Doreen Levasseur
Interviewed by Ann Froines
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Braintree, Massachusetts

Today is February 23rd. I am interviewing Doreen Levasseur who's in her office at the MTA Building on the South Shore.

So tell me a little bit about the story of how you entered 925.

Well, I was working as a department secretary at Boston State College, and a woman I was working with was fascinating. She was Dr. Ann Gavin, who had been one of the founders of the faculty union there, and whose uncle also was the chaplain of the Catholic Labor Guild. And very early on we developed a very good relationship. She was just a terrific person to work for, very strong and smart and very encouraging of the talents and skills that she felt I had. And it happened that I came to work for her at a kind of a low point in my life, and she was just—she, without knowing it, just inspired me.
She talked to me about the collective bargaining law that had passed, that was about to take effect for public employees—was taking effect July 1st, '74. It was what we now know as Chapter 150-E, the real expanded Collective Bargaining Law. And the man who was at that point the chair of the commission, the Labor Relations Commission, had been invited to come and talk to the employees at Boston State about what the implications of the law were for us. So she said, "They're having a union meeting across the street—I think you oughta go."

So I went and listened to him and I thought, "Huh!" We had a union--it was the Mass. State Employees Association--but they really didn't do anything—we never heard from them or anything. So I went over there and talked with some other people, and we realized we had some rights that we weren't exercising. And so we kind of started this Nonprofessional Employees Organizing Committee. I actually have a couple of the newsletters that we did at that time. And I and another person were kind of co-chairs of this committee. And the reason *we* were is because people knew that we worked for probably the two most untouchable administrators in the system at that time at the school, which was located on Huntington Avenue. The personnel director was a terror to everybody, but she would never take on these two people, and so we were kind of like protected under their umbrella.

And so we decided we would try to meet with the president and make certain demands about how our rights under this thing called a "Blue Book" would be honored and protected and so forth. We were kind of doing, I guess, a lot of 9to5 things without even realizing it.

What kind of rights—excuse me—were most concerning you?

I'm trying to remember—that's the hard— I'd have to look actually at those old

newsletters. But I think it had to do with breaks and lunches and various kinds of things like that. I think there was kind of like an internal grievance process kind of thing. But we really wanted to assert ourselves because the director of personnel was in the habit of, you know, she'd corner people in the hallway and get mad at them about something and they would just cry. So we just wanted to stop that kind of thing. She wasn't a bad person —she was just a terror. [laughs] I used to kind of make fun of her. But she liked me. In a way, it was like Catholic school which I went to for twelve years, that if you were smart and did your work well, you could get away with anything. But if there was a little weak spot they could find, they'd pick on you, you know, and that's how she was, and I didn't like that at all.

So in any event, we started this organization, and then we started looking into, OK, well, now it means we can actually join a real union. What unions are out there? I met at that point--I met two people: one was Harvey Berman, who was with AFSCME; and the other was with Donna [Sarutis]—oh, it was actually Donna Kaplan at the time--and she was with Local 254 of SEIU. I actually met Donna first, and now Donna works for MTA. [laughs] Donna Sarutis. And I always say, "Donna, you're the first union organizer I ever met!"

Basically the unions were really looking at, OK, what's the opportunity here for organizing state employees with this new collective bargaining law? Eventually all of that evolved into this huge case about the units, the various units in the state. It ended up being 10 units, and the biggest one was the unit I was in, which was the clerical unit. But that wasn't going get resolved for a long time to come, so really all of that wasn't going to sort of come to fruit for quite a while.

But what was going on in our little corner of the world was a couple of things. Dr. Gavin encouraged me to go take courses at the School of Industrial Relations, which was sponsored by the Labor Guild, which was— at that time it was located near Boston City Hospital. It wasn't an easy place to get to. But I went there and it was a wonderful place to be, because there were all sorts of courses, you know, about women in the labor movement and collective bargaining—just stuff I hadn't— you know, like I had nothing in my file to understand what unions were about. So this was a great place to learn. Father Gavin always made it an incredibly just accessible place—you know, no one was better than anybody else. He had this real penchant for encouraging young people, and he was just a tremendous person.

This is the Labor Relations Guild?

Right. The Catholic Labor Guild, the labor guild of the Archdiocese. And they ran this school. And Father Gavin at that time was the chaplain. And he knew I worked for his niece and you know, he was extremely encouraging. They're still like that. The school is now located in Weymouth. It went from near Boston City--they had to move out of there —it was the old Boston College High School. They had to move to Quincy, and now they're in Weymouth. It's just the same; the attitude is the same. Father Boyle, who's the current chaplain, has the same attitude—*very* encouraging of people, and no one's better

than anybody else, you know.

So I took really fun, great courses there. Ann Withers was one woman who was giving courses, and I remember taking a course on women in the labor movement. It was really exciting. Florence Luscomb—do you remember Florence Luscomb? She was speaking one night, and this man walked into the room, and from the back of the room, he says, "Florence Luscomb, I haven't seen you since we marched for Sacco and Vanzetti!" And everybody in the room just turned—this was like living history. And she says, "So who's that? I recognize the voice, but who is it?" "Sam Angoff!" Sam Angoff was head of Angoff, Goldman, Manning, Powell, and Wanger, which was like a big labor law firm. And it was just incredible. And I came to, later on, through 9to5, have a relationship with that firm. It all comes around. So, anyway, it was just really a fun time. I just met great people. And again, Ann Gavin really was the inspiration for me.

So out of that came an awareness. And I don't remember what my awareness was. Maybe it was through someone else at the college who was involved in 9to5. I remember this young woman named Connie—I can't remember her last name—but she had gone, I think, to some 9to5 meetings, told me about it. 9to5 was at that time fairly new. They had begun organizing, like, committees of university women, committees of women in insurance, women in banking, women in publishing. So I went to this university women event.

That was kind of the first event you remember?

Yeah. The whole thing was just what Karen and Ellen and Janet and Judy were doing at that time, which is, you hold this event, you talk about some of the statistics, some of the issues, what are the rights, you know, what can we do about some of these problems that we're all having in common. Kind of building that sense of community and sense of something we can do about this. And so I developed a relationship with the organization, went to some of the meetings and some of the events, and got to know Karen.

And then it was in 1975—so that happened around '74—a year later there was a change in the department head in my department, and the woman who was now the new department head, I knew I didn't want to work for her. She had been in the department, but I knew I didn't want to work for her. My role would be very different and I felt it would really be downgraded and I didn't like that. So I transferred to another department.

In the meantime, Karen called me and she said, "What's going on with you?" and she came over and had lunch and, you know, I told her what was happening, how I'd changed departments and why. And she said, "Well," she said, "you know, we're thinking of... we're trying to actually get a charter from a national union to organize office workers. Would you be interested in being part of that?" And I said, "Yeah, that sounds really interesting!" I had no idea what the hell I was doing.

And so she invited me to come to--she says, "Well, we're having a staff picnic. It's not just staff, but some other people are coming. And maybe we could stay around afterwards

and we could talk." So I went to this staff thing, I think it was at Lars Anderson (Park). And other people were there, other women from other industries were there, too. And so, then people left and it was several of us—I'm thinking Joan Tighe was probably at that as well, that sort of gathering at the end. And they started asking me all these questions, and suddenly I realized, it was a job interview! [laughs] It was like, I wasn't even—Janet Selcer thinks to this day that this is the funniest thing that she ever—"You didn't know it was a job interview? What are you, completely clueless?" I said, "I don't know! I just didn't--" It was so informal, you know? [laughs] It was pretty funny. It just hit me all of a sudden—"Oh, my God, this is a job interview!" I might've even said it out loud.

But in any event, they asked me if I wanted to come and work with Karen and Jackie Ruff as the staff members of this organization. They hadn't quite yet sealed the deal with SEIU, but it looked like out of the unions they were talking to, that was the most likely, to give them the charter and the financial backing that they felt they wanted to have, to get going.

So that's kind of how it was. And I started working for the organization in July of '75. Maybe I ended up making the same money or $5 more a week than I had been making, which was $110 or something like that. And that's how it got started.

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

No, not really as an organizer, no. I had been at Boston University from '67 to 71' and, of course, it was a time of really high activity, antiwar activity, and then anti-Silber activity, and that sort of thing. Silber was just beg---

So you'd been working at Boston University?

No, I was a student. But not, like, a lot beyond that. By the time I got out of—I went into B.U. thinking I wanted to be a social worker, and throughout that 4-year period I realized —and two of the years I spent working a work-study job that was working with young teens, female teens, through the YWCA in South Boston and Charlestown. That was a real eye-opener for me. I grew up in very working-class environment, but we always had our own house—except for when my parents split up and we lived in apartments. And, you know, it was a struggle. But I assumed just everybody was like that. But this was, like, these young girls who lived in the project who didn't have a lot to look forward to. And some of them in just deplorable conditions with really some terrible family situations. But basically you could just see—because they were young--just the goodness, in them. And I thought, "I don't just want to be a social worker—I want to work for social change." And I didn't know really what that meant, at the time, but I just felt it's not enough to just try to fix what's there. You gotta *change* what's there. There's something fundamentally wrong that this exists as it is. And that there's so little hope. So that really was kind of my experience.

Do you want to describe any of your own experiences as an office worker? Did you observe a lot of lack of respect for women office workers?

Well, yeah!

You've given me an example already about that sort of picking on people's weaknesses...

Yeah. It just seemed to me, this was a real sector of the workforce that was really undervalued, underappreciated, picked on, and you know, sort of kept down. It didn't seem like to be a lot of opportunities, for places for people to go. I worked with the elementary education faculty—and I liked them; they were all really good people. But they had like these attitudes, like, we should just do all the grunt work and I remember this one [laughs] this one particular situation where this teacher—and I really liked her, this faculty member; she was very sweet but she was a total airhead. I remember her tottering up to my desk in her high heels saying, "I just spilled the coffee pot and there's coffee all over the place. The coffee pot fell off the sofa and coffee's everywhere, and I have to go to a class." And I just looked at her and I said, "It'll be there waiting for you when you get back." [laughs] I thought, "I can't believe I just said that." "Oh, OK!" But just sort of this expectation that we would fix things and clean up and everything.

But in that situation, again, working for Ann, she was so encouraging of anything that I wanted to do, however I wanted to do it. She trusted me implicitly with being able to make good decisions. We had a work-study staff and I worked with them and sort of directed their work. So it was good working for her. When the next department head was coming on, she clearly felt I had too much power and was gonna *really* downgrade the position. And I thought, "This is a real undervaluing of what I'm able to do, and I'm not gonna do this. I'll go work--in the department they expect me to be just a secretary--rather than stay here and have everything change like this." When I was hired, the director of personnel, looking at my resume and what I had done, and she said, "You know, I feel like I'm getting R.H. Stern for Grant's prices." R.H. Stern's and Grants—we're probably the only ones that remember those stores. [laughs] But it was like she was getting Bloomingdale's for, you know, K-Mart prices. So that's kind of just the way it was. I think just watching more how the people I worked with got treated, much more warehoused than I was, I felt like this was wrong. But I had far less direct experience with it than many people, again because of who I worked for at that time.

In these early years of the early '70's, of course were the rise of the women's movement and feminism. Where you involved in that, aware of that? How did that affect you?

Absolutely! Sure! I didn't mention that, but that certainly was a big part of what was going on as part of the anti-war movement. Of course, there's all this talk about how the women in the anti-war movement were being exploited, as well. And I remember there was a group of women on the B.U. campus who actually developed a whole slide show—you probably saw it, too—where they used like— I'll never forget--using that Rolling Stones song, "Under My Thumb." It was like this multimedia-type show, and talking about the attitudes that there were about women, and how women were controlled and

stereotyped. Yeah, I became very aware of that. And actually the woman who was our dorm director at that time—that was in my junior year—was this very sweet-sounding woman from Missouri, but really tough and just was very aware of this stuff, and just really worked with the young women in our dorm to bring that kind of awareness to us. She invited these people over to the dorm to talk with us. So yeah, that really was another big aspect. I went through that whole thing very fast. It took hold on me very, very quickly.

Did do you consider yourself a feminist?

Absolutely. Absolutely. It just seemed like--I came from a home where I had a very strong mother, you know, so it wasn't too much of a leap for me in that regard. One of the things that happened to me at Boston State was I had applied for a job as the night registrar. It was definitely a promotion there. The guy who was up for it had been assistant to the registrar. When the registrar interviewed me, he said, "Well, you know, this involves a lot of night work; it's probably not appropriate for a woman." Or maybe he said "girl," I don't know. But, in any event, it was definitely one of those things where it was definitely an actionable case. But of course, even with my own awareness, I just thought, "Fuck it, I'm not gonna fight this. [chuckles] This is crazy. I'm just gonna figure out how to leave here."

Was the content of any discussions in 925 *about* the women's movement and office workers? Feminism and office workers?

Well, yes. Absolutely. Well, yes. I can't say that I remember specific discussions, but all I can say was this was in the air. The whole basis of this whole movement was… As I got to know Jackie and Karen, and a little bit about their histories, and some of the other people, and I realized where a lot of their *roots* were—you know, it was in the anti-war movement and the women's movement. It was kind of like all together. I mean, you remember, it like a piece of a whole. And the whole really had to do with empowerment and not just accepting things for the way they were because it was a mess! And there were people being hurt and oppressed, and bad decisions were being made that were affecting people who essentially were victims of those decisions, you know. And that the powerhouses were a lot these corporations in Boston. It was the Boston Survey Group who set the wages. So, yeah, there was a lot of that real bringing together—and it all made sense to me! You know, it all kind of all made sense to me, that it all just sort of fit into one whole picture.

Growing up, did you have any knowledge of unions or workplace struggles?

Well, it's interesting, because my mother had been in a union in a factory. And in fact, I later learned in my life— I grew up in Lowell, and I later learned later in my life that my father's father had been blackballed from the factories in Lowell because of his union activity, and had had to move at one time—the family had a lot of kids—they had to move them to Vermont, and they really lived in poverty. And eventually they were able to come back to Lowell. And that my uncle, my mother's brother, had been treasurer of his

union at one of the big factories in Lowell, in the Booth Mills, and—

Is this like the French-Canadian side of your family?

Yeah! Yeah. Well, I'm all French-Canadian. Yeah, so there's a lot of that history there, and a lot of involvement in the mill union activities. But I didn't know any of that. I really didn't know any of that history; we weren't brought up to really know that history. And the whole thing. Like for many, you know—the children of many immigrant families--I was second generation--you know, get ahead, get an education, get up, get out. Lowell was a pretty depressed city at that time, a lot like Lawrence still is. I don't know--Lawrence hasn't had the kind of revival that Lowell has had. So the goal was to get out. I mean, it wasn't a thing where you just thought...I mean, sure, there were the mills, and a lot of them were closed. We were aware that people had lost their jobs because the mills had gone elsewhere—down South at that time. Later across the oceans. But you just needed to get out. You know, that was the goal and that was what our parents wanted for us.

You said your mother worked in a factory.

She did.

Did she work outside the home while you were growing up?

Oh, yeah, all the time. Sure. My dad worked at the V.A. Hospital in Bedford, and it was a pretty, you know, it was a low-level job. Like an attendant. A man, again, just with no education, capable of much more than what he had, but for his own personal demons and his own shortcomings, just didn't get beyond that. So Mom always had to work. She worked as a practical nurse; she worked in the factory; she worked as a clerical worker, as an office worker. I heard about workplace struggles on an individual level, sure. And you know sometimes there was involvement by her union. But we didn't really know what a union was. You know, I always say, there was nothing in the file. [chuckles] I didn't even know where to begin to ask the questions. So, like there in the background, the attitudes were there in the background--you stand up and you fight for what's right, but not sort of any concrete knowledge. Just in the atmosphere, I guess.

OK, a little shift here. Can you describe in some detail one of the campaigns you were involved in with 925 that struck you as important? The union organizing, or the tactics you used?

Well, yeah. Let me think back.

It can be pieces of different [stories], too, it doesn't have to just be a story of one.

The organizing we did was really basic stuff. It was really just talking to people, figuring out what their interests were, connecting them with other people, mapping out a place, putting together— I think that I learned very early on the importance of putting together a

really good organizing committee. And wherever we did not have a really solid organizing committee, we failed!

The university campaigns I thought were really interesting because a lot of what we did was just talk about the conditions and bring people together and network people through the departments. But it was such a challenge because the people were so spread out. That setting, that university setting, is very seductive in a way. One can get to feel that, well, you know, I'm doing OK right here and the faculty members in my department are nice to me—kind of like how I felt at Boston State, in a way, and I knew that. You know, as long as everything is OK in *my* little corner of the world, you know, what's the—It wasn't until people maybe had a bigger experience or sort of worked in a bigger kind of department registrar's office or anything that they really felt the effects of what it was like to be only a cog in the wheel.

The publishing house campaigns, I think, were pretty interesting, in that there was really sort of a lot of building and helping people build awareness of sort of where their company—it wasn't just like this little family company, it was part of a whole corporation and a whole corporate mentality, that was really important in terms of setting the policies that affected them that had nothing to do with their personal relationship with their boss. It had to do with getting beyond that. In one case—

Were these union campaigns you were doing in publishing?

Yeah. Allyn & Bacon was the first, you know, union—well, Educators' Publishing Service, which was a kind of little company in Cambridge. And then Allyn & Bacon, which actually became a big campaign and a big victory and a big contract. And then Allyn & Bacon downsized and then went South. That was the story [chuckles] of our lives at that point. We were trying to organize in the toughest— in this private sector where the companies had this whole union-busting industry. It had just begun to blossom and was starting to really flourish, but we didn't know anything about it. We didn't know how it worked. I remember talking to— I stayed in touch with the Labor Guild. My job, [chuckles] my particular job was to develop relationships with other unions. Sort of, put us in a network of the AFL-CIO. And the most comfortable place to do that was through the Labor Guild, where it was totally non-threatening. So I got to know tons of people, including the executive director of Mass. Teachers right now, who in 1980 encouraged me to apply for a job at Mass. Teachers Association. And Joe Faherty?, who eventually became president of the Mass. AFL-CIO, and lots of the big names. People who...I remember some of these guys when they were unemployed! [laughs] But that was a great place to develop those relationships. And so I talked to them, you know, a lot of these guys in the trades. They were used to having these—you know, they had training halls, apprentice programs and hiring halls, and they had these contracts they'd had for years with the contractors. It wasn't easy. But, you know, there was a relationship. And I talked to them about some of the tactics that were being used against us in some of these campaigns. And they'd look at us quizzically, like, "What are you talking about?" Because it was really psychological warfare.

Where it was really interesting was in media. We actually did have organizing drives and actually even an election at one station, at Channels 4 and 7. At that time 7 was downtown, WBZ, channel 4, was on Soldiers Field Road. And it was so interesting because the talent was organized, the technicians were organized—but damn it, they were going to fight tooth and nail to keep the office workers from organizing. It was fascinating. Just fascinating.

Can you describe a little bit what you mean by "psychological warfare"?

Well, what they did was they would try to convince people that unions meant strikes, that there was this big union that was gonna control what you did, you weren't going to have any say. Suddenly it was like we were trying to bring in this monster to control people's lives. When certainly SEIU and our approach to this was very much to put the power in *their* hands. It was scaring the bejesus out of them so that they would think like they would lose *all* control, and it would no longer be this nice little, you know, comfortable relationship with management—even though it was uncomfortable, often. But rather this *third party,* the third party that would sort of insert itself between you, our beloved employee, and us, your benevolent bosses, and then all bets are off! We don't know what would happen! So it's the *fear* of the unknown. That was so much the key. One guy, Executive Enterprises, which was run by Alfred DiMaria, he used to actually conduct these union-busting seminars, and use literature from some of our campaigns to train people.

I remember in the Channel 7 campaign, we talked about this pioneer union for office workers, and he turned it around on us and said, "Yeah, you wanna be a bunch of guinea pigs?" [laughs] I thought it was pretty clever at the time, but it was a frightening time because people would get— they would just be so afraid. And I would just watch these people go from feeling strong and like we need to do something, to feeling like totally terrified to do anything, and paralyzed. And it just made me so upset. I remember several years ago it came out, that book, *Confessions of a Union-Buster.* And I read it. And again, at the time we were doing this, people knew very little about the union-busting industry. Dick Wilson from the national AFL-CIO started doing work on this and came to Boston to interview us, and interview people who were working for the hospital workers, Local 880, about some of the tactics management was using. And it was through bringing together stories like that from these campaigns all over the country, that we were able to put together a profile of this industry. And sort of "unmask" them.

And I thought we were being paranoid. When I read *Confessions of a Union-Buster,* I *cried,* because I thought everything that we believed that they had done, and they were trying to do, and what their intentions were, it was not only as bad as we thought, but worse. Worse! It made me cry. It really did, because I thought—at the time, I thought, are we being paranoid? Are we being—you know—what is this?

You saw what you were really up against.

Yes! And it was overwhelming. It was just overwhelming.

I presume the fear—this was mostly women workers felt, was because they could lose their jobs.

That's right, they could lose their job. Yeah. That was the whole thing. They weren't working for as they said, the little extras, they were working because they were--

So-called pin money

The pin money—right! They were working for their family's survival. Yeah. It was terrifying for them. And it made *me* terrified to be asking them to be doing what we were asking them to do. The first two months—I always say this—the first two months I worked for this organization, I would literally wake up with nightmares, screaming. Because I'd be terrified of what we were asking people to do, to put their jobs on the line. That's what it felt that--you know, that scary. I mean, I knew in my own family what it would mean if my mother lost her job. I knew from direct experience.

What were some of the successes of those days, in organizing in the private sector? You mentioned Allyn & Bacon.

There was Allyn & Bacon. We had Beacon Publishing, which was owned by the UUA [Unitarian Universalist Association]. We had Brandeis University Libraries, the B.U. library. I'm trying to think of some of the others. I mean, there wasn't a lot. We tried—I was telling one of my co-workers the other day that we had tried to organize the Arthur Murray dance studio instructors! [laughs] We used to have our meetings at the place that's now Hard Rock Café at 11:30 at night when they'd get out of work. [laughs] They taught me how to disco dance. [laughs] That was funny.

Good story.

Yeah, but those--

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So, she organized for this leafleting, and I think it was mainly through the anti-war network, and it may have been through some SEIU help, too, leaflet these fund-raising dinners throughout the country with these leaflets that said, "Brandeis isn't kosher." [laughs] It's pretty funny. She was great. Karen was incredible at just leaflets and putting together… [tape off and on]

What was different about 925's approach to union organizing?

I really don't know, because that was the only one that I knew. I remember us talking a lot about sort of business unionism, and just the ways in which many of the unions just sort of worked along the lines of…you know, you just sort of took care of business. It

wasn't about really empowering members, but rather the contract and enforcing the contract, and business agents doing that, and that sort of thing. We never thought of ourselves as business agents, and even today I would never even call myself a business agent. I call myself a field rep. We don't use that term. We don't use the term "business agents" in MTA, we use the term "consultant," which is a term I hate. Or "uniserve director," which comes out of the NEA, which is another term I hate, because no one knows what the hell it means. So I always use the term "field rep." That identifies it best for me.

So we talked a lot just about that, and that the *important* thing was to really put control in the hands of the members—that it was *their* work life, it would be *their* contract, *their* organizing drive, that they needed to be directly involved in making the decisions, making the plans, and that our job was to really bring them along, to open the doors, present the opportunities, teach people about what the opportunities were. So we were *coaches*, I think, more than anything else. It wasn't our job to *run* the thing. It was our job to help people understand how *they* could run the thing.

Again, I had no experience with any other union, so what did I know? But I remember that that was very much, sort of, our approach, that always it was member-centered. We always struggled with that, too, as the organization grew, to really developing the rank-and-file leadership. It's a real common struggle, as I came to learn, as time went on, in every union. In MTA they actually had a big, sort of, real internal struggle about this in the '70s, between the membership and the staff, to go from being staff-centered to being member-centered. That struggle in many ways continues, because there's always going to be that tension between the elected leadership and the paid staff. So it's something we deal with even today. But there were many of us—I think there were enough of us—who really believed that it is the members who need to make the decisions, that that struggle gets really resolved in a good way.

You mentioned that it gave you nightmares to think of putting--

It did.

—of asking women to put their jobs at risk. Can you tell any anecdote describing a really courageous thing you saw? A person, or [ ]

Yeah! I can, I really can. This had to do with the Richard C. Knight Insurance Agency, which was RCKIA. We actually had Old MacDonald's song--RCKIA. Anyway, this was a company of about 40 employees in a bargaining unit. It was located on Beacon Hill. I could go walk to that door today. It was right in that block between Charles Street and Joy Street. No, even before Joy. So this insurance company sold a very special product which was they sold insurance of student loans. So, for example—and this was a fact—Dan Rather's kid was going to Colby College and had a student loan, and he bought insurance to cover that loan if there was default—in case it would be defaulted on. It was very interesting. So that was their product.

It was a family-owned and -run business, Richard C. Knight, and I guess it was his father had started it. And these people really felt like they needed to organize a union. They felt that they were not paid enough, that they were exploited, that it was like a dictatorship. And that--but the only way, and when we talked to them about what would be involved in organizing, under the National Labor Relations Act, they said there was absolutely no way that they will let this happen. They will fire us all; we have to hit 'em fast and hit 'em hard. So we talked about a recognition strike, a strike that would demand recognition for union representation. And I will remember Jackie Ruff and myself sitting on the porch of a triple-decker in Cambridge, and we said to people, "You have got to understand what this means. You could all get your asses fired. Because this is not an unfair labor practice strike; it's a recognition strike." We explained to them, and we had them go through it, we talked about every single person, where the weak links would be, how we would do this, how we would spring it on them—it was an excruciating discussion. And it happened—it was in the spring, late spring. And they said, no—I mean, I felt like we really had—we just knew, Jackie and I, that we had to make sure that they understood all the implications and all the negative possibilities. And so they decided, knowing *all* of this, they decided that they would do it anyway.

We lost, terribly. But I thought it was so gutsy. And there was this one particular woman I remember, Roberta Bezoin?, she was just incredible. She didn't have any children and her husband had a pretty good job and she was one of the, sort of, line supervisors. But just a tough, tough Armenian woman. She was just great. You know, just her heart and soul in her eyes, just a wonderful person. And I thought, "This group did an incredibly courageous thing. They knew they could lose everything and they thought, you know, 'We're goin' for broke.'" And so they went out—

When you said you failed. Did they all get fired?

Yeah, they all got fired. And the only thing that—it's a funny story in a way. What happened was, as we realized that they were bringing in replacements—I mean, here we were, at this picket line on Beacon Street. We had a lot of events, you know, parties and things, to keep people together and to keep people's spirits up. The strike went on for a couple of weeks and they had started hiring replacements and we became aware of it. And so we thought, "OK, the only way to get out of this and save, you know, what there is, is to make an unconditional offer to return to work." And so we said, "OK, everybody's been on the picket line now and you've been wearing your shorts—" Because now it was really warm out, you know, it was June. "So come here on Monday dressed to go to work and we will make the offer of unconditional return."

So everybody dressed up and I knocked on the door and the manager came to the door and I said—I forget what his name was—I can see him but I can't remember his name—and I said, "I'm here to make an offer for people to return to work. They're ready to come back to work," is how I put it. And he said, "Well, we're not ready to have them back." And I said, "Well, you know basically that they're ready to come back to work, without any conditions." I don't remember if I used the word, "any conditions," but the word—the whole case hung on my use of the word "basically." It's a word I try not to

use anymore. Because what happened with that, is that they still refused to take people back. At that point there were still three jobs open that they had not hired replacements for—only three. And they didn't take people back, even those three, and so we filed charges with the Labor Relations Board. And they had a lawyer—not only is he now a judge, but I do believe he was named for Judge Webster Thayer, who sat in on the Sacco and Vanzetti trial. His name was Thayer Fremont Smith. Never trust anybody with three last names. I mean, it's just like... So Thayer Fremont Smith, [whispers] that pig, [laughs] for the record. [laughs] He did look like one too. We fought this case; the NLRB signed an attorney, they took the case. They said the case was, we had made an unconditional offer to return to work, and the company said, "No, that's not what happened." The case went to the First Circuit. And I remember thinking—I went to hear the arguments that the lawyers on both sides were making. I thought I was in the Twilight Zone because the NLRB lawyers are saying to the First Circuit Court, "What Miss Levasseur said was, 'You know basically that the employees are ready to come back to work.'" "No, no!" said the company attorneys. "What she said was, 'You know, basically, the employees are ready to come back to work.'" And where I put the emphasis on the word "basically," that is the point on which the entire case turned! In the end, the First Circuit agreed that I had said, "*You* know, basically—" "Basically, you know, the employees are ready to come back to work." I wasn't saying that, "You know, *basically* the employees are ready to come back to work." Now if you can understand the distinction—

I don't even see the distinction.

There is a distinction. "*Basically* the employees were ready to come back to work" versus "Basically you *know* that they're ready to come back to work." So I try not to use that word anymore because it just got me in so much trouble then. And eventually those three people did get, you know, piles of back pay. But it was really devastating, because everybody had lost their job! You know, it was really awful. But what they had done was...they walked away, I think all of them, feeling like, "Well, yeah, it was awful, but we gave it our best shot." They never blamed us, because we had really taken them through the ringer in, like, making sure they understood *all* aspects of the risk at hand.

Describe the kind of training you received as an organizer—although *you* were actually one of the original organizers, so you were training other people. [laughs]

Listen, this was, like, seat of our pants, I'm telling you. This was, like, definitely OJT, on-the-job training. We did have—there were some good opportunities, though. Joe Buckley, who's currently the...you know, he really should be part of this history. I don't know if he--

He will be.

He will be, yeah. He--Joe of course is now the regional director for SEIU. He had been with SEIU for a number of years; he had been in the trenches for quite awhile. He brought together Rosemary Trump, who was President of Local 585 in Pittsburgh, social

workers, and Kevin Beemer, who—Beemer, was that his last name? He was out of New York. He later became a union-buster, which was really heartbreaking. He would put together the training weekend for us. So these people kind of became our mentors. Joe, particularly. Joe really…he wrote this manual called "Connect the Dots," which was really about how to put together a solid organizing committee. Joe was just a really great organizer. And Karen and Jackie were really good at being able to pull together people who could teach us. And they had learned a lot from their own anti-war organizing. And so we relied a lot on that experience. But just in terms of the union aspects, Joe was like there with us, from the beginning. He really taught us so much and brought together people who could teach us.

At that point were you called District 925?

It was Local 925.

Local 925. It was just in Massachusetts.

It was just in Boston, yeah, sure.

And then later became…

Yeah, the District wasn't developed until…it was 1980. '79, '80.

Do you remember having any specific discussions about women's leadership or leadership as it relates to women?

Well, we talked a lot about it in terms of sort of a national picture. I think early on, Karen really wanted to build alliances with the strong women leaders in SEIU, of which there weren't many. Rose was just one. Eleanor Glenn was another. Eleanor was out of California. And then there were other, younger women that were coming along. And so we really tried to build that network. You know, in terms of talking about the differences, again, I think it really was focusing on that women would be more inclusive in bringing people in. And not be such…not want to maintain this sort of tight control that the men seemed to want to maintain. That was what they knew. That was what they knew, what they thought worked. But women had been on the outside for so long that they knew that they needed to bring in more people—that it was about bringing in people, and not excluding people. So I think that, again, it was just all about the people we connected with and that we allied with, and how we saw the…

I think that what was really fun was that some of these women really were so encouraging of what we were doing. Because it was kind of like the first thing like this that we were focusing on, an industry that were so heavily female and white collar, which was very interesting to them. So they were *very* encouraging.

What can you say about your own development as a leader? Did you think of yourself as a leader in those early years?

No. I thought of myself as a person who would bring along other people. Even today, I was telling my son the other day, he said "Well, Mom, what is it exactly that you do?" I said, "I make other people look good." It's never about us being in the front. And I don't see myself that way now, at all. I have this joke with one of my presidents—he's an English teacher. And the joke is that I write everything and he pretties it up and then it's *his*. I never take credit for it; I never tell anybody that I wrote it. It's all his! That's my job. I don't see myself as a leader; I see myself as a teacher, I guess, as an encourager, as a coach. I never saw myself as a leader in that sense. Not that the—I guess at one point in time when I was sort of president of a local--it was like a dual role, you know? But it still was my job to bring along other people, to develop leadership. And that's still a lot what I do. It's still a big part of what I do, is develop leadership, encourage other people, really talk to the local leadership about *how* we can bring in people. It's been a big issue in this industry, especially with bringing in new teachers because there's been such a huge demographic change. So we talk a lot about that and we work directly on that, and bring people in, and it's really just so exciting and fun to see those new people come along, you know, and just take up roles, and out-front roles and leadership roles. That's one of the best parts of my work right now.

So when I was president of Local 925, yeah, I was very much the titular leader and then the actual leader, and I did a lot of, lot of speaking engagements. I traveled all over the place doing all these speaking engagements, in that role. And that was important, but what was more important was what was behind me. You know, what was the leadership like in the chapters? And how are we going to develop the leadership of the local—you know, the executive board, and what kind of decisions they would make. And then later on, as part of District 925, how we were going to really encourage people. I think that whole culture of developing rank-and-file leadership and having *them* be in the decision-making roles really permeated right up through every aspect of the organization.

It was only that period of time when I was actually president of the local that I saw myself as, "OK, this is a part of my job, too."

Were there men involved in District 925 and can you say anything about their roles?

Very few, really. I remember a couple of men at the B.U. library. What happened in Boston was that we then, because the private sector organizing was so hard, and we needed desperately to have dues-paying members, is we began affiliating these school secretary organizations, which were—they were independents. In fact, in this state, how an independent union affiliates with another union was, all the standards had been set under the National Labor Relations Act through various cases. There wasn't a similar kind of case in Massachusetts. Ours was the first case involving the Belmont School secretaries. So forever after how what standards we used for affiliation, even for affiliation of locals with MTA, were set in that case. And we modeled it after the National Labor Relations Board standards, and that became the standards for Massachusetts. So we began affiliating a lot of school secretary and town hall employee independent unions. In some of those, there were a few men, but really it was very few. I remember we had a

number of men involved in Chelsea. We represented the City Hall employees in Chelsea before the receivership. And that was interesting, and there were some men involved in that. But mainly, there were very...There really were no men in the school secretary units that I can remember. Maybe there was a technician or two. I'm trying to think. There *were* some men in Allyn & Bacon, so in some of the private sector ones: in Brandeis, Allyn & Bacon, B.U., there were some men who were involved—

Did they ever emerge as leaders?

No, not really. A little bit— You know, a couple at Allyn & Bacon, but not many over [at way]. When I think of our board, I really see women.

Did 9to5 or 925 provide training about diversity in the workplace, or diversity with respect to race, in particular, ethnicity...

Not that I remember.

How to organize around those issues?

No, not that I remember. I mean, so many of the people, especially in these school secretary units, they were pretty white. And of course, you know, around Boston, pretty Irish.

Clerical workers in Boston in general were pretty white.

Yeah. I remember a couple of people who became leaders, actually, one in Sharon, another woman in Brockton, who were really terrific, and women of color, but...we had one young Korean man at the B.U. library. But that's all that comes to mind.

So, the issue of diversity, or possibly racism within organization, that wasn't really part of the history of 925 that you remember?

No, I don't really remember. I remember a case of one staff person at 9to5 who was a woman of color. I think that there was really a genuine attempt on the part of 9to5 to hire women of color as staff, but it just didn't happen.

Were you working for 925 after you had a family? Was it a family-friendly organization?

Well, my son was born in 1986, and I had left the organization in 1990. I remember I planned it so I got pregnant in August and had the baby in May and was able to take the summer off. It worked out! [laughs] When I came back, there was a conflict about that. Because what I wanted to do...we were working a lot of hours, and what I wanted to do was work 4 days a week in the office and 1 day a week at home. The four days working out of the office were not— it wasn't 40 hours—it was way more than that still. And the woman who was then at that time, who was the sort of district director, after a year, she

said, "You know, we don't want you to do this anymore." And I remember I was *so* pissed off. I was just so pissed off about that.

This was the director of District 925?

Yeah, regional director of the district. And she, herself, actually was--her baby was born a year after mine. And I remember I was really angry about it.

And I also remember another situation where before, in 1980, my mother had had a hip operation. And so what I wanted to do was leave at noon on Friday so I could go see her, do her shopping, do my grandmother's shopping (because my grandmother was still alive and relied on my mother), and, you know, be there for her. And I remember being asked, "Do you want to take this as vacation, or sick time?" I was just flabbergasted by the question. I said, "I don't give a shit how you count it," and I walked out of the office.

So were these rules that were coming down through SEIU?
This rigidity?

No.

That's interesting because I associate 925 with family-friendly policies and an awareness that the work at that point, that work life has to take--

No. I do not think it was family-friendly in that way. No, I don't. I felt there was a fair amount of rigidity around those kinds of issues. I didn't think there was the consideration...I mean, MTA is far more friendly, family-friendly. Really not a lot of consideration for the fact that we were working just unbelievable amounts of hours and there should be some flexibility.

Do you think it was the era? Did family-friendly policies become more...unions become more aware of them later on? Or do you think it—?

I don't know. I really don't know. I can only tell you my experience with MTA has been a lot different. I really don't know. I can't comment.

Where that comes from.

I will say, too, at this juncture, as you bring that up, I also think there are a lot of class issues. I'm from a very working-class background, and I remember when I...we didn't have any money. I mean, I went to school on loans and grants and all kinds of things. I'm the only one in my family, of my siblings, that graduated from *high school*, let alone college. And it was a real...for them, I was the miracle child. My brothers were all incredibly proud of me. And my mother and...My father died at the end of September of my freshman year, but he was *so* proud that I was going to college. And he had an eighth-grade education. And I had always been encouraged in that way. You know, I was smart and was clearly capable of doing it.

I became aware of class issues when I went to B.U. and was shocked to meet people for whom it had always been an expectation that, of course, they were going to college. For me, it was a miracle I was there. So that was a real eye-opener.

So I learned a lot about class issues at B.U., and that extended into my experience in the organization, where clearly our senses of humor were different. Mine is much more bawdy, you know, than...And just our life experiences have been so different, our expectations were so different. I remember, I didn't have any money to get a car, and so I finally was able to...The man I was dating, who then I later married, said, "Look, probably the best thing for you to get a car would be to get a VW Bug because they're easy to fix, I can teach you how to fix it, you'll save money on repairs, you can get them pretty cheap, they're cheap to run—the whole thing." So I said, "Sounds good." So we got one, and in fact, he did teach me how to change the shock absorbers [laughs], I remember! And I was *really* excited—I came into the office and I said, "I can't believe it, I just got my first car." "What'd you get?" I said, "I got a VW Bug." "You're working for the labor movement and you didn't get an American-made car?" And it just took me back. And I didn't say anything. And I said, "Well, this was what I could afford." And later on, I realized this came from two women whose *parents* had *bought* them their brand-new, American-made cars. And I thought, "This is what it's about. This is what it's about." So, if anything, I'm a class snob! [laughs] A working-class snob. I am. I really am. I pick up on that stuff *immediately*, and I react to it. I think I'm a little more mature about it now.

Was that ever a subject for discussion in 925?

You know, it really wasn't! It was like--

[It just didn't] come up.

It didn't, you know, it didn't, so much...Almost all the women, with probably one exception, were women who grew up in middle-class backgrounds.

And you were the one exception?

Well, there was probably one other one, probably Judy McCullogh had grown up in a background much closer to mine.

So it was really interesting. It's not that I don't, and I didn't, or don't love these women dearly, but there's a big difference. A big difference. It's interesting. And I'm still aware of it. As I say, I'm less...MTA, is probably, when I came to work for MTA, even though a lot of people themselves had been teachers before working for the union, they had come from very similar backgrounds to mine, many of them. And I felt like, "Yeah, this is the people I'm used to!" [laughs]

Again, a kind of shift here. Were the aims of 925 realized?

Well that's an interesting question. We had that reunion a year ago. I don't know if you've seen the video that was done. We really talked about that kind of question. And you know, if you think in terms of aims of being sort of a long-lasting deep organizing of office workers, no. In the private sector, no. But in terms of sort of an effect on the labor movement and the right organization at the right time to move things forward, yes. I think, yes. So it's a "yes and no" answer to that question.

What other things could you say are important in 925's legacy?

Again, 925, even now, you talk about it with people. But going back to 9to5, just the awareness of the situation of office workers. I mean, what organization has a movie made about it that really just tapped into the consciousness, and what was already there [with] people, many women who worked as office workers, knew as their experience, and believed. It was so empowering for them, that movie, and just that whole...The fact that that movie came about was I think just evidence of the fact of how much it had permeated the culture. You know, just the whole, that new awareness and that raising of consciousness. So I think in that regard—I forgot what the question was, but in that regard I think it made a—

The legacy of 925.

Yeah, I think that's a huge piece of the legacy. I think that just being a clerical worker is no longer something that people just accept as...And I think the whole idea of women working for pin money—that notion is *gone!* I do believe that notion is gone forever. 9to5, Local 925, District 925 was just key in destroying that myth.

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

You've spoken about the legacy of 9to5. What about the legacy of District 925? Did it have an impact, do you think, on the labor movement or on SEIU?

Within the labor movement? I think yes. I think yes. When I've watched, particularly, what Karen has done, in taking what our experience was in District 925 and Local 925 *into* SEIU, and then even in the work she did with the Department of Labor, and now into the AFL-CIO, I think that...The wonderful thing about Karen is that no matter where she's ever been, she's always who she is, which is this, you know, basic, deep-down organizer who believes that women need to take strong roles and should take strong roles, and for whom the word "empowerment" is not just a catch-phrase, but something real, like it is for me. I think in that way, District 925 gave her the backdrop to continue doing what she was doing in every place she went. You look at SEIU today and I think it just looks a lot different. I mean, definitely looks a lot different than when we came along, just in terms of the roles of women and people of color, too. That's also a credit to SEIU. There's a lot that happened in SEIU separate and apart from District 925. And it plays a really interesting role right now in the labor movement. I think it absolutely had an effect

of legitimizing the role of women. And also the importance of the organizing in these female-dominated sectors of the workforce. Because at the same time that we were doing the District 925 stuff, there was a huge emphasis on the health care stuff, too. The two pieces were kind of going hand-in hand, both very heavily.

Healthcare benefits, you mean, for workers?

No, the health care sector of the workforce, in nursing homes and hospitals. Nursing homes were huge. One of our newest people in here, worked for— two of them worked for--285, organizing nursing home workers. We have that right here in my office. And one is much younger—he's like 20 years younger than I am, and just on fire with this stuff. So I think just those two pieces of the movement, especially in Boston, were happening at the same time. Because there was Local 880, which really decided to take on the big hospitals. 285 was really kind of a real business union at that time. It was a Boston city union. It changed a lot. But 880 was the force and we were the office workers force. Sort of two pieces were going hand-in-hand.

What did the experience working as an organizer with 9to5 and then 925 mean in your life?

I never worked for 9to5—always for 925. Because I was one of the...the first staff of the *local.* Not of the organization. It meant everything to me. I felt like this was who I am really am. This is what I want my life to be—working with people to help them take control over their own work lives. Because it's in that setting, and I mean, so often I keep in mind the kinds of hurts that my mother talked about experiencing in her work situations. And I see her all the time in this work, and people like her. And just work really hard to give people hope, and to show a way. That's my job—just to show a way. Now you take it. And I'll be there. But this is *your* way. It's a job— I always say that I'm really, really lucky to have a job that I love every day, that is different every day. I learn something *every* day. And now I get paid [rest] for it! (laughs) We get paid really well in MTA.

It is a union, right?

Yeah! And in fact, yeah, in fact, I'm on the bargaining team. When I first came to MTA, I came in '90. In '93 we had a strike, a staff strike for 9 days, and I was one of the outside organizers, organizing tactics and things like that. And now I'm on the bargaining team for this contract we're negotiating this year. I've been the secretary of the union and so forth, yeah.

What kind of work did you do right after you left 925? You stayed in the labor movement?

Yeah, I came to MTA.

Oh, I see.

Yeah. I left 925 to come to the MTA.

Have you had a certain career path in MTA? Have you always been a field rep?

Yes, and I don't want to be anything else. One of the things about leaving District 925 was I hated the management part of my job. I just hated it. And I came to realize, in that job, and I was only in charge of like three people, but I came to realize that the reason we need unions is because management just thinks differently. The interests are just different. It's not about bad or good—it's just different. The interests are different, and I don't like the way I'm starting to think! [laughs] So it really was one of the motivators. Yeah, I just had to get out of that. That just wasn't me; I didn't like it. I didn't like feeling that way. I just don't think that there's a good way for *me* to do that job. I just don't. I was asked to consider kind of a management job in this organization and I said "No. I'm not doin' it." Then I was *begged* to, and I said, "OK, I'll try it." And then the whole thing went south, which was fine with me. I was so relieved because I just didn't really want to do it! I didn't want to do it. So I'm happy being a grunt. [laughs] I'm a well-paid grunt, but I'm happy being it. This is what I want to do.

So in other words, you go out of the office quite a bit?

Oh, yeah. Yeah. I have 6 locals where I represent teachers, and then in 3 of the locals I also have secretaries, teacher assistants, cafeteria workers—

In the same locals with the—

Yeah.

This is that affiliated thing you were talking about?

Well, no, the way it works is that, for example. I'll give you in one example. In one town, we have one contract and it covers 8 different units. So when we go to the bargaining table, which we just did last fall, spring and fall, 8 different bargaining units are represented: teachers, mid-level administrators, nurses, school secretaries, classroom assistants, occupational therapists and occupational therapist assistants, physical therapists and physical therapist assistants—all in one contract. It's fun to do—it's really fun! We sit at the bargaining table and all the units are represented, this *huge* bargaining team, and it's just really a great experience.

And in another local, I have 5 units that have 5 separate contracts. [So] the two differences. We have the teachers' contract, the mid-level administrators' contract, cafeteria workers, school secretaries, and the classroom assistants, teacher aides. That's 5 different contracts. That's a *different* model.

Then there's a third model, where we have another town where I represent the teachers, and they also have the mid-level administrators, so I have 2 contracts there. And the school secretaries are *not* affiliated with the teachers, they're not a unit of the teachers,

they're directly affiliated with MTA. So that's a third model. So I run the gamut. But it's fun, because I— What's fun is I still represent office workers, a lot of the time.

Do you feel optimistic about the organizing you're doing now?

Oh yeah! I really do, because I've had 3 really, really—and I have one contract fight still going on— three really difficult negotiations last year. And in all those cases, we put together what we call a crisis committee, which is basically the committee that's gonna plan--it's the skunkworks. [laughs] We plan all the tactics at the direction of the bargaining team. And in all those cases, I loved the organizing I did. It brought in—we had these—I mean, I still put together a crisis committee the way I put together an organizing committee, which— and I tell them: it's gotta be representative, demographically, by building, by job category—there's gotta be representatives. So we get these crisis committees of like 30 people. (laughs) It's really fun! It's *really fun.* And that has brought in...it had the effect of bringing in people, of involving so many more people, the young teachers. This is where's there's a lot of emergence of this young leadership—and that is a *blast.* So I've had the *best time.* I mean, it's been hard! It's been a hard time.

I was wondering, is it hard to get people to participate, or do they want to?

Oh, they want to. And you know, we always say—we said back then, we say now, I say it every day—the boss is the best organizer. They will eventually do something to piss people off and then people will come forward because they don't want to be treated that way. And our job is to make them realize they *don't* have to be treated that way. And the young teachers, particularly—they're not willing to take any crap. Partly because it's now, you know, a sellers' market. They have labor that is becoming a precious commodity, as fewer and fewer—you know, many people are retiring, and fewer and fewer people are going to the schools of education and getting teaching certifications. So it's a *good* thing! And it's really making them feisty, and I like it. And that's really been--that's fun.

So I have a big campaign going on in one town, in Dedham, where we have--it's not just the teachers--we have a coalition of all the town employee unions, which is a blast because the town is going after health insurance.

They want to cut—?

Yeah, they want people to spend more toward their health insurance. So that was the call I took. It's a lot of fun.

I see. So that's organizing beyond the confines of MTA?

Oh, yeah! Oh my God, yeah. Yeah, it's wonderful. My goal is to get to know as many cops as possible, so I can drive through the town with impunity. [laughs] But it's really fun. That is really, really fun. And I just love it.

What do you do when you come up against the town administration that just says, "We don't have the funding" or because of the general crisis in the United States right now, state and local?

Hmm. We tell them--

Governments getting such terrible cutbacks.

They've got to figure it out, and they've got to work with us on a solution. In this case, they're just basically trying to *muscle* it out of people. And we just keep saying, "You're gonna have blood in the streets! You're gonna have blood in the streets." And we're demonstrating it. We'll have a big demonstration in the town, on the 5th of March.

So ultimately, by getting people out in the streets, and getting publicity that way...

Yeah! If that's what it takes, yeah! That's our bottom line. We're gonna make them miserable. They're just gonna be miserable! We're just gonna raise the political price that they have to pay. That's what we're gonna do. There's no magic to it. It's just getting people to the point where they understand that this is what it's going to take. It's no more about being polite.

People still— I find— [chuckles] It's interesting--I find this among the cops and firefighters--they're just willing to be a lot more polite than I'm willing to be [laughs]. It takes them a little longer. So in that regard, I find that actually the teachers are much tougher. It's really interesting. Very interesting to me. And the elementary teachers are the toughest of all. Get them pissed off and that's it. It's over! Campaign's over. They'll win. They're the backbone.

And **you suggest that this is partly because it is, as you say, a seller's market. The teachers know they're needed.**

Yes, they know they're needed. But the thing with elementary teachers is that it takes a lot— they're so giving. And they give *so* much every day because the kids *need* so much, the little kids, you know the kindergarten teachers, [ ] kindergarten kids, the first and second graders.

But when they turn, it really is profound. It really is profound. It really is striking to the parents and to the school committee and to the community at large what this means—that people who are willing to give so much are now saying, "Enough." So it's a good thing.

With sort of that broader picture, we say "Yeah, we know there's a big problem out there, but you're not gonna settle it on the backs of the people that work for you." In this particular town, they pay 90% of the health insurance, but the salaries aren't very high. And so they said, "Look at this, this is our total compensation." You want them to pay 25% of the health insurance? Well, here's what it means in dollars and cents, it means a

pay cut, forevermore. It means that if we negotiate a 3% raise, it'll *never* be 3%—never! It already isn't, because of how the health insurance goes up anyway. But it will never be 3%. And the value of that raise will go down over a period of time. And you take a school secretary—you know, the constant is the cost of the premium--you take a school secretary, and pretty soon she's gonna have—in another 5 years, she'll have a pay cut. She won't even be getting the value of her raise--it'll be a pay cut and a loss ever more, every year after. So we demonstrate that and we say, "This is not acceptable." "Well, we want to be competitive with other towns." "Oh, you want to be competitive by *downgrading* the benefit? That makes sense." So we get to shine the light on the foolishness of it.

And again, acknowledging that it is, yeah, it's a nationwide problem, but they cannot resolve to settling it on the backs of the employees. They can't. We just can't let 'em. So. It's not easy—it's a tough issue. It's a *really* tough issue.

In your organizing work around these kind of issues, are you able to bring up the broader context and a analysis of that?

Well, we are, but the problem is it ends up—we *do* and we *can*— you know, we can and we do, but the problem is, is we don't have a [ready] solution for it. Because the solution to it goes so far beyond our borders, that..what it is, it's basically pushing from the bottom...pushing the resolution for this problem up, and up, and up to the next level. They're trying to push it *down*, and resolve it on the lower levels, on the backs of the people who need the insurance. And we're trying to push it back up, to say, "OK, you, the town, you go to the state. You, the state, go to the feds."

The Democratic Party, push it up, get Congress to...

Yeah. Yeah.

Defeat the Bush agenda.

If we just keep absorbing, if we just concede and keep absorbing the downfalls of the system, then what gets solved? Nothing.

Yeah. I agree. In my own experience, one of the demands of union organizing, though, is to get to the level where you're talking to people about what causes some of these things where they want to pass things down, and then that's always kind of tricky because you're trying to keep unity your union, on the other hand not be too far to the left, or get into partisan politics, and it gets—

Well, it's hard. The person who's done a really good job on this is the president in Brookline, and he's very active on their insurance advisory committee. He's a full-time president, and he's also brilliant and an incredibly good person. And he's been writing columns for the *Brookline Tab* monthly. And one of his most recent columns (I'll give you a copy of it) is on health insurance and the problems with it, and how the whole thing

is structured. He is one person, and it's a real luxury, because he is a full-time president, he is one person who's out there saying, "There's a bigger solution to this problem, and it can't be on us."

By a full-time person, you mean he doesn't have to teach.

Right. He's paid by the union.

A lot of towns don't have that.

They can't afford it. They don't have the funds in their treasury. In Brookline's...800 members.

Oh, the local has to pay, to [make] him full-time.

Yeah! Oh yeah, yeah. It's expensive.

OK. Anything else you want to add about what keeps you going as an organizer?

[laughs] I think I talked about what keeps me going. The bottom line is, it's incredibly fulfilling, it's a lot of fun, and I just love it every day! [laughs]

END of INTERVIEW