William Lucy Oral History

Interviewed by Philip Mason
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PHIL MASON: This is April 16, 2001. We're in the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University, Detroit, which is not only the depository for all the inactive files of AFSCME, but also of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. And I'm Phil Mason on the staff of Wayne University, and today we'll be interviewing William Lucy, secretary-treasurer of AFSCME and one of the five founding members of CBTU. As we discussed earlier, Bill, in addition to providing a source of material on CBTU, we wanted to -- one objective in mind is to prepare material for a film, which will [00:01:00] be done for the 30th anniversary of CBTU coming up in Orlando later this year. So, can we start, though, Bill, talking about your own career in the labor movement? For example, where were you born, and what part of the country did you come out, and how did you get interested in the labor movement?

WILLIAM LUCY: Well, first of all, I am a native of Memphis, Tennessee. I was born there, stayed there, like an awful lot of other folks, until the beginning of World War II. Went to elementary school. My beginnings in elementary school were in Memphis at Larose Elementary School. And then, shortly after, my father and family moved to

Richmond, California, as a part of the war effort. My father who, like, so many others, were classified [00:02:00] as unskilled laborers, and their strength being unskilled, until the war broke out and three weeks later he was a welder for Kaiser Shipyards. We moved to California as a part of that, and I completed my schooling in California, graduating from El Cerrito High School, going on to Contra Costa Junior College. Did a bit at the University of California. My study was in engineering. Went to work for the US Navy shortly after completion of high school in 1951. I worked there until 1953, then went into public service at the county level for Contra Costa County in California, which is where my initial acquaintance with organized workers and organized labor, and I make that distinction. In county [00:03:00] service, we didn't have laws that granted collective bargaining to public sector workers, so we had an independent employee association. I became a part of that in 1953, 1954, and we had a strong labor county. Contra Costa was noted for having strong trade unions in the oil industry, steel, building and construction trades. Our union, in 1956 -- our association in 1956 -- took on the debate of whether we wanted to continue to be an independent association or whether we wanted to be a formal part of the trade union

movement. We had two questions before us. One, that: do we want to be a union? Secondly, if so, who do we want to be affiliated with? And that was a major decision for public employees to sort of wrestle with in those days. [00:04:00] We took a year to debate this issue among our membership of about 7,500, 8,000 members. And at the end of this debate period, the decision was that we ought to be a bona fide trade union like any others, and we ought to be affiliated with the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees. At that time, the president of AFSCME was Arnold Zander, his secretary-treasurer was Gordon Chapman. So we affiliated. And I began to sort of get a feel for what the debate was around public sector trade unionism as a general proposition and, secondly, began to understand AFSCME as an institution. At the same time, what became very apparent to us very early on is that, while AFSCME was a great institution, we thought it was somewhat behind the curve in terms of being an aggressive trade union, [00:05:00] with regards to organization and collective bargaining rights for public sector employees. And, you know, while we in our county had a strong organization, we saw in other parts of the country -- I mean, the movement for collective bargaining rights was not nearly as strong. And it was about that

point in time when the debate between Jerry Wurf as a leader of the drive for full bargaining and trade union rights for public sector workers, equal to what existed in the private sector, was beginning to at least have an open debate among leaders of the union. We naturally gravitated towards that part of the debate. Not so much the personality, because we didn't understand the various splits within the union, but we were a very pro-collective bargaining early on, and ultimately sided with Jerry Wurf and the [00:06:00] advancement of this argument. I was, by the time the argument became full-blown, I had achieved some standing in the union. I was a board member for a while and a chief negotiator for a while and, ultimately, president of the local. At the time, you know, we became truly committed to the Wurf philosophy of public sector unionism. I remained with the county for 13 years as an employee in the materials and research laboratory, as a system materials and research engineer for the county, and that was a part of the Public Works Department. And our union represented virtually every classification in the county service, with the exception of high-level administration. We represented Public Works, health department, social service department, water and sewer, I mean, all of those blue-collar and white-collar entities

for all those years. [00:07:00] Even had some district attorneys, and we had the whole conglomerate of county services. But we were a strong organization. In today's context, I think we'd be called a liberal trade union, because we tended to look at issues and almost instantly get the progressive side of it as opposed to anything else. In 1964, the leadership of the union changed hands. Jerry Wurf defeated Arnold Zander by a handful of votes in the context for the presidency of the union, and a whole new philosophy came into being within AFSCME. There were a number of issues raised during the debate: the method by which national leadership would be selected. The question of [00:08:00] collective bargaining as a principal issue as opposed to merit systems and civil service systems and the implications of that for workers who had been, by and large, committed to the merit system or civil service system in years past. One person, one vote. And going to legislative districts as opposed to at-large elections. The whole question of the responsibilities of the national union to local members and a bill of rights for members. I mean, this was a whole new change, a sea change, in approach to trade unionism. In '64, after the election, Joe Ames, who was a leader out of the Saint Louis section of the union -- I believe out of local 410 -- was charged

with the responsibility of taking about a year in developing a new constitution for the union, to set it on a [00:09:00] sort of a new course. And he did that. In ’65, that constitution was adopted in a special convention, and it became sort of the foundation for what is now the AFSCME of today. I continued as president of my local union until, oh, the middle of 1966, when our union was beginning to think quite actively about the whole legislative, political, and what we call community affairs role of the union. In the public sector, the public itself is always a factor in our relationships with our employers. I mean, elected officials who get elected in a political process, if we’re going to organize, if we’re going to bargain, or if we’re going to deal with public policy issues, the public [00:10:00] is a factor in that. And we thought that we needed to at least begin to build some rapport, rather than just pure political situations. We needed to, if we’re going to be effective as a national organization, begin to shape our views with regard to public policy, whether it be public policy around infrastructure issues, around energy issues, around education, around housing, around transportation. These were all areas that our members worked in, and therefore we needed to understand these areas in order to effectively represent them. Well,

Jerry Wurf, at that time, really wanted to develop this and expand this a bit more, both at the federal level and at the state and local level. And the union was very small then. Maybe 250,000, give or take a few. And it was a perfect, you know, time for this kind of vision to [00:11:00] begin to be built. So I was offered a role, along with a fellow by the name Al Bilik, to organize this department, organize this function, and try and begin to put in place the pieces for a legislative program, for a political program. And to try and build on the natural relationships that our workers had with the communities that they lived in and worked in. And so I came to work in July, June or July of 1966. Al Bilik was dispatched to convince me that we should do this together. So I came in 1966 and Bilik never showed up. (laughs) So we managed to develop the beginnings of such a function. And I think --

PM: Before you get into this, could you just [00:12:00] address one issue? What was the makeup of your local union in California? In terms of diversity, in terms of, for example, Hispanics, Chicanos, or --

WL: My guess would be, in county service, there were not very many Spanish-speaking who were members of the union at all. Probably because it was county service, if we had five percent African Americans, that was a lot. We were a

county union, although we had representation in many cities because we began to organize in many cities. But, still, it never got above 10 percent, if that much, in those years. And female gender balance was probably about 60-40 because the public sector has always had high representation from female workers. Clerical administrative workforce, social services, hospitals and the [00:13:00] healthcare sectors. But we, I mean, we were very aggressive about organizing, and what we were finding as we organized was almost the same patterns at the city level of government and special districts. But, as we began to develop the program for legislative and political action, I mean, we began to see a real need to sort of build a solid foundation. Because clearly politics was going to play a big part in our life, whether it be city and county budgets, state budgets, or the federal relationship of state and local government support systems, and particularly at social services and transportation.

PM: Right. Well, this experience, then, you had in California was very helpful to you in setting a new national policy for AFSCME.

WL: Well, very helpful. California, [00:14:00] at all levels of government, had an incredibly strong civil service system, and the quality of public service was very high.

Not to suggest that other states were low, but it was a very strong, focused state, it was a growing state in those years. Lots of diversity within its industries. And transportation was sort of a central part of the economic expansion that was taking place in the state. And the counties, in partnership with the state, took on the responsibility for implementing what, in effect, was Eisenhower's national highway system. And so our Public Works Department, along with a lot of others, had that responsibility. And our county bought into it totally. So, along with that, our membership expanded. Our influence [00:15:00] in the political process went right along with that in terms of our ability to impact on boards of supervisors in our county and those members of city councils in the cities that we represent. So our program in California became very strong, and I think that was probably -- I mean, we were probably being mirrored in other places, and I think Wurf's analysis of this and what we could possibly do with it may have helped in the selection of Bilik and myself to try and put this together. And we were able to start, as I say, the foundations of such a department in 1966 and '67. And, like many other careers, at that time, you were sort of a jack of all trades. You were organizer, strike settler, negotiator,

you were whatever it needed. And, ironically enough, I came to Detroit in [00:16:00] February of 1967 for essentially what was supposed to be about an eight-day or two-week assignment, which lasted two years thereabouts, and within that assignment, a lot of others. I was here for the city of Detroit employees, which was, oh, District Council 77 of AFSCME. And worked here with Lloyd Simpson and so many other really great trade unionists. Alton Cobb and just an awful lot of people which had an awful lot of history here in this town. During my assignment here, the sanitation strike occurred in Memphis, Tennessee. And so I was between here and Memphis, trying to work with the two of those at the conclusion of the Memphis, Tennessee strike, and at the conclusion of my assignment here, I went [00:17:00] back to headquarters in Washington, DC. And, shortly after that, was made an assistant to the president, although I still had the responsibilities for the department that we started to build. Right.

PM: Now, we're coming up close, then, to 1971. (laughs)

WL: We are about, now, in 1970, '71. An interesting thing happened, Joseph Ames -- Gordon Chapman had resigned or retired, I think in about 1969, '68 or '69. And Joe Ames became secretary-treasurer. And we were a very aggressive union in those days. I mean, we were organizing in many

states and many counties around the country. And we've never had the luxury of, whatever your title was, you being able to have that as a sole function. [00:18:00] And Joe was much more the meticulous, you know, record type of secretary-treasurer. And the travel experience, the go thing -- plus, I think, in all honesty, a desire to diversify the leadership of the union -- Joe decided that he would not stand for election in 1972. Which created a situation that was, I think, rather new and kind of interesting at that point in time. Because I had become assistant to the president, later on executive assistant to the president, while Joe Ames was still secretary-treasurer. So, at the time, he made a decision not to stand for election in 1972, which, we're now in 1971, but looking forward to '72. The question was, would I run for [00:19:00] secretary-treasurer if Joe Ames stepped aside? This was all very, very new by now, and a major challenge. And the question to Wurf and to Ames and to the leadership of the union is, you know, what does all of this mean? The last thing I want to do is leave California to be sort of a single-o, token-o in a national union. The question was not, Did I want to? But, Was the union ready for this? And based on these four, five years' worth of experience, am I ready to do this? And what's to be asked of a person

who has this responsibility? And so the decision was made that what I would do -- they could do what they wanted, but what I would do [00:20:00] was take some time and go around the country and talk to some people to see what the possible reaction would be from a union such as ours. And while we were a very aggressive union, in the liberal image it was a fairly conservative union by nature -- I mean, public employees, by their very nature, were conservative -- and the last thing we wanted, at least from my point of view, was a diversion from mission. Would we get caught up in the implications of a Black standing for election in a union that is so substantially white, and what did all of this mean? And I guess President Wurf and Joe Ames and others did their own due diligence, and I did my own also, and I think we all came to the conclusion that, while nothing is a given, there was a better than even chance that your record [00:21:00] and your contribution would be at least looked at objectively. And if you could stand muster you'd have a better than even shot at getting it done. So, in 1972, at our national convention, I stood for election and won. And, if you've ever gone through this process of being nominated and then waiting for further nominations, it was about the longest three or four minutes I've ever spent in my life, but I was a sole nominee and

got the support of the majority of the delegates there. And so a whole new career began then. I'm not convinced I did anything differently after becoming secretary-treasurer as I did when I was executive assistant or assistant to the president, but it was sort of a new opening within [00:22:00] the union. And sort of set another sort of bar for other unions to look at in terms of the question of diversity, because while one did not want to be seen as the African American secretary-treasurer, no matter what you did, that was the way it was going to be seen. I always thought I was a pretty good trade unionist and, on that basis, ought to be dealt with. But I could remember the first interview with a fellow from the *New York Times* whose first question he raised was, "How does it feel to be the first Black secretary-treasurer of a major union?" And so, actually, that's two questions. I mean, I feel the same way I did about being Black today as I did yesterday. Being secretary-treasurer, I'm not really sure how I feel about that right now since it's, like, day one. But I [00:23:00] think, for Black trade unionists, it was an opportunity to demonstrate that, given the opportunity, given the chance to perform in all the areas where experiences develop, given a chance to do all the things that prepare you for a different role. Given that

opportunity, anybody can make it. I think, if anything, I would say that I'm sort of a product of being at the right place, right time, right set of conditions with the proper background to sort of make the most of them.

PM: Well, all right. September 1972, a group got together, you were one of the five, to found the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. What was the background, especially as far as you're concerned, in your experience, in bringing together a group to [00:24:00] start this? Did it have to do with your tour, for example, as you were exploring the possibilities of becoming secretary-treasurer of AFSCME? Did you already have contact nationally with other leaders, especially African American leaders in the labor movement? Tell us about that.

WL: Well, the coming-together of this group is really sort of almost tangential to a much larger event. The AFL-CIO met in convention in 1971. And a major part of that agenda was the preparation for the national elections that were underway. And this time, the contest on the Democratic side was between Hubert Humphrey and George McGovern for the Democratic nomination. And on the Republican side, Richard Nixon, [00:25:00] and that was it. We, as a movement, had spent the prior three years dealing with Richard Nixon policy for working people. I mean, it didn't

leave an awful lot to worry about. I mean, Richard Nixon, in those days, was dreadful as a president in the context of worker's issues, except probably some of the building trades, it wasn't quite as bad. But from the African American community, we had certainly did chapter and verse. Not being anti-Nixon, but simply keeping this record before the community and certainly before working people. And this had been a three-year effort to educate people as to what the impact of federal policy are emanating from a president and the party like this. And we certainly [00:26:00] thought the case was made. Well, the AFL-CIO, if you may recall, decided to be neutral in the contest between McGovern and Nixon. McGovern won the Democratic nomination and Richard Nixon won the Republican nomination, as it would be assumed, and the movement took a position of neutrality, which was perfectly within its right to do based on its own procedures. But for so many Black labor leaders, or others, it sort of strongly suggested that your concerns, your issues, your posture, your stature, your credibility had little relevance in the decision-making process. And what shocked us was that they could make a decision like this with no input whatsoever from Black labor leadership. And we probably know a lot more now than we knew then, but it was just appalling [00:27:00] that the

neutrality position would suggest that the American labor movement saw no difference between Richard Nixon or George McGovern. And the way that got translated, for those of us who were trying to keep labor's image as the key movement that was going to improve the standard of living, quality of life, et cetera, it left us in an incredibly difficult position. And some of us felt very strongly about this, and of course, what do you do about it? So a number of people said, we really ought to have a way of discussing this. So about five or six of us at that time, and it boiled down to five, we said -- well, we got together in Miami to just talk about what had just happened. And we just couldn't believe that [00:28:00] tradition would bring the movement to a point where it would send this kind of signal. And we decided that we had to do something, but we did not know what we would do. So we thought about having a meeting to see if other people felt the same way. We didn't have any mailing list or anything like that. I mean, the people who got together were the people who were in the hallway, angry about the issue. So we thought, well, we'll have a meeting. We'll first decide where we're going to have it, when we're going to have it, and what it's going to be about. And the easiest place to have it was Chicago. Apparently, everybody knew the Parker House

or the Parma House, I forget the name of the hotel. And Charlie Hayes, who was, at that time, either a regional director or a vice president of Amalgamated Meat Cutters, [00:29:00] would sort of play host to this meeting. So we simply said, "We're going to have a meeting in Chicago." I mean, and we were hoping that we would get 50 or 100 people to show up to discuss this issue. Well, come the meeting, some 13, 1400 people came. And they came from every part of the country. It was an unbelievable turnout for us, because we had no idea that, A, people were paying this much attention to the role that the AFL-CIO had staked out for itself, but also, many other issues were caught up in this decision. I mean, disrespect for the views of the stature or the credibility of Black labor leadership, both within the house of labor and within their community. The [00:30:00] ongoing, unabated discrimination that existed within unions, that reflected itself in the leadership of the AFL-CIO, although Mr. Randolph and Mr. Dellums, I suspect, were a part of that. I mean, the more active and more progressive trade unionists did not see the respect being shown to them that they thought they were entitled to, by virtue of their station in life. And that all of the problems -- some real, some imaginary -- that was being visited upon us by the Nixon administration and others

before that, that labor really did not have it as a part of its agenda to defend us and represent us in these kinds of areas. And so people came to Chicago with all of those kinds of concerns, and that's when we discovered that this really was not about McGovern and Nixon. This was about something much larger [00:31:00] than that. Because, in effect, the movement later on started Labor for McGovern. But what the Black labor leadership was saying is that we've got to find a way that our views are heard before the decision is made, our views are a part of the decision, or our views are there to criticize a decision. Whatever way, we've got to find a way to get that in place. And the irony of the Chicago meeting is that there was no endorsement. While the McGovern-Nixon neutrality triggered this, the decision was not to make an endorsement, because that would give the impression that this is a political gathering as opposed --

(break in audio) [00:32:00]

WL: --ehicle to address all these other concerns. So, out of the meeting, the resolutions and policies that were developed were aimed at establishing an organization. Now, the convention instructed the leadership to take a full year and analyze this thing. That we would plan a convention the following year, but we would really take the

year to go around the country, to talk to other leadership, to talk to other figures of statue, to ask them what they thought about this. Was this a good idea? What's the downside, what's the upside? Do you agree that these are issues that need some vehicle to [00:33:00] pursue? And if you do, you know, what's your suggestion as to how we go about structuring this? And keep in mind, we were not the first group to do this. I mean, there had been at least two other groups that proceeded us. There was the Negro American Labor Council, and certainly, right here in Detroit, there was the Trade Union Leadership Council, TULC.

PM: TULC.

WL: From which had produced so many great trade union leaders. Well, we went -- anywhere we'd get a phone call, somebody wanted to talk to us, we would go. Four of us, maybe five of us, had -- just took parts of the country to talk to people, and we took the full year. It was very clear, six months out, that people were looking for something. Thought they needed something. And we were instructed to come up with a structure, come up with a set of bylaws or a constitution that [00:34:00] would govern this mechanism, talk about how it would function, what would be the governance thing, and what would its mission be? It's one

thing to be angry, but what is it you're trying to do, and how do you see going about to do it? So we completed our work in a year's time. We came back to our second convention or, I guess, our first official convention -- I think in Washington, DC -- and gave our report. We had some, I guess, close to 1200, 1400 people showed up for the meeting. We gave them the principal report from our hearings, as we called them. We gave them our recommendations and then talked about the issues. Almost a unanimous [00:35:00] support and recommendation to establish the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. The adoption of a constitution and a structure and officers and a financing mechanism. The five principal people who were a part of that was Nelson "Jack" Edwards, Charlie Hayes, Cleveland Robinson, Bill Simons, and myself, but there were other people who played a magnificent role in there. Sister Addie Wyatt and, I mean, just a lot of folks who lent their time and their talent to trying to get this together. And two interesting things happened that didn't get any notoriety. The NALC, which had been headed up by A. Philip Randolph, who, by this time, Cleveland Robinson was the president, their last official conference or convention was held, I believe, in [00:36:00] 1971 or early '72. Had been held in, I believe, either Toledo,

Ohio, or -- But they voted as an organization to join the CBTU, so all of their leadership came with it. With the help of Nelson "Jack" Edwards and Horace Sheffield and Buddy Battle and some others, the TULC, while they certainly didn't go out of business, but it took a policy position to become supportive of this effort. So we had two major bodies saying that this makes some sense. And we went into business. And, fortunately, unfortunately, I'm not sure which, I became president at the founding convention. Charlie Hayes, Jack Edwards, many of the original folks had [00:37:00] an officer position. And we sort of began, then, to bring on an executive board. We tried to avoid the pitfalls of other organizations, and that was they'd become top-heavy with brand-name people. You know, folks who held high national position and, by virtue of that, could participate. We made a conscious decision that this had to be what we called rank and file-focused. And so, in its structure, we allocated certain numbers of positions for rank-and-filers. We made it clear that, in the financing part of it, that no one would be priced out of the game, so the big pork-choppers have to pay more to participate than rank-and-file members. National officers pay one rate, [00:38:00] staff people pay another rate, and rank-and-filers have a rate that allows

them to be able to participate. And our view on this was we were not going to chase anybody to have them finance our organization, because if you can't pay in order to have a fairly free voice to say what's on your mind, you're not really destined to be around for a long time. So we started out with a view that, while we were totally supportive of organized labor, we were not some separate group, we were not outside of the house of labor. We did feel that we wanted to be an independent voice within labor, one that could interpret labor and its mission to the communities from which we come, including our own union. And vice versa, to be able to interpret the issues and policy questions that flow from the community back to our unions. Because we see then, as we see now, [00:39:00] the trade union movement and the needs of working communities, whether they were within labor or not, are almost identical. And the question was raised -- well, there already existed the A. Philip Randolph Institute. And many of us were members then and we're members now. But we saw their mission to be substantially different than what we were talking about. Their role, as described by themselves, and certainly it's described by the house of labor, was almost a political role, to sort of enhance the political program of the AFL-CIO. Which is a role that was

important to play. But had it been playing its role, we wouldn't have been in the position that we were in. I mean, had it raised the kinds of issues [00:40:00] that needed to be raised, perhaps we wouldn't have had to take on this role. But we saw ours being more of on interventional policy questions, being able to interpret policy questions. And as we looked at it, we began to see gaping holes where workers of color were simply not a part of the debate. And we certainly didn't consider ourselves foreign policy experts, but if you're going to talk about trade, if you're going to talk about a shifting economy from a service workforce to an industrial workforce or vice versa, you're going to get into areas where the interests of workers of color are impacted by decisions that are made by the executive council. And not that that's good or bad, but how does our view get put into that process? And we saw ourselves different [00:41:00] than the A. Philip Randolph Institute. Not better than, but different than. But there were those who just foamed at the mouth when you said CBTU. I mean, they just thought there was something fundamentally wrong and that we had no right to even think in the context of having independent thought. I mean, the line would come down, and your mission was to follow the line.

PM: Now, these groups that opposed or had reservations about what you were doing also represented, in fact, some of the more liberal international unions.

WL: Yes. Yes. Yes.

PM: And explain, from your vantage point, why some of these, like the UAW, had some reservations, not necessarily at your objectives, but how you were reaching your objectives.

WL: Well, I think -- and I can't speak for the UAW, but I think --

PM: Or other unions.

WL: -- but, as a general proposition, folks [00:42:00] wanted to make the argument that everything was pretty okay. I mean, there was a lump or a bump here and there, but by and large, everything was okay. And there was no real need to have these other organizations, or another organization. And it just sort of raised questions about the homogenous movement we were a part of. Well, the fact is, it's not a homogenous movement, and I think you get better policy when there are diverse views that come to play on any given subject. And I think people were disturbed by the title "Coalition of Black Trade Unionists." I mean, folks were terribly disturbed about that. And the title, I would have to say, was an intentional designation, because we wanted folks to think about this, [00:43:00] and first of all, to

get over the negativity of thinking anything that has the title "Black" in it, there's something wrong with. And we always use the example, it's kind of funny, like, when the bank goes belly-up, it's in the red. When it's making money, it's in the black, but it never sort of comes out when you (laughs) think about it. We wanted folks to get over this hangup of Black institutions and to be able to deal with someone representing the Black perspective like you would any other. And it was not an in-your-face thing, it was just, here are some issues that you need to think about from a Black perspective. And I'd have to say that the leadership, after a while, began to accept this notion, and they weren't necessarily for it, but they accepted it. I mean, we were not [00:44:00] so -- I think some people thought we were really going to beat labor over the head and be so antagonistic that it would fracture relationships. We only pointed out those contradictions when there were contradictions. You know, labor's position on affirmative action in those days were a little strange. Their position on such major issues as full employment was just absolutely unbelievable. If you recall the great debate around the Humphrey-Hawkins full employment act, and we all, you know, were able to be practical about this, but how can you be reluctant to support full employment? And

we thought, since our unemployment was two and a half and three times that of the national average, that as trade unionists, we had to be for a policy that would pretty much guarantee every able-bodied person opportunity to work. [00:45:00] And, you know, the AFL-CIO was hung up in the fine print, where we were trying to make a point that the government has a fundamental responsibility to develop an economy that provides access. And then those things that contribute to that education, training, skill development, these are all government responsibilities, either at the national or the local level. And if we're going to compete, in those days, if we're going to compete with Pacific Rim nations or Europe, we had to have a skilled workforce irrespective of color. And we began to entertain discussions like this, and I think that's when some people discovered this as a new debate that they'd never had to have before. Or when we were talking trade, as we've come to learn now, and even with regard -- I mean, the principal impact organization, the UAW, [00:46:00] and steel, and we're saying the more companies that move offshore, the more companies transfer a productive capacity to cheaper labor areas. Ultimately it's going to come home to roost. And I think, while we were not necessarily visionary, our point was that, let's discuss these in a different context.

PM: Now, you were also, at this time, secretary-treasurer of one of the fastest-growing unions in America, and you were the leader of this other organization. What was the impact within your own union, for example?

WL: I think, in the early days -- well, let me just put it -- I think Jerry Wurf, who was president at that time, understood this dichotomy. I mean, [00:47:00] he was one of the more progressive people on the board. I'm not sure he was totally in line with it, but he understood that there had to be a different approach to these kinds of issues. I'm not sure we had the support of a lot of other folks on our board at that time. And I think, to our credit, folks gave us the benefit of the doubt, and I think that's probably what happened across the movement. "Let's wait and see, we're not going to help them, but we're not going to stand in their way. And there were two kinds of things that were happening to us. In the AFL-CIO conventions, you'd have one kind of activity, and, I suspect, in the conventions of our own unions, you had another. With regard to AFSCME, I think probably we got a break because I was secretary-treasurer, and what I used to tell folks who were concerned about [00:48:00] this Black thing, I said, I could get every Black vote in the union and lose by a landslide. So it's not about, you know,

starting a new special brand of politics. It's simply trying to represent issues important to organized labor and workers from a Black perspective. Not do anything other than saying, this may be a great issue for Dearborn, but here's how it works in Anacostia. I mean, you can have a perfect labor candidate that has given you a vote on every issue, but he has done nothing for education, housing, transportation, and the areas important to us. So, before we sign on, let's raise these other questions so we can get a full position out of the guy. Well, these weren't issues that a lot of folk wanted to deal with [00:49:00] at that point in time, but we were convinced that nothing was going to ever change unless you forced people to deal with those kinds of issues. And you notice that the AFL-CIO finally found a way to support Humphrey-Hawkins. They finally found a way to support infrastructure projects and programs that were targeted for urban areas, which had spinoff employment opportunity. They finally found a way to support the strengthening of urban education. They found a lot of ways to do things because they discovered it was not harmful to their interests to do these other things. Probably one of the most troubling areas for it was the area of foreign policy, of foreign affairs, which had been their exclusive domain. And we had no interest in

[00:50:00] rubbing them the wrong way, but how can you have the contradiction of being for democracy or talking about the freedom to organize and bargain collectively, and you can't say that to nations with a high concentration of workers of color? Whether you're talking about Africa or Latin and Central America. I mean, if you're totally preoccupied with the issue of communism, which is certainly an issue that the American workforce has got to be conscious of, does that supersede the issue of freedom of association in any respective country? Does that supersede the issues of workers having the right to organize and deal with their own governments, which are by and large either military governments or dictatorships, when our government is either supporting the military government or [00:51:00] supporting the dictatorship? I mean, there are just those kinds of contradictions.

PM: Well, there were issues, then, you developed and entertained within CBTU, that transcended the traditional collective bargaining issues within the labor movement. International issues, for example. South Africa. Now, how did this come about? Was this, right from the beginning, one of the major objectives of your organization? Did this develop as your members saw this was relevant to their own experiences and to the nation?

WL: I think it developed as we became much more aware of how foreign affairs, foreign relations, the labor movement's relationship with international labor movements would ultimately affect us. Our – "our" being our country -- our relationship with other countries, either government-to-government, and labor works through the various government entities, [00:52:00] through international labor organizations, whether it be the ILO or ICFTU, or the other entities. Our view was, our interest is caught up in these countries where our national interest is involved. If it's Africa, then so long as Africa is a source of cheap labor for the individual countries, individual governments, we're going to always be exposed to that threat. Same would be true of the Pacific Rim nations, same would be true of Latin and Central America. We began to look at these first from, certainly, the national interests of our government, but also the moral interests. I mean, if our government is going to participate in devastating countries across Africa because of the East-West policies, [00:53:00] you know, why not raise these questions so that we can have a sane policy? And you can see the contradictions all across the African continent. I mean, the Soviets had one relationship, we had the other, and then we'd switch sides. There's no clearer example than Somalia, where the Soviets

arm one camp, we arm the other camp, and then both of our camps fell out, so we switched sides. I mean, so (laughs) we're now arming everybody. It's insane. But that was typical of virtually every country. We began to argue that workers are not part of this big debate that's taking place here. I mean, their lives are spent trying to have a better life, not whether or not they're going to have tanks and planes. And as we began to make these arguments, our [00:54:00] national policy leaders began to get more frantic, because the Cold War was having this real impact, not just in Africa but in other countries. South Africa became sort of the spearhead of what's wrong with our policies. I mean, we could support apartheid in the name of democracy, which is a contradiction. And this is all during -- you know, transcended from Nixon through Carter through Reagan and on up. And the AFL never blinked once. We were on the wrong side of history in most of these countries, simply because we were more committed to the government's policy than we were to our own principles. And we began to raise these, not to embarrass the movement, but to try and argue that we ought to be supporting the building of free and democratic trade unions because [00:55:00] they can then interact with their own governments on their own behalf.

PM: Now, was there any opposition or any difference of opinion within CBTU as to whether these international interests or affairs should be given higher priority, or whether other more current national, local interests should get the major attention?

WL: I'm sure there were schisms, but the way our policies are developed, like most other institutions, they're convention-developed policies. Delegates, through their local chapters, send in resolutions of policies, statements, to be reviewed by the convention as a whole. And in certain times, some issues are just upfront. I think we got into the whole foreign policy thing [00:56:00] more around the countries of Brazil, Zimbabwe, South Africa, because of what was happening at the time. And then there's always sort of an implementation of the position that's there in 1984, as an example, when we took -- well, we had taken a position on South Africa long before that, but we were sort of a catalyst to the creation of the Free South Africa movement. And along with that was a whole program to try and advance this. We worked on Namibia, we worked on South Africa, Malawi, Kenya, going way back. So, I mean, there are internationalists within the organization, people who feel very strongly about foreign affairs, and we try to do what the convention

mandates that we do. And it's not [00:57:00] either-or, it's, what do the delegates have on their minds?

PM: Right. Well, I guess another way of putting it, what the delegates had on their mind, what they considered most important and highest-priority, was there pretty substantial agreement on these issues, or were there --

WL: Yeah.

PM: -- not necessarily *disagreements*, but --

WL: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

PM: -- you should be spending more attention on something else, given limited resources or energies and the like?

WL: One of the interesting things is that we've been able to almost work by consensus, and I can't think of more than one or two issues where there have been division. We took an interest in Israel, in the Middle East, which -- much to the consternation of the AFL-CIO. But we saw the relationships between the [00:58:00] African American community and the Jewish community deteriorating for reasons of misunderstanding, lack of communication, the whole series of things. And we wanted to at least convey this to our friends from Histadrut, our friends in the Jewish labor community, and our friends in the government of Israel. So, in 1976, we were invited to bring a delegation to Israel to talk about some of these sort of

domestic problems, as we saw them. And we didn't claim to be experts, but we could pretty much tell people that there are lots and lots of people who see the Jewish community as a monolithic thing. You know, everybody here thinks the same way as everybody there, and everybody there thinks the same way as everybody -- well, that's obviously the furthest thing from the truth. But the [00:59:00] reality is, unless people at least hear the downside as they think about their policies in the Middle East, it just gets worse and worse. And we had a very successful trip. Shared an awful lot of good information. We learned a lot. We learned an awful lot about, you know, the lack of security, the instability of the region, and what is happening with Arab and Palestinian residents of the State of Israel itself. So, I mean, everybody learned, hopefully, a little bit from everybody else. But the fact is, we didn't see our need to get clearance to do this. We didn't see our need to get the "Okay, it's all right for you to visit Israel," from the AFL-CIO. We paid a little bit of a price, but I think the point was that we've got a point of view, [01:00:00] we're not saying this is the only one or the absolute right one, but it's a point of view that somebody ought to hear.

PM: What was the response, in general, from members in the existing trade unions, now, that you developed and became more well-known nationally within the movement?

WL: I think many of the progressive unions began to think that we're making some sense. They may not like what they're hearing, but it needs to be said. We have always enjoyed good support from the Machinists, from the UAW, we've had good support from the Service Employees. And the progressive 12 or 15 have always been there. We have never did anything other than say, "Watch what we're trying to do, and if you think it makes sense, then help us." We've never [01:01:00] gone out and solicited resources from unions. I mean, those leaders who were part of us may have solicited their own organizations, but we don't do an annual canvas of the unions, you know, "Please send us some money." What we tried to do is look at the issues that confront all of the union, all of the movement, and give some thought to it as to how it might strengthen the relationship between the African American community and those unions. And the irony is, I think it's played out well. It's caused a couple of things to happen. In the early days, you had, as I said before, Mr. Randolph and C.L. Dellums was on the executive council of the AFL-CIO. And probably only one or two unions had any diversity of

their top leadership [01:02:00] to speak of. Today, and certainly it's not fair to say it's because of we did, but today it's hard to see a major union without diversity, whether it's African American, Hispanic, or women. It's just good, institutionally, to have that, and certainly to provide a spot for the views to be put into the policy debate process. Some unions have gone far beyond others, but we think we've been a catalyst to that.

PM: Now, you've also, I noticed, along the line, developed a very strong women's section within CBTU. How did that get started and how has that worked out?

WL: The women have always been aggressive and supportive of the CBTU program. And, [01:03:00] ironically, what happened to the movement as a whole happened to us also. Because we became so tunnel-visioned on the broader issues that we forgot that the women in the workforce were really suffering from and exposed to a lot of different kinds of problems that we just had no understanding of. And many of them are women problems in general, but Black women specifically have a number of other difficulties that just never get on the agenda. So sister Addie Wyatt, Clara Day, many of them said, "Look, I mean, we've got to have a way of getting these issues on the front burner."

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WL: And there was a real consternation (laughs) and we didn't instantly relate what they were saying to what we were in the process of saying ourselves. And I believe, again, in Chicago, the decision was made that we will establish this mechanism where the female leadership could have its forum, its vehicle for bringing its issues on the table. And we thought we had a good understanding of this, but until you understand the problems of pay equity or parity in the workplace, or the dual role or sometimes triple role that female workers have to play in terms of managing the home, the job, and all of that. [00:01:00] Or just the problems inherent in the workforce: promotional opportunities, harassment on the job. And we didn't have a feel for that. And we thought, Well, these are issues that need to be brought up front. Health issues. I mean, a whole host of new kinds of problems because of the changing nature of the workforce. It has been very successful. I mean, very, very successful. They have raised -- and I shouldn't say *they*, I mean, but the organization have been able to raise issues that have different kinds of impact in the broad

discussion of women. Equal pay for equal work has one meaning, but when you look at the role of African American women, equal pay for equal work does not quite get it done because of the way discrimination has played itself out [00:02:00] in the workforce. So we've got to talk about pay equity, but we've also got to talk about opportunities. We've got to talk about affirmative action. But there's some tremendous leadership among our women, and I'll get in trouble if I name names, but from virtually every union, our strongest support all along has always came from our female members. We've got CWA, IUE, and I think probably CLUW is symptomatic of this real need for women to have a place where they can meet and discuss their own issues and develop their own policies.

PM: Now, you mentioned, from Chicago on. [00:03:00] Are you referring, then, to the first major convention, or --

WL: No. No. No, this was a subsequent meeting.

PM: Right. Subsequent meeting, then, that this came in and you responded to it in a very positive way.

WL: Right. It took us a while to allow them to think through the structure that they thought would work best for them. It dawned on us that we really can't, ourselves, determine what works for them. They've got to work this out and come back with a recommendation. And they did, and it was at

the Chicago meeting of, I think, (pause) I want to say ’82, that it was put in place. And the women selected their own leadership and developed their own structure and developed their own issues. [00:04:00] Now they have -- a special day is set aside for the women’s convention, which deals with a number of issues unique to women, but all part of, you know, the basic workforce issues.

PM: Has this posed any problem, administratively, to have these independent groups within your organization? Are there others, other than the women’s issue, which have started to develop special interests that you address?

WL: There was a discussion about -- from New York, they wanted to have a men’s group. (laughs) And they made the argument that the role of men is important enough that there be a committee for that. So our decision there was, why don’t you have it in your [00:05:00] chapter? And then let it work for a while and see what develops from that, to see whether or not there’s a need at the national level or whether that might not be just sort of a local phenomenon. And what has happened is that there’s been a number of policy issues that have come out. For instance, the issue of prostate cancer among African American males came out of this discussion in this group, and how do we get some national attention focused on this phenomenon? The

incidence of diabetes among African American males. The issue of hazardous and toxic exposure based on discriminatory practice which puts African American males in a greater exposure environment to hazardous [00:06:00] materials, in times past and now. So those kinds of issues came out of these discussions, and we're working on those. As a matter of fact, the toxic waste and hazardous materials issue has taken on much larger dimensions than what we thought we had when we first started.

PM: Now, then, you mentioned two areas in our discussion. Separate areas. One international, now women's issues. What about the issues of politics? National elections, regional elections? How has your organization responded to that and developed this program?

WL: In the late '70s, when we sat down and sort of looked at what the role of African American trade unionists was in the political process, it was essentially voter registration and get out the vote. I mean, that was [00:07:00] sort of the two designated functions. And we thought that that was a less-than-honest relationship with organized labor and with our community. Because trade unionists bring to the table a great deal of expertise, a great deal of discipline, and a great deal of understanding of public policy questions. There had, at least in our

understanding, never been a concentrated effort to have Black labor leadership present in the national parties' conventions. There'd be some brand-name folks but, I mean, by and large, local trade union leadership, unless sent by their organization, never made it. So we decided that what we had to do, first of all, was understand the workings of the political parties. How their [00:08:00] platforms, their programs, how their candidate selections, how all of this worked so that we could begin to play a much more meaningful role at every level of the organization. So in, I believe, 1981, we decided that we would train all of our leadership who wanted to be trained in the process of becoming a delegate to a state convention or a national convention of either party. And I don't even know if we had some Republicans who were part of the organization, but we wanted to train them on how to be a delegate, how to get elected as a delegate, how to organize your community, how to build the support to get yourself elected. And, to our surprise, we wound up with, [00:09:00] I guess, 30 or 40 delegates. Thirty or 40 of our people being elected as delegates to a national convention. More than we'd ever seen before. And some who were getting elected without the support of their international unions. Not that this was a contest, but they were just able to run in their

congressional districts with their own mobilized support. We then began to see that this has implications for state and local activity. And we developed a program around this. How to build a campaign to get elected, and what role do you play. And we followed that same plan ever since then. Luckily, many of the national unions saw this as an asset and began, then, to select [00:10:00] leadership, participate as a part of that union program for the national party conventions. And, while I don't remember numbers, the Jackson campaign of '84 and '88 produced tremendous upswing in participation. The first Clinton campaign of '92, I guess it would be, and the second -- I mean, we're in the middle of the mix now. We do not claim to be a 501(c)(3) organization. We believe we are an advocacy organization, so we have a (c)(4) status. Although many of the groups we work with are (c)(3)s, and we therefore don't jeopardize their situation. But we believe we have a responsibility to analyze candidates, [00:11:00] to analyze issues, and to speak to what's positive for Black workers and the Black community. Not to the detriment of organized labor, but here are our views on their records as it relates to our interests. And, 95 percent of the time, we're going to be on the same page, but it's the five percent that we argue that we have an

independent right to be for or against this candidate. Not on the basis of the color of their eyes, but here's where they have been on issues relevant to our community.

PM: Do you ever get together with labor organizations to consider endorsements and what's best for -- in general?

WL: We do, but typically what happens is that the various constituent groups of the AFL-CIO or the other groups, Coalition Labor Union Women, APRI, LCLAA, Pride At Work, [00:12:00] these are all (c)(3) groups, so, therefore, they can't endorse. But where we get engaged in nonpartisan campaigns within the respective communities, by and large, the outcome is almost the same as if you had endorsed. But there are situations where we are working on our own. We feel we have every responsibility to endorse candidates. We work with organized labor at the AFL-CIO level or individual affiliates in the support of candidates and support of issues.

PM: In the last election, while we're so close to this election, last fall, where did CBTU stand on Ralph Nader?

WL: We were opposed to Ralph Nader, and our fundamental belief was, [00:13:00] there have been three -- or at least two -- prior situations where the emerging Black political influence and impact was set back as a result of these independent candidates. And as we looked at it and went

back to the Humphrey-Nixon race, where the war issue was a single issue, that the liberal community distanced themselves from Humphrey because he didn't distance himself from Johnson early enough. Our view was, how different the world would have been had Humphrey won that election as opposed to Nixon. But the liberal community walked away from Humphrey, he lost, we got Nixon, and worker interests and Black interests were [00:14:00] set back tremendously. We then came to the Carter election. When Carter was not charismatic enough for the intelligentsia and they took a backseat, we got Reagan, and we got eight years of Reagan and four years of Bush, so we got 12 years of policy, simply because single-issue politics played this game. So then we come to Clinton. And it wasn't a Clinton problem, it was a Gore problem, and the antagonism toward Gore had more to do with Clinton than it had to do with Gore. But Ralph's campaign was premised on, the Democratic party is not worth supporting, which is sort of a strange position. For us, both workers in general and Black workers in particular, the eight years under the Clinton administration had seen tremendous gains for organized [00:15:00] labor, in spite of the fact that there were just dreadful disagreements. I mean, we by no means forgive the Clinton administration for the NAFTA or for a lot of the

other -- I mean, I shouldn't say a lot of other – but major public policy questions. But, on the whole, to have a government that was essentially pro-labor, to have appointments that are essentially pro-worker, to have policies that certainly favored all spectrums of the workforce sort of superseded this knee-jerk reaction to the party. And I met with Ralph, as a matter of fact, and said to him that all that we see, this is not a cinch for Al Gore. This is a much closer thing than we realize. And, in effect, it is conceivable that this could cost us the election, and if it doesn't cost us the election, it'll cost us a trainload of money, you know, trying to make the [00:16:00] case. And Ralph said to me, he said, "You are not adequately representing your interests. If push comes to shove, you would be better off with Bush than you would be with Gore." And I thought, coming from Ralph, that had to be the most ass-backwards analysis of our situation you could think of. I mean, it was just a dreadful underestimation of the impact of single issues. And he certainly had every right to run, but it is my belief -- and I may be the only one that believes it -- that, in the end, it cost us the election. It cost Gore the election in the state of Florida. Now you say, well, how about other places? And his argument is that there are people voting

who would not have voted. I would say that of the 95 thousand votes that you got in Florida, [00:17:00] at least 535 of them may have gone to Gore. And the CBTU had 44 work sites that it took on as its own responsibility for advancing, in a nonpartisan way, the Gore campaign, and -- I mean, I shouldn't say *the Gore campaign*, but the voter mobilization around this issue. So we took it on in a couple different ways. We did not wait until three weeks or four weeks before the election day. We started a year before, with town hall forums and seminars, so that the people who were going to be asked to vote understood what was at stake and the difference between the two candidacies. And that there were issues [00:18:00] of employment, domestic economy, healthcare. I mean, all the issues that flow from the federal government through the state government, all of these are on the table, and you need to understand where each candidate stands. So we held, as I said, what we call town hall meetings or seminars from the deep South -- in Mississippi, in Tennessee, in Arkansas, Missouri, Georgia, Ohio, New Jersey, New York, Michigan. A series of these meetings, bringing community-based organizations, community leadership, rank-and-file voters, and to take a look at the issues. Our interest was increasing the vote, increasing

the turnout. And one of the interesting things, we haven't seen all of the data on it yet, but in the last two cycles, and other organizations, [00:19:00] I suspect, have done the same thing, but the African American vote, while not record-shattering, has been higher than expected. And as a result has impacted on the ultimate outcome of the elections. In the '98 cycle, in terms of the congressional races, the senatorial races, and in the last 2000 election, so I mean the presidential race and in some senate races that nobody expected to even pull closer. So we think we're in the process of developing a fairly effective program. We're certainly not there yet, but we have changed the relationship. It is not just register voters and turn them out to vote. We see this as an empowerment process and that the community, if it can develop an infrastructure for participation on [00:20:00] those issues that affect this interest, they will turn out. And that's true of any community.

PM: Now, do the various branches within CBTU, did they actually assist individual candidates during the recent election? Did they take that role, as some unions do?

WL: In some cases, yes.

PM: Bringing in voters? And, you know, registration and that?

WL: In some cases, yes. Yeah. Because, in some areas, you've got relationships between candidates that are close, almost like family relationships. If we went to the second congressional district in the state of Mississippi, where Bennie Thompson is an old ally of workers, he's probably the only candidate who would run with a labor record and a labor program in the state of Mississippi. Well, I mean, you're not neutral on Bennie Thompson, you know what I mean? So, in that case, you would work with him. [00:21:00] Still, in Mississippi, there's a district right adjacent to his, congressional district number four, a white candidate, a fellow by the name of Ronny Shows, who was targeted by the Republican party. Our folks are just as eager to work for him, and did so. And it's a mixed bag, but sure.

PM: Now, as you look back, you know, there's 30 years that you've been active. As you look back, what would you think of some of the accomplishments that CBTU has on its record? You've discussed many of them already, but in a little, maybe, a different context, the things that stand out, that -- even though they were maybe unexpected at the time.

WL: I think we've probably, if we've accomplished anything, it's changed the [00:22:00] policymaking process as it relates to major issues. And I have to see this from the

context of organized labor. I'm not sure that we, as an institution, have changed anything on our own, but we've been a catalyst, I think, to the movement, looking at things a little bit differently. Example: I think, for the eight years of the Clinton administration, the question of domestic economic policy, which gave consideration to the lower-paid workers as opposed to just, I mean, the high-level income. We think we played a role in getting people behind the earned income tax credit thing, which gives a boost for lower-income workers. We think we played a role in focusing the whole debate around healthcare and the need for a national healthcare program. We were single-payer [00:23:00] with all of the contradictions that that'd bring up for certain unions, but the debate over the need, we think we made a case for that. I think we've made an impact with regard to the movement's view of its own role with regard to domestic politics. If anything, I think we've sensitized them to the fact that it's just not, "Let's get our 30 percent of the 40 percent that turns out." Let's find ways and means of empowering our broad trade union base and our communities at the same time so that we've got a much greater impact on the political process. I'm told that 26, 27 percent of the last vote was from union households. Well, a large number of those

households were African American households, and I think the point's been made that where you develop a program that meets the interests of [00:24:00] these voters, you're going to get their support. I think probably the other area where we've had, I think, singly the greatest success, was getting them to look at our international allies a little bit differently. And by that I mean, look at movements across the globe and look at them first and what's in the best interests of those workers as opposed to what's in the best interests of our government. And I think under President Sweeney's leadership, the whole international affairs role is more worker-oriented than before. And I think that stands us in good stead when we begin to talk about trade relationships, when we start to talk about major trade policies. CBTU opposed the African Growth and Opportunity Act and brought organized labor with us, because the issue [00:25:00] there was more sovereignty than it was investment. I mean, the Growth and Opportunity Act was neither growth nor opportunity. (laughs) And we said so, much to the consternation of some of our congressional allies, and certainly the AFL-CIO did not want to make enemies of congressional allies by being opposed to it. But the issue we were pointing out was right. I mean, how can you expect nations, whether it be

Africa or anywhere else, to pay debts back to the international financial institutions and, at the same time, have a domestic program that will improve the quality of life for their people? I mean, it's just a contradiction, and I think we made that case, and I think the AFL-CIO, much to its credit, really stood very tall in that fight and is carrying that over into other issues.

PM: Now, what is the administrative structure now of CBTU? There's [00:26:00] obviously officers, you have an executive council, but how often do you meet, for example?

WL: We meet quarterly as a normal operation, on call dependent upon what the issues wind up being. We try, as I said, we have not lost this issue of being rank and file-focused. So we believe we've got to keep people as informed as possible. We have a newsletter, and like most newsletters, it comes out on a regular schedule every now and then. (laughs) But we try and give a good picture of what's going on by chapter, based on the chapter's own reports. We then try and give people a good sense of what's going on nationally based on the issues before them, and then we try and give them a report on what we have done [00:27:00] with the convention mandates that we were given. And we, like any other organization, I mean, it sort of rises and falls, totally dependent upon the leadership and how aggressive

they are at pursuing these things. Our executive committee, which is the chair officers and the trustees, we meet by phone probably more often than quarterly. In a political year, we probably meet a little more than that as we develop programs. We have a structure that involves what we call regional directors. We have, in some cases, states grouped together, where an individual is responsible for monitoring and coordinating the activities within those states, and to assist the chapters [00:28:00] and chapter leadership and just keeping their program going. We're trying to strengthen that. We think, and it'll be a big issue at this upcoming convention, we think we've sort of outgrown some of the ad hoc approach to this. We've got to get sort of a regional presence that allows for the chapter leadership to have sort of a focal point short of Washington, DC. And we're beginning to move towards the staffing of at least four offices within the regions, not settling on where they ought to be right now, but we think we ought to be able to afford about four of them where we've got some people there on full-time basis.

PM: Full-time basis, yeah.

WL: We've got a growing youth program where we're trying to get young people [00:29:00] to, first of all, look at trade unionism, not only as a good career, but the movement as a

valuable part of this whole society thing. I mean, workers show up thinking the employer has done all right by the worker because he gave him all these things -- decent pay, decent salary, decent benefits -- what's the problem? Well, you know, nobody ever really takes the role to tell them, "Well, the union extracted these, they were not given." We've now got about 150 young people who have been with us for three, four years, who have gone from, like, junior high school, to high school, to some are in college now, who see themselves being career trade unionists. And they participate in all of the programs. Whether it's the seminars and the issue forums, the political part of the program, whether it's [00:30:00] registration or mobilization. And I think we're doing a pretty good job, which is a real testimony to the local leadership, who is able to convince the kids that there's a real role for you to play in your community. And we've got a couple ideas we're going to try out after this convention. What we'd like to do, and we don't have consensus on this yet, is to structure a couple of youth organizations with resources, let them develop their own governance mechanism. And their job would be, in their community, to bring labor and labor's agenda to their high school peers, so they can talk to young people about the role and value of labor in our

society. And I just, you know, whenever there's a strike, you hear about the union [00:31:00] or something like that, but what's our job and what's our role and responsibility as a part of the whole community policy formulation process? And we've got a couple of -- we've had good luck in New York, in Chicago, and South Florida. So we're going to see if we can't put some structure together with the adults acting as advisors as opposed to them running it and bringing the kids in.

PM: This represents a f--

(break in audio)

PM: -- that your organizations develop to meet and respond to these new needs, that you didn't think about in 1972?

WL: Not at all.

PM: You want to take -- [00:32:00] okay. This time we're taking a break, 10?

[Carolyn?]: Yes.

PM: Okay.

(break in audio)

PM: The organization, tell -- you had started, earlier, talking about the structure from above, but it's your attempt, I understand, to develop local organizations, local chapters. With people assigned in those areas, at least, that can be contacted in those areas.

WL: Well, what we want to do is sort of put a loop around a number of states and sort of install some sort of a coordinating mechanism. We want to call it a regional office. I mean, we can't take the whole country, but in those areas where we've got good program, good organization, good leadership, try and put someone in place to help coordinate that. Because most of our folks are volunteers and they got a regular job and regular family responsibilities. [00:33:00] And they can continue to work as long as they can get some legwork support, some sort of technical, technological support. So that's what we're looking at now in addition to this, as I indicated before, trying to develop this youth mechanism. And it's a part of our sort of build-out approach. As more and more people learn about us, learn some of the work that we're trying to do, more people become interested in us. But they're starting at 0.8 on a scale to 10, so they're not able to grasp everything right away. So we've got to find some way of getting them the logistical support that they need in order to be effective, and we think we can make that happen.

PM: Mm-hmm. You have a dues structure.

WL: Yes, we do. As a matter of fact, it's going to be one of the real subjects of debate at the upcoming convention.

Our dues structure has not changed since we went into business. We have, for us big hitters [00:34:00] like Nate Head and Joe Davis and the crowds that you know, we all pay 75 bucks to participate, half of which goes to the local chapter from whose city we're from. For administrative staff people, they have paid 37.50, and then for rank-and-filers, we've had a 15-dollar membership fee for all these years. This is at the national level. Now, at the chapter level, they have a dues structure to support their local chapter activities, and we split our national dues right down the middle with the local chapters. That's been able to keep us going for all these years because we get an awful lot of in-kind support. What we're looking at now is, some of us who've been here a long time may not be here forever, a remote possibility. So we're trying to think of, how do we secure this organization for the future? You know, five years out, 10 years out? [00:35:00] How do we put it on a sound financial footing so that it can carry on the program, not so much at the national level, but at the local level? And so we're going to have a major debate about financing at the upcoming convention, and some of the programs that we're going to put in place, some that are in place that we want to strengthen, and we've got to talk about, what's this cost and who gets to pay it? And some

of that debate is taking place right now out among the chapters, and people who are coming to the convention will voice their views on this. We think that if the organization is worth having, it's worth paying for. We should not be dependent upon someone else to finance our organization, and so that's going to be on the drawing board.

PM: Who's eligible for membership?

WL: Anyone who is a member of a bona fide trade union. That is [00:36:00] the threshold. We don't care what party you belong to, we don't care -- but you've got to hold a membership card in a union. And, contrary to popular belief, (laughs), when we said a "Coalition of Black Trade Unionists," we have Hispanic members, we've got, you know, Caucasian members, we've got members from every place. Because what we say to people is that this is an open organization, this is an open democracy. What you will get when you come to our meetings is trade unionism from a Black perspective. And you're free to join in that debate at any level, in any way you want, but that's the premise. It is not sectarian. We don't shut anybody out. As a matter of fact, we welcome everybody in. As a matter of fact, one of the real slurs or slanders that was used against us is that we only want Black members. Well,

that's silly. What we want are people [00:37:00] who are prepared to be in an activist mode on issues from a Black perspective, and I think we've achieved that. And I started to say earlier that we have shifted since our initial coming-together. I mean, we came together, initially, out of protest to a certain set of conditions, a certain environment thrust upon us. And we've gone through that phase and we've accepted and acknowledged that the key movement in our country is the trade union movement. And we've got to be a part of that, and we've got to make ourselves relevant to it and it more relevant to our community. And the American labor movement has shifted. It is no longer in the conservative mode that it was in [00:38:00] 15 years ago, 10 years ago, and even five years ago. And we've got to -- at least, our thinking is, we have to shift with the times and with the circumstances. So we started to analyze ourselves six years ago. What have we accomplished from the old mode of operation? What are the new issues we are confronted with right now and are we structured right to deal with them? And if not, what do we have to do? And, as you're well aware, in 1995, the leadership of the AFL-CIO changed. And changed, at least in my opinion, for some very fundamental reasons: that the American workforce had almost exhausted its patience with a

movement that was as conservative [00:39:00] as that was, that was as traditional as that was, and did not appear to meet the needs of the new worker. And so, when President Sweeney was elected president of the AFL-CIO on a platform of, you know, "A new voice for workers" and et cetera, it raised some new and different questions with us. Could we continue to play the same kind of policy role, and how effective would that be? Well, with Mr. Sweeney's election, along with that came an expansion of the executive council, which is sort of the highest level of governance of the AFL-CIO. And we had made an argument during the candidacy period of Mr. Sweeney and Mr. Donahue that whichever got elected [00:40:00] had to deal with a number of issues if the movement was going to be relevant to all of its constituency. And so we submitted to each of the candidates a list of 12 items that we thought they had to deal with. One, and I think primary, was that there had to be an opening-up of the executive council process to give greater voice to this new and different workforce that was out there. Of women, of young workers, of immigrants, of Hispanics and African Americans. I mean, you can't have a leadership that didn't reflect both who was in the workforce now and at least those you were going to try and organize. Secondly, that there was a real need for people

to understand the role of the AFL-CIO. I mean, because you don't really turn on your [00:41:00] television and get any idea of what the worker's movement is all about unless you've got a strike or something like that. So we gave them this whole list of things, and to their credit, each of them met with us twice. Met with the leadership of the coalition twice to talk about these things. In the end, when Mr. Sweeney won, step one of what they did was expanded the executive council and open it up, I think, to about 48, 49 members, and it's a little bit larger than that now. But included in that were the presence of new and different people. African Americans, women, Hispanics, Asian Pac-- I mean, just a very, I thought, [00:42:00] refreshing approach in this new beginning. I think 12 or 13 new spots were opened up for people of color and women, which, and I kid you not, in effect changed the debate within the executive council. And that has opened up a whole new arena of activity, and we believed, six years ago -- five years ago, actually -- that we had to change with those times. We could no longer be on the outside yelling and screaming. We were now on the inside, and we had to make the most of our presence. And all of the areas and issues that we were concerned about are now on the table before us. We got voice and vote as to the direction that

the institution ought to take to address these, and I think it's in that arena that we've been [00:43:00] very effective, whether it's domestic affairs or foreign affairs. Of the six or eight African Americans, particularly, who are on there, I mean, we have committee assignments in some of the key areas of activity and have voice on any other area that comes before the council. So I think it's been, I mean, his action to expand the council has been extremely helpful in making sure that there are views inside the policy process. And we are shifting with that. We made some initial changes five years ago, and we're about to complete those changes this year, and along -- part of those changes is the reinforcement of our structure. It's the development of technical systems for our [00:44:00] branches. It's the use of new technology for communications and it's development of our own individual capacity to participate. I mean, it's one thing to be in the room, it's another thing to understand what's going on. So we've got to make sure that our folks understand how to play. We get domestic assignments, we get foreign assignments, and to the credit of our people, I think they've gone far beyond just the call of just basic duty. The changes has to make us more responsible and more responsive, you know, to the program overall.

PM: In effect, your success in bringing about these changes within the AF of L has forced [00:45:00] your organization to be a different organization.

WL: Right. To be a different organization. To be a different organization.

PM: Well, this is a good way to look, then, at the future, 2001. In the organization, you're moving ahead at this meeting this fall, making changes in the organization, expanding the structure and the like. But you're facing, probably in all of your history, for 30 years, a much more challenging issue with the administration in Washington and the threat that that administration has already demonstrated upon working men and women and the labor movement. How are you going to be prepared, how are you prepared, to meet these changes? And how do you see your plan of action now, even in a temporary way, in meeting them?

WL: Well, I think the first thing we've got to do is separate out two functions that we've played in the past. While we never considered ourselves a civil rights organization, we did take [00:46:00] on civil rights issues. I think we've got to work with our civil rights colleagues to advance civil rights issues. By that, I mean the Urban League, the NAACP, SCLC, OIC, all those organizations who have civil

rights as a part of their basic mission, to try and help them advance that. We see ourselves, now, much more as a policy organization with responsibility to interpret policy and educate around it. Clearly, I think, our best contribution is to an enlightened electorate at every level of government, so that people understand what the impact of policy is formulated by either administration, Democratic or Republican, at both federal, state, or local. So that they are up to date enough [00:47:00] when they go into the polling place to cast the ballot in a way to best reflect their interests. Example: Nixon was a flaming liberal compared to what we're dealing with now. We've got an administration who is totally committed to a higher level of income group, anti-worker, certainly anti-union. The four or five initial policy decisions that they've made just gives us a signal as to what we're going to be in for for the next four years. You know, the elimination of project labor agreements, which has meant so much to maintaining basic prevailing wage rates from major projects. Our community, meaning the African [00:48:00] American community, which normally don't get involved in project labor discussions, but they have to know that so many jobs targeted to the community of the project come through the agreements within the provisions within that

agreement. We talk about prevailing wages, we talk about health and safety benefits both on those projects and as a basic issue across the workforce. We talk about the elimination, let's say, in the public sector, of joint participation by employee organizations and management on how to improve the workplace, how to improve productivity. I mean, the signals that have been sent are just awful. For the environmental crowd, the assault on the arsenic standards that were implemented after great study in the last weeks of the Clinton administration. I mean, they were saying, [00:49:00] we're going to eliminate them because they were done in the last weeks. Well, the studies took years. Or the ergonomic standards that took 10 years to develop, just eliminated when you've got hundreds of thousands of people who are suffering from repetitive motion injuries. I mean, that is a set of signals that are sent out there, they're shots across the bow, that directly affect the workplace, and it affects so many of the people we represent. We've got to get the broad community to understand the implications of this. We had, just last week, and while even under the Clinton administration, the food inspection, the agricultural inspection of food processing, had been weakened enough by the '94 congress. [00:50:00] Now, having people die from

E. coli, which means, in the years to come, we can't be comfortable with the food chain or the food processing thing. All of these things are issues we've got to understand, and we have, on the drawing boards, as I said before, a series of what we call town hall seminars. We're trying to get our local branches to hold -- we say on a biannual basis now, but we'll take them as frequently as we can get them -- these forums on public policy questions that directly affect quality of life issues. And if we do nothing but develop a more informed electorate, then we think we will have at least succeeded in that regard. But, I mean, we are in the process of shifting this to a policy implementation organization, to a policy [00:51:00] education organization. Sharpening our political participation skills. Trying to look at, what other areas of political activity can we have the most dramatic impact on people? Example: in so many of the urban communities, the judicial system has as great an impact as anything else. We're trying to take a look at, where can we get people interested in judges who run for election, for folks to do a fair analysis of their records so we can see whether or not they'll have that responsibility? We're looking at ways of impacting on our young people. We've been experimenting, for a number of years, with what we

call peer mediation or dispute mediation systems at a high school level. Where we've been using retired trade unionists, who have some arbitration [00:52:00] and mediation skills, to talk to kids about talking to each other, rather than some of the violent outbreaks that were so prevalent in the '80s and, I guess, the early '90s. As a matter of fact, a lady from the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service right here in Detroit, sister Julia Greer, has worked with us on developing this, and it's been bought into by a number of the education systems around the country. And we want to talk a little bit about educating the community around, you know, substance abuse, jail diversion. Looking at our community, so many of our young folks are coming into their experience with the court systems in a way that absolutely stigmatizes them for life. And, you know, so many of them are involved in nonviolent activities, [00:53:00] but that generates an incarceration sentence. We've been talking to a couple of jurisdictions about jail diversion approaches, and I guess our strongest argument is in substance abuse cases, where young people are either subject to abuse of drugs and narcotics or what have you and they're given jail time rather than treatment time. We think they ought to take a look at this and, rather than looking at it from the moral point of view,

let's look at it from the economic point of view. Can we convince enough leadership that we ought to be looking at treatment at 7000 a year as opposed to incarceration at 30,000? [00:54:00] And for nonviolent offenders, I mean, all of the data argues that you reduce instance of crime in community, the recidivism rate is much lower when people receive treatment. By and large folks straighten up, at least 90 percent straighten up, reducing your real problem areas to 10 percent. So we want to try some of this. We want to see, A, if we can't get folks to do it themselves, we'll try and do some initiatives on ballot situations to try and move some of this. But it's those kinds of issues, we think, are the new issues we've got to cope with. While discrimination certainly is not gone by any stretch of the imagination, either in society or within the trade union movement itself, we think we've sort of exhausted our ability to focus on that as a single reason for being.

PM: But these issues that you've just [00:55:00] described, that you're now coping with, represent and reflect the changes that have taken place in your organization since 1972.

WL: Right.

PM: But, in a different way, reflect your ability, and the flexibility you have, to make these changes as an

organization. That you're not structured into any one narrow rank and file or working conditions and the like. That you see broader than that to the implications of --

WL: Well, we try. We have a series of taskforces within the organization whose mission is to look at a lot of these things and to try and keep us tuned in to what we think we ought to be doing. Interestingly enough, we've got an international taskforce whose job is to look at international issues. We will be participating in the upcoming world conference on racism and [00:56:00] xenophobia and et cetera that'll be taking place in August in South Africa, which is an incredibly interesting meeting. We've been asked by the ICFTU to participate as sort of a point organization on the NGO side to talk about issues of discrimination in the workplace and society as a whole and what steps ought to be taken to address some of these. And I don't think there's any more important issue than discrimination around core labor standards. And while people say, "Well, that's a policy question," that's an issue of discrimination, and we've got to address it as such. We participated in a study in Brazil on the impact of color in the Brazilian society, and we did this in conjunction with a sort of a Brazilian [00:57:00] coalition partner, and what we discovered -- I shouldn't say what we

discovered, but what became clear is that the darker you are, the worse off you are in Brazil. And in Brazil, you've got the largest Afro-Brazilian population outside of Nigeria, and this is not new news, but to look at it in an economic context, you're raising some very disturbing questions. We've raised these questions. We've raised them in the context of the international organization's responsibility. When is it the responsibility of WTO in the context of reinforcing discriminatory systems? If trade agreements are reached with nations that reinforce existing systems of discrimination, you know, don't they have a responsibility to look at this? What's the responsibility of the World Bank? [00:58:00] What's the responsibility of the International Monetary Fund? Should they finance projects in countries where the discriminatory systems are reinforced by their lending practices, by their demands for domestic retrenchments? We think these are questions that need to be put on the table. And so we've been raising them, and I would say, to their credit, the AFL-CIO has understood what we're trying to say. If workers can get core labor standards when they can bargain collectively, irrespective of who the employer, the issue of color discrimination begins to disappear.

PM: Exactly.

WL: And so we've been pressing this thing.

PM: In the earlier part of our discussion today, in this interview, you talked about your own experience in [00:59:00] the labor movement, starting in California and Richmond and the like, and your coming to AFSCME, and organizing and then becoming secretary-treasurer. How has the experience you've had in the traditional labor movement, as you described it, impacted upon your role and effectiveness in the coalition, CBTU?

WL: Oh, I think what we've learned in AFSCME has helped tremendously. I think, by nature, I think I'm a community activist. But seeing what can be done on behalf of these issues with an institution our size -- our size being AFSCME, 1.3 million members philosophically in tune with these kinds of issues -- clearly, if you can marry these things, you can change policy. And when you change policy, I [01:00:00] mean, you set into motion entirely different dynamics that change things. If we -- the earned income tax credit issue, I mean, a major piece of policy that was really advocated by organized labor on behalf of lower-income [inaudible]. That was really raised by organizations such as ours who talk about the loopholes at the top and the closed doors at the bottom. So, I mean, lower-income workers now, just based on their status, are

given opportunities for tax benefits and tax breaks that they would not normally have. One of the areas where we didn't do so good, but we at least got people fed, by welfare reform. I mean, the welfare reform program of the Clinton administration, in our opinion, was a disaster. But, what you're [01:01:00] seeing happen is, in spite of the people who fall through cracks, those who are able to find their way through the system are now off of welfare, now in meaningful jobs, now have a future. We don't think these things would happen unless someone had been raising the issue. And I think the trade union experience has played well in understanding how institutions work, the political strength of institutions, giving us a sense of how policy is made and how it's advanced. The thing that we do hope is that we'll be bringing along new leadership that's able to replace those of us old-timers who are not destined for much longer but have that same sense of commitment to the ideals and principles of the [01:02:00] organization.

PM: Now, to another very related bit, in 1972, when you started, you indicated some resistance on the part of some union leaders, even those of more progressive liberal organizations, about this new organization. Two thousand one, how is your organization viewed?

WL: I think we are mainstream, I'm not sure whether that's good or bad. (laughs)

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WL: We sort of boldly advocated what we called full participation. That the American labor movement cannot begin to attract new members -- bear in mind, we had been declining in membership for years -- and how do you organize new members if you do not reflect any degree of that new potential? I said young workers, female workers, Asian Pacific, Hispanics, African Americans, I mean, your leadership has got to reflect that. I think the AFL took that note and took that lead. You see a new aggressive effort to reach out to unorganized workers. The effort to build what we call *union cities*, which is an effort to spread the [00:01:00] base of organized labor into all sectors of the workforce in a given city. I mean, that's what we ought to be about. I mean, the American labor movement ought not be a closed club. It ought to provide access to anyone who wants to build a union and find better representation. I think that's all the direction that the

American labor movement is going now. I think that we have to constantly make ourselves available to play whatever role is called for, to enhance labor's image, to sharpen its message, to give focus to its program in the community. And all of these are sort of pendulum swings, you know? It goes good for a while and then it goes back the other way. I think we're in for four years of [00:02:00] difficult times, which may be good in the sense that it'll force us to examine past program, future program needs, and sharpen our message to new workers and younger workers.

PM: Now that you're more accepted in the labor movement as an organization and that you're not only a catalyst but you're a participant in many of the joint programs, have you been involved at all in working with other international unions or the AF of L in a cooporative basis on certain projects?

WL: Yes. Yes, we've had the opportunity to work with a number of unions around a number of issues. Trade. Our community normally does not get exposed to the question of the implications of trade. We have tried to get people to understand [00:03:00] what it means when an employer moves productive capacity from one place to another. What's it mean to have an export deficit or an import deficit or a deficit in trade? I mean, what does that mean in terms of jobs? We've worked with UAW, we've worked with Service

Employees, we've worked with other unions on direct organizing campaigns among areas of high concentrations of African American workers, and certainly political campaigns. But our major role we see as being able to help interpret the policy questions, to help get our community to understand what labor's agenda happens to be. And we stand ready to aid anybody. For instance, right now, we're trying to play a lead role in the gaming industry, and particularly in the South, which has become the major industry [00:04:00] in the states of Mississippi and Connecticut and other places. And these are, by and large, bringing jobs to rural areas, and that's the only job that's there. Well, a lot of these workers are African Americans, they're women, in some cases are Spanish-speaking. So we're trying to build some bridges on behalf of those unions that want to engage in organizing activity. In this case we're speaking of now, HERE. And we've organized, independently, some organizations, and took them to the proper union. So, I mean, we think we're at the point where we're playing a very effective role. We, at one point, were having Monday night meetings for unorganized workers. You know, sort of a local -- if you're unorganized, want to have a union, come down to the meeting. And [00:05:00] we were having more people show up

than we had interest from the unions. And so we're having to sort of massage this problem. But in the African American community, they understand the value of unions. I mean, they know that the benefits are better. They know that the wages are better. They know that there's better protection and representation when you've got a union. And this is in spite of all the difficulties they may have had in past years. They will still join four to five times faster when given the opportunity.

PM: That's interesting. Well, Bill, this has been a very interesting interview and has supplied us so much information. Are there other areas that you can think of that we might not have covered, with recognition that we ought to, in future interviews, go into great depth into a lot of these areas? Especially your own career. But [00:06:00] have we overlooked anything in covering anything that you'd like to add?

WL: Well, I think the challenge for us is to make sure that there's a leadership development process, and we don't think that the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists is going to last forever, in whatever form it's in now. But we do think that there's an idea there that needs a mechanism to continue to advance, and there has to be people tuned into this, not from an anti perspective, but from, how do we

enhance labor's role so that these problems become problems that are automatically put into the agenda? I think we've got to have people who are much clearer on what the international agenda means to us domestically. [00:07:00] How, as an example, the auto industry impacts on so many other jobs and industries. I always use the simple analogy that cars that used to be made here had tires made here, too. Well, cars that come from wherever they come from come with the tires on them. So the rubber industry, all those related -- I mean, I think we've got to understand that, otherwise we become a nation making hamburgers and selling them to each other. And we see our job being part of that education process. And I think we've gained a great deal of respect from organized labor, but more importantly, from the communities that we come from, as we try to do this. And I hope that I haven't given you the impression that all is perfect. I don't mean that.

PM: No, not at all.

WL: But what we do think is we're making a dent [00:08:00] in what has traditionally been problem areas. We're succeeding because we can tell that more people are participating in the electoral process, there're more people showing up at forums. Not just forums that we have, but other organizations have. We've built a better working

relationship between grassroot community-based organizations, and I think that's part of our sort of unstated mission.

PM: Right. Carolyn, do you have anything you'd like to add?

C: (inaudible).

PM: Well, I think we're all set then, Bill.

WL: [Right?].

PM: Thank you.

C: [Here for a longer time?].

WL: (laughs)

PM: Now that the mic will be turned off, in a second but I don't want you to get away without [00:09:00] realizing that this is just the beginning. You've really got to work in your schedule, in the coming year, additional trips so that we can get an in-depth account of your union career.

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