

Jackie Ruff
Interviewed by Ann Froines
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I'm interviewing Jacqueline Ruff in Washington D.C. Jackie, I know you entered 9to5 quite early. Tell me the story about how you did enter 9to5.

My history was the following. Let me see if I can get this right. I was interested in women's issues, from the time that I was in college. That's part of the background. Shortly after I was in college, I worked for a place doing newspaper layout, sort of magazine layout, that we ended up organizing into a graphic arts union. And I actually went to the—

This was in Boston.

In Boston, to the founding convention of the Coalition of Labor Union Women, as the graphic arts member. I think that was in '74 or something like that. And because I was interested in women's issues and organizing and so on, I moved from Boston to Chicago and worked for Women Employed.

Tell me what the founding convention was like for you—was that an exciting moment?

Oh, yeah, that was great. It was very exciting, because that unions were a vehicle for addressing women's issues—economic equity issues and so on, so it was really exciting to have that made explicit, through the Coalition of Labor Union Women. Unions as a tool, focus on women. And I actually—when I was in that organizing effort in Boston, I was fired. I worked very closely with the union organizer. And I said to him when I was fired, "Gee, is there any way I could come work for the union?" And he said, "Oh no, we would never have women organizing the union."

What union was that?

Graphic Arts International Union, which at that point still I believe, or very recently before that had separate men and women locals in Boston. So this was really sort of a turning point time, obviously, in so many different ways. So because I wanted to continue working around working women's issues and I worked for Women Employed, which was of course was—

Say a little bit about it—

--similar. It was a women's advocacy activist organization, similar to 9to5. So I was an organizer with them for a year or so, and we did a lot to use the federal contractor requirements, the affirmative action requirements, to insist that banks and insurance companies do better by the women that were working there, with pay but also career

ladder, promotion kinds of things, that would help them fulfill the affirmative action goals that they had given to the government as part of being federal contractors.

Was Women Employed a membership organization like 9to5?

Yes.

You were trying to recruit?

Yes. Exactly. So I had known Karen Nussbaum and some of the other folks who were involved in 9to5 through antiwar activities in Boston. When they actually were in conversations with the Service Employees Union about the possibility of getting a charter and setting up a local in Boston, they talked to me about that—would that be something that I would be interested in being a part of. After thinking about it, it seemed like a great idea, a very exciting idea. So, I was never actually a part of 9to5.

Did you come back to Boston as an organizer for Local 925?

Yes.

And what was the first activity you were involved in, do you remember?

I was there from the beginning; if you look at the charter, I am one of the signatories to the charter. There were several of us: I think it was Karen Nussbaum and Doreen Lavasseur and myself. I think Doreen was there from the beginning. And we just tried to figure out how to go out and do organizing. We were doing a lot of work on college campuses, and just more general outreach to try to find places that would be interested in organizing.

Karen was still also involved with 9to5, right? The parallel organization to 925?

Yes.

But you were focused on Local 925, right?

Yes.

Had you been involved with women's issues or the women's movement when you were in college?

Yes.

Did you consider yourself a feminist?

Yes.

In terms of your interest in working with women. Growing up did you have any knowledge or opinions on labor unions or workplace struggles?

My father worked in mining and eventually was in a management position. But when he began his career, he had been a union member. And I used to hear about that. He was very positive in his descriptions. Even when he went into management, he was always very close with the folks who were the union members.

Do you think that influenced you?

I think it gave me a fairly positive view of what a union would be, but what really was more influential to me was my feminism, which also was derived some from my family, in the sense that I was told from the beginning, you can do anything a man can do, and don't let anybody tell you otherwise. That sort of family-based sense that we should have fairly high expectations as to how we should be treated, which weren't always borne out. So it was a sense of women's equity issues. I grew up in Latin America, so I had a very strong sense of justice around international issues and farmworkers. And when I was in college of course there was a whole farmworker issue that was quite prominent.

Could you describe in some detail one or more campaigns or struggles that were important to you in your work in 925?

The Equitable campaign was certainly [laughs] challenging. But what I often think about in that period was how everything we did was for the first time. And whether it was a tiny office or a larger one--Equitable was part of a huge company--but even when we were doing the smaller offices in Boston, we were always negotiating contracts for the first time, or figuring out how to take this tool, and use it for concerns that this particular type of workforce had. And so for example, I remember very clearly in the publishing industry, we tried to take even some of the ideas that I had seen in Women Employed, which is trying to use affirmative action or job training or career ladders, and actually put those into a contract, because that was the nature of the workforce. We talked about...I remember with the publishing employees, they really cared about the quality of work that was going into the textbooks. Which is something you often hear about more in health care, that the workers care about that. But that was equally true, oftentimes, with the folks that we were working with.

Were you involved organizing in the Blue Cross Blue Shield campaign?

Yes.

That was quite a big effort, right, nationally?

It was a big effort. What was striking about those campaigns was: the companies were huge; the work was very routinized; it was a time in which these computers we all work with today were just being introduced; there was monitoring of the work that was being done—how quickly are you doing what; what's your error rate—this big brother

atmosphere. There was a lot of interest among the workforce; there was also enormous opposition from the company. So with Equitable, we organized a branch office. It was a very dedicated work force. But it was a branch office of a huge company which eventually they could just shut down.

With Blue Cross Blue Shield—

[] were able to bargain, or did you actually have a contract?

I think we actually had the contract. Yes. I remember going back and forth to Syracuse [laughs] many winter days.

And Blue Cross Blue Shield, I always thought had more potential—you know, it was a really exciting opportunity, because there were large bargaining units, but in a way each one was self-sufficient, say, within a state, or a city. So you're either going to get the whole unit, or you're going to get nothing. You wouldn't have the problems of it being just a branch office. And that there would be more leverage to being able to get a contract, or maybe neutrality on the organizing, because Blue Cross cared more about its community image, had unions as customers, etc. There was a lot of effort on that, and some promise. But we were never able to really create support that we needed.

What is your opinion about 925's organizing in the private sector?

It seems like a long time ago, what was it—20 years ago. But I think in general, unionizing office workers was extremely challenging, and that was why there was a strategy to try to build, say, in the public sector, or build in universities, or build a track record that could help persuade others that this was the way to go. So I think what you're asking about universities—it's the overall question that you would ask about any place, right: why didn't a strong enough majority of people decide that they were interested. I think a lot of it was fear and the employer campaigning, the desire to avoid conflict, employers improving conditions because they were faced with the prospect of a union, and workers just deciding, "Well, this is a better way to go. I'd rather have a relationship with my employer that is not conflict-ridden, that I don't have to worry that it could be adversarial, and where I'll get some improvement, than to go the other route." It was always great, if you win an election, to get a contract, you have people who step into leadership positions, who really show abilities, or tap abilities and skills that they might not have the opportunity to do otherwise—those kinds of things. And you make change, right? And that's great.

How would you describe the way in which 925's approach to organizing was different?

Certainly we were trying to select—it was different because the workforce was different, in the sense that we were trying to deal with issues that the office work, and primarily women, workforce cared about. I talked about those before—the career ladders, the recognition, the having a voice, not just in terms of what the working conditions are, but

what the nature of work is, the quality of work, and that. So, it would be different just by the nature of the workforce. I think there was a lot of attention to trying to develop leaders. It's the only union I was ever in except the graphic arts union, briefly, so I can't have a real day-to-day comparison. I do think that many of the things that were being done were similar to other parts of the labor movement that were new and cutting edge at the time: what was being done in health care, some of the things that were being done in the public sector at that point—the heritage, the SEIU pieces that were the heritage to what it is now, or what other unions are—I mean, that was the union I was in, so I can't speak as directly about other unions, but that was a point at which there were, for example, some nursing home campaigns between SEIU [] trying to be innovative; there was of course the whole heritage with the farmworkers, and just trying to look for leverage points. To some extent, for example when we organized in universities and we would try to make alliances with faculty or students—this whole notion of looking for allies I think was really built in a different way at that point in the labor movement more generally.

Were you involved—I can't remember at the moment when you stopped being an organizer—in the leadership of District 925.

I left the local—I was with the local from '75 to '81. In 1981, John Sweeney asked me to come to Washington to do, I guess what was going to become the District 925, to do that. And then—

What do you mean, to do that?

To be the executive director of it, in Washington. And then SEIU also had industry divisions at that point. And there was a office workers division—that had been called clerical division; and so I was the coordinator. Inside SEIU, there was a lead staff person for each of those divisions. And I was the one. I was a member of the senior staff of the Service Employees. I did that til '88.

Do you think 925 had an impact on SEIU?

Yes, very much so.

How would you describe it?

I think it really got the union to recognize the importance of women members and leaders, it promoted work around certain issues—I think a lot of the work around family and medical leave, health care, pay equity—those were—am I forgetting any—those were the main policy issues that I worked on inside SEIU. It sort of crystallized because of the 925 work. There were also women on staff, and certainly elsewhere in the union, throughout the union, who were real activists and leaders, and so I don't want to in any way downplay what they were doing. But a very important piece of encouraging all that, I think, was the whole 925 effort.

One of the things I remember thinking about, even early 9to5 was doing just sort of ad hoc movement work—but just really being very well organized about the movement.

Yes. There was certainly a lot of that. We were very, very careful, just to make sure even people came to meetings. Our style of organizing, of course, was to always have great organizing committees, and people inside the company who would sign all the leaflets and reach out to co-workers, and all that. So. We were very deliberate about all that. I learned a lot back at Women Employed. If I wanted to turn out people to a meeting, I would make sure I called at least twice as—what I would do, I'd call x number, then I'd get yeses from y, and I would expect that half of those yeses would turn up at the meeting. So if I wanted a committee meeting with 20 people, I had to get yeses from 40, and call even more.

All those years you were an organizer, you were basically working days and evenings. How did you juggle that with other things you might have wanted to do with your life?

I was very enthusiastic about what I was doing. So it encompassed a lot in my life. And I was single the entire time that I was working for the union. I didn't have children; I didn't have—I mean, I had extended family responsibilities, but in a way, I didn't have to do as much juggling as I fully recognized that other people certainly did and do.

Some people have actually said that their social life was also built around 925, that it was your friendship network as well as your political network.

Right. I think there was certainly—there was a lot of that. Sure.

What can you say about your own development as a leader?

I think I was probably so focused on having the organizing work, that what happened is, I moved into leadership positions or did things that are parts of that, maybe with less anxiety about actually playing that role, than I might have otherwise. I don't know if this clear but—in an organizing campaign, for example, you've got to run meetings, give speeches, eventually negotiate contracts, sit across the table with some of the top lawyers in the city—but I've never quite focused on that, so much as I was: are we going to put all the pieces together that we can actually win this election. Do we have the right committee and the right tactics and everything to get this contract negotiated.

Somewhere along the line, you gained some sense of confidence that you could do these things.

Right. But my point is I wasn't as anxious about giving speeches or running meetings as I might have been if I'd only been thinking about it as professional development.

You were dedicated to what you were doing.

Right.

Do you have any observations about the role of men in the organization?

I'm trying to think—did we have men actually as organizers. We probably did. I don't know. You probably should ask somebody else. None are coming to mind. But certainly in our bargaining units, we had men. Of course, it would reflect the proportion, and there were always some, and they were on organizing committees and stewards and all that sort of thing. I think within the units that I worked with, they seemed to be comfortable, because the union was reflecting the workforce.

Comfortable with women's leadership.

Yes.

Do you think 925 was a family-friendly organization?

I certainly think so. I think people would back each other up; recognize that you can do great work even if you aren't working the usual—make sure I got this []—recognition that you can do great work, even if it isn't round the clock, or if it's a part time schedule. We also I think had a really great track record, when we had the national operation, of being able to have people in different parts of the country, and still have consistency and support, and make all that work.

Do you think the aims of 925 were realized?

I certainly think that during the time that during the time that I was there—I'm only current through '88, right—that we did an enormous amount of organizing in a very challenging environment, and built an organization, improved the lives of many people, developed leaders, had an influence on the broader union and the broader labor movement. It would have been great to have organized hundreds times in terms of numbers, but I think everybody should be very proud of what was accomplished. And again, I'm sure that there were equally wonderful things that happened after that. That's just when I left, myself.

Finally, what did 925 mean in your life. I'm sure you have a couple of things to say about that.

I feel that it was a very special and rare opportunity to actually effect change in the world, and I was fortunate to be able to have that opportunity. I'm very proud of what I did and what the organization did.

Do you feel like you learned things about yourself?

I think I learned things about myself all the time.

And you sure learned a lot about the labor movement.

[laughs] Right.

Was there anything at all that disappointed you working for 925 in those times. Karen has characterized the ‘80s as difficult times for the organization.

When I think of the difficulties, I think of the challenges of organizing. I think that some people in the organization, and probably Karen, and certainly concluded from the retreat that [] have very bitter feelings toward the leadership in the labor movement. And they would describe it as, “the men in the labor movement.” I don’t share those feelings. Because I think that in general, SEIU and even the broader labor movement was really trying to do something that was a watershed, and made enormous progress. And it would have been great to have even more resources to organize, but I don’t feel that the failure to organize 100 times as many people was just about resources, by any means. So I was a bit taken aback personally by the bitterness that was conveyed at that retreat, because it just didn’t resonate with me. But on the other hand—

You’re talking about the one at the disbanding of 925, that retreat? The weekend?

Yes. Everybody was sharing experiences. But I only spent 14 years... But based on my own personal experience during those 14 years, to the extent that I have disappointment, it was just that we weren’t able to break through in terms of the organizing.

Anything else you want to add about the legacy of 925?

I can’t think of anything else. I think it’s great that you’re doing this project, and trying to capture the history. I believe the legacy is all things that we’ve discussed, and that other people remember; I think it’s probably also lots of very subtle things, just in terms of being a part of a period of change, and greater recognition for women and workers. And it’s still a long way to go—we see that everyday, but.

What kind of work did you do after you left 925, and are you doing now?

I’ll just give a little context, which is that after I left the union in 1988, I went to work on the Hill for a Senate committee, Labor and Human Resources committee, which I did because I’d been working on policy issues, like family leave and child care. I went to work for the committee where that legislation actually was being considered. And Senator Dodd, who was the author of the Family Medical Leave Act, for example, was my boss. And I went to law school at the same time, in the evening, became an attorney, and then went to private practice. Then I returned to government at the Federal Communications Commission, and I’m now back in the private sector at Verizon Communications, where I head up a group on international public policy and regulatory affairs. And I believe that in part I am continuing to serve the public good by being part of an organization that brings communication services to people here in the U.S., but also

in a number of developing countries where Verizon has investments or is the local communications service provider.

Ok, great. Thanks.

END of INTERVIEW