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Interviewed by Stacey Heath

I know you were very helpful to 925 in many ways. You spoke at fundraisers and conferences and lent your panache and celebrity to lots of events. I want you to tell me a little bit about why you felt that was worth your time. And I know that there were some specific things, like you walked on a picket line with telephone workers in Boston. Do you remember anything about that, is there anything you can tell me about that one?

I don't remember specifically about that. (chuckles) Picket lines all tend to blur together. I think there was more than one picket line for 925—because it was a new organizing effort. I've walked on a lot of picket lines with nurses, for instance, which felt a little different because the unionizing effort was one of longstanding. But this one had a great spirit because it was new. Do you remember whether the Boston one was before or after the movie came out?

No, I don't, actually.

Because that had something to do with it. Because people would sing the "9 to 5" song. The one that Dolly Parton wrote for the movie. It had a joyousness about it, in addition to anger and purpose.

What was it about the 925 effort that was particularly compelling to you?

Secretaries or clerical workers are a symbol of many injustices. At that time, and perhaps still, a clerical worker or a secretary was better educated by about a year and a half than the average boss. The jobs are ideal training jobs for promotion if one wishes to get into a different category of work -- you certainly learn the boss' work from that position very well-- yet they were not part of the job ladder. They were regarded almost as office wives; you only got promoted if the person or people you were working for got promoted. And of course the unionizing effort was new.

Then in addition, there had been a period of time -- now past, obviously -- when unions themselves, SEIU in San Francisco, for instance, resisted signing up clerical workers. I remember arriving in San Francisco and seeing a big banner red headline above the fold of the newspaper which said I think "Sexism Blockade." Because there had been a not unusual situation in city government in which the men who picked up the phone and did clerical tasks in the police department made much, much more money than the women who did the same thing in City Hall. And two organizers, one African American and one European American, for SEIU, had signed up I think three thousand female clerical workers. But they had been refused by the union. That's a whole long saga which you should ask Aileen Hernandez about. She could also tell you, because she is a former labor organizer who lives in San Francisco and was trying to help women clerical workers get help from the SEIU.

So clerical workers had started out with many of the symbols of women's larger problems: education doesn't help, you're in a dead end job, you're doing exactly the same thing that men are doing but getting paid much less, and even the unions are resisting helping you. So therefore, when the unionizing effort began, and it became successful, it was a great cause for celebration.

Was there something about the way 925 did this organizing that was different than the way you saw others doing it?

It felt different because it was not an add-on. The question of issues that especially affect female workers were often add-ons in large unions in which there were perhaps a minority of women and more men. Sometimes as a result, those demands that were of special importance to women got bargained off first. This was clearly an effort in which the needs of female workers were central.

How did you see them fitting into the larger women's movement?

They were and are the women's movement. I don't see any demarcation because all the same issues affect all of us, whether it's reproductive freedom or equal pay or comparable worth or the problem of having two jobs, one at home and one outside the home—those are umbrella problems that affect everyone to differing degrees. So it just seemed organic.

Do you think there were strengths and capabilities of 925 that weren't fully utilized?

I think so, because the clerical workers inside the union structure itself were often fighting battles and the clerical workers inside the corporate employers who were the adversaries of the unions were often fighting the same battles. So I suspect that the potential to unify across boundaries -- which is very subversive -- and tell each other the secrets of your respective employers, was perhaps not utilized.

I'll give you an example of something that did work, although I think it was a one campus organizing effort at the same time at 925 was being born. It was a campus in Boston—we'd have to check—where the faculty women were having seniority and other discrimination problems. They did reports and wrote about it and researched it but they didn't get very far. The female students were having problems—I think there was perhaps not a gynecologist on staff—I think it had to do with health care. They organized, and they were not successful. The clerical workers and telephone operators on campus had enormous work problems. Campuses often pay very poorly for the so-called nonprofessional tasks on campus. But when the telephone operators joined with the faculty and the students, everybody got some of what they wanted. No one had cared very much on campus about the seniority issues, or if the English students went on strike. But when not one phone call went in or out of their campus for a day or two, people cared. The clerical workers were in a position to really help the other two groups who were organizing. And they were in a position to protect the clerical workers from losing

their jobs. That kind of cross-boundary organizing has great potential, and hasn't been done enough.

Were there instances of that kind of cross-boundary organizing where the women's movement and 925—where there was a greater integration with 925 and other efforts in the women's movement, or was 925 really---

The Boston example I'm speaking of, and again I'm not sure whether 925 was playing a role with the clerical workers -- but that was the women's movement. The idea of women organizing together as women across boundaries is what the women's movement is.

I guess in my mind there's a distinction, there's some kind of boundary where I don't think of--and this is probably completely wrong (chuckles)--the women's movement of being not so much about workers. So I guess that's where there's—I have some confusion about what that boundary was about.

What do you mean? I don't quite understand.

That the women's movement was focusing more on...let's say social issues. And that 925 was part of the economic issues. And somewhere in my brain there's a distinction there. But I hear you not making the distinction now.

I don't think so, because equal pay was the first rallying cry -- certainly an economic issue. And then when it became clear that equal pay wasn't helpful to, say, nurses who were a female profession, then comparable worth became the next development. I think the only reason a so-called social issue like abortion got focused on was because the ultra right wing focused on reproductive issues. They became more of a public focus because they became the focus of opposition. In my own life, just getting paid as a writer, was certainly a first issue.

Ok. And how did something like the movie, the 9 to 5 movie that you mentioned, did you see a difference in how people thought of clerical workers and union organizing...

It did make a difference, because it was a popular, populist movie with Lily Tomlin and Jane Fonda that made people pay attention. It also focused on what clerical workers actually do, not just on a chance for getting promoted out of being a clerical worker. I think that was quite conscious because the 925 movement informed the movie. Many other popular depictions of secretaries or clerical workers had depicted them as people just waiting to do something else, as opposed to doing an important and dignified and vital job in and of itself. I would go to places where 925 wasn't organizing yet, and you would hear the song. I remember going to a big 925 benefit in Atlanta, where everyone was singing it. In the same way that the civil rights movement has songs that are symbolic, and the antiwar movement has songs, this gave a song to a whole pool of workers.

That's great. You're the first person who's really talked about the song, it's fascinating.

I also think about the way the union started, or the consciousness started. I remember Karen Nussbaum talking about, I hope I'm quoting her correctly, but the kind of final straw when she as a clerical worker was enduring all these indignities and being overworked, and then someone looked into a room in which she was with a few other women, and said, "Oh, excuse me, I thought someone was here!"

(laughs) Oh, my God. Oh, my. So, ok.

And everybody can identify with that.

Yeah, exactly. Three stories of my own flashed before my eyes right there, I though, oh, I've been through that so many times! (chuckles)

For those of us of a certain generation, we were so aware of the oppression of clerical workers that we refused to learn how to type. We essentially did ourselves in, because it's important to know how to type! (chuckles)

That sounds like a great segue to our last question, how would you describe the legacy of 925?

Certainly the legacy of 925 is the visibility of a very large class of workers who were just not visible before, culturally, socially, politically. That's very important. I don't know enough about the current situation to know the degree to which this whole slice of the work force is doing better...that's a question that I haven't researched.

Have you seen—I don't know how involved you've been with the labor movement in the period since then, but would you say that there've been any changes that you've seen?

Oh yes. Yes, absolutely. In the late 60s and throughout the 70s we were fighting the unions almost as much as the employers, because they just wouldn't—they bargained away women's demands, or they didn't have any women on any of the decision-making councils. There were a lot of struggles. And the idea that now on national labor union board there's at least a few women, is new. It was a great irony always, because women had been, from Bread and Roses forward, the union movement. But once the unions—some of the unions—some of them were always much better than others, obviously—but when some of the unions became kind of protective associations for particular male ethnic groups, it became much more difficult. Its very different now, thanks in large part to 925.

Great. Well, this has been terrific, I really appreciate it.