way, the skills you develop running a union are not that different from management.

Absolutely.

And it gives you the confidence to do it.

And the other thing that kicked that over was that my supervisor in the management position is a fantastic person, and just an excellent...in another life she would have made a great union organizer (laughs). She went in another direction. But for the first time I was working with somebody who valued my work in the way that my union work had been valued. So that made it somewhat easier. But it was not a lightly made decision.

So what is your present job now? How would you describe it?

I'm branch manager, for the community branch in Bay Village.

So that means you're the kind of chief officer...

I'm the only non-bargaining unit in the facility. And that's isolating. (laughs)

Now do you ever find yourself bargaining on the other side of the table now, or is that left to—

They have not asked me to be on it. Now my supervisor has been, and she and I have talked a lot about—she had some difficulty seeing the roles. She's the kind of person that...reasonable people should be able to do this without all this rigamarole. So she and I talked about the roles that people play at a negotiating table, and she says that I helped her understand it and look at it in a different way. But I have not been asked to be on the negotiating team for management.

Have you wanted to at all?

I think that I would have something to contribute to it. I think it's really valuable to know both sides of what you're dealing with. And I can see things I would do as a member of the management team, that I would not have done as a member of the union team, and I would have thought were terrible. But the role is different. But I think being able to see the other person's—you know, really knowing where the other person's coming from, would be really valuable.

I learned from Peggy that they're trying to work wherever possible now with this model of win-win bargaining, [], which is more of a problem-solving approach? Instead of the two sides trading, we want this, and the other side's like, no, we want this, and you kind of gradually narrow it down and come to an agreement, they define what the problems are, and then they jointly solve them. She said in ideal situations it goes on in between bargaining contracts as well, to deal with certain issues that come up.

Yes.

And it sounds like you would be a really wonderful person to be involved in that kind of a bargaining situation. Because you have seen both sides, and you value a good process.

I think ideally it's the way it should work. The last negotiating team I was on, we were at that time calling it interest-based bargaining—

Oh, ok. She said it's the same thing.

And it was making me crazy. I had been through like 3 contracts with the other model, and people were just talking all the time, and talking, talking, talking, and never deciding anything (laughs), and it was making me nuts!

Oh, I see, so it has its down side too, in other words.

And I think a lot of that had to do with the personalities of who was on each team. But I think that that can be a really valuable tool, and especially as Peggy told you, between times, if you recognize when to stop doing it.

You mean when it's not productive []

Right. When this isn't the way. This is a problem that's not appropriate to address it in that way. It has to be done some other way. If you can recognize that, and if both sides are truly buying into it. Then sure! That's...

That's ideal, huh?

That's ideal...

What kind of work do you do now mainly, in your job as a branch manager?

The day-to-day operation of the branch. It's a lot of stuff to do with the physical plant—what needs fixing, what needs replacing. A lot of work in the community with the mayor and the superintendent of schools, just talking about what each segment is doing and coordinating and cooperating. There's a lot of that. Just the day-to-day supervision. I'm the person that they ask, should we do this. Or there's something horrible going on, come take care of it! (laughs)

And you probably do all the personnel evaluations too, is that part of your job?

I do my department heads. There are four department heads. And then they do their—

And how big is the staff of a branch library?

Bay is a kind of a middle sized branch in our system. We have the four department heads, three are professional librarians and the other one supervises the circulation desk. The staff is 16 including myself, plus then the shelvers who are very part time—8, 10, 12 hours a week. And there's about 10 of them. So all together, 25 people or so work there. I don't directly supervise everyone, but I supervise their supervisors.

Do you still feel—this is my final question—do you still feel a connection with the labor movement at all?

I do. I still get the leadership magazines and stuff. Of course now that SEIU has pulled out of the AFL-CIO, I'm not getting their things. But I just never let them know that I wasn't in the unit anymore, because I want to see, you know, I—

What's happening.

I enjoy reading about what's happening. I don't feel like we had a huge struggle. You know, our jobs weren't on the line. And when I see people making minimum wage standing up and putting their jobs on the line for the union, it's very inspiring. I just think they're heroes.

That's a great place to stop. Thank you.

END