William Lucy Oral History

Interviewed by Philip Mason
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PHIL MASON: This is Thursday, January 10. We're in the conference room at the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs at Wayne University. And today and tomorrow, on the eleventh, we'll be interviewing extensively William Lucy, the secretary-treasurer of AFSCME. Bill, can we start today at something about your early life? Where you were born, your family, names of the family and the like, and siblings if there were any. And let's go back to the 1930s in Memphis, Tennessee.

WILLIAM LUCY: All right, I was born in Memphis, Tennessee, one of, originally, three children. One passed away early: my brother, who was a year older, Joe Lucy, named after my father, Joe Lucy. [00:01:00] And my mother, who's Susie, Susie Bell Lucy. Parents are originally from Alabama. My early years in Memphis, Tennessee was sort of interesting years. This was 1933. I was born in November, November 26. And, of course, you don't know an awful lot about the early days, but those days you remember is when you started your schooling, you started to sort of understand the city around you. I went to a little school called Larose Elementary School -- which is still in Memphis, Tennessee, by the way -- and spent the early years there. We lived in

a number of places in Memphis. I thought for some time that we traveled a lot, you know, and then [00:02:00] I realized after a while that we were traveling almost in 30-day cycles. Thirty, 60, or 90. But my father worked as a part-time mechanic, part time musician, part-time unskilled laborer. So, in those days, as I understand now, work was not what you call steady. So our movement was related to income. (laughs) But we lived in many parts of Memphis. Finally, in the years that are most clear to me, we lived at a place called LeMoyne Gardens, which, at that time, was a housing project developed by the city of Memphis in conjunction with the federal government. We lived quite near what is now LeMoyne-Owen College, and it's interesting, in those days, [00:03:00] a home in the projects was a rather prestigious place to live. Unlike today -- I mean, the projects are now presumed to be some place of poor, downtrodden, what have you -- in those days, you had to qualify to be given an apartment in the projects. You had to be a family who could stand the scrutiny of other families in the projects. So we lived there for at least some of the early formative years. As I said, I went to Larose Elementary School, and we remained in Memphis until shortly after the outbreak of World War II. On December 7, at the beginning of the war, [00:04:00]

my parents, like a lot of others, became sort of caught up in the war effort. My father, at that time, worked for Memphis Power and Light Company as an unskilled laborer, with the emphasis being on "unskilled." And he, like so many others at that time, had been either helped with a job or given the job by the political leadership of the city, one E. H. Crump. And he worked for the Light and Power Company as an unskilled laborer. And I make that point because it challenges the notion that the nation can do what it needs to do in an emergency. As I said, he was an unskilled laborer on December 7. On January 7, he was a journeyman welder. He and so many of his other friends were brought into the war effort and moved to [00:05:00] California to work in the shipyards of Henry Kaiser.

PM: Now, continue in Memphis. By way of background, your family -- when did your parents or your father move to Memphis? Was he from rural areas?

WL: He was from rural Alabama. They moved, as I'm told, just a matter of a few days before I was born. And it was quite common, I think, for folks to leave the South and move up -- as they say, leave the South in terms of Alabama, Mississippi, and move up to Memphis. That Memphis was sort of the point of opportunity for a lot of workers from rural states. So, I guess until about six or seven, that was

home for us. And at the beginning of the war, when thousands upon thousands were recruited and brought to the centers for the war effort, [00:06:00] my father, along with a number of others, either enlisted, were conscripted, or whatever, to work in the shipyards. They were given the basic training necessary in two- and three- and four-week courses to join the workforce. He became a welder and was sent to work in the shipyards in Richmond, California, which was essentially why we left Memphis, Tennessee and moved to Richmond. We moved in the early part of 1942. That would be my brother, my mother, and myself. Caught the train like a lot of other families and joined the breadwinners in the areas of wartime employment. I grew up in Richmond, California. Went to schools, all levels, completed elementary school in Richmond, California. I went to junior high [00:07:00] school and high school, on to junior college. We lived, like a lot of other people, again, in a project setting, wartime. Richmond, prior to the war effort, had been, by and large, a farm community, which became the center of ship construction. Richmond, California was noted for what they called the Victory ship, which was Henry Kaiser's contribution to the war effort. And he promised President Roosevelt and the war department that he would build one ship every day, and he did, and

some of them even floated. But the principal point was that thousands and thousands of workers were brought into that area for essentially 24-hour, around-the-clock work, my father being one of them.

PM: What was the makeup of the community when you came in? [00:08:00]

WL: Richmond had exploded into a fairly diverse community during the war. Although the living patterns were fairly segregated, wartime workers were given housing through a housing administration, and by and large the housing patterns were pretty much the same as they would have been in the South, except that the city as a whole was fairly diverse. Were some old-time residents. I guess, if you dealt with ethnic groups, you'd have the Italian community, some parts of the Irish community, Hispanic communities, but all, by and large, separated. And we grew up in that environment, not, at that time, paying such great attention to the race questions, because it was [00:09:00] full-time concentration on the war effort. I graduated, as I said, from junior high school, and went on to a high school, at El Cerrito High School, which is in a little adjoining city, very quite close to Richmond. Richmond, in those times, was an exciting town for someone preteen and then teenager. We began to get a sense of what that kind of

community could be. I mean, the assumption was, at the end of the war in 1945, everybody would go back where they came from, which was not the case at all. Richmond became sort of a bustling community, with the major industries being Standard Oil, Ford Motor Company at that time, some chemical companies. A large segment of the economy [00:10:00] was tied to new construction. So it was an area where there were good opportunities for a better life, and our parents stayed there until a few years later. What I began to at least personally understand is that California held the promise of a good life, not just for myself, but for others. The education system, while I couldn't evaluate it at that point in time, on reflection, was a tremendous education system for young folks of all races and all colors, and it would prepare you for all kinds of opportunities. I have to applaud our school system. Even though it had its problems, it had the ability to deliver a good-quality education to the youngsters who came through it.

PM: Let's stop for a minute about -- or [00:11:00] pause about your education. In high school, what interests did you have? What subjects were even going on further from high school? Was sports a part of your interest, for example?

WL: Sports was a part of the interest. I played baseball, basketball, and about three games of varsity football before a bright and promising career came to an (laughs) end. My principal interest in high school was focused towards architectural drafting. I thought then that the ability to create and design and what have you was something that was of interest to me, so, from junior high school on, on through high school and on through a bit of junior college, I was focused on architectural drafting. On buildings, on bridges, on homes and what have you. And sort [00:12:00] of prepared for that. And then discovered that, in those days, that the only drafting that an African American could do would be the printing on designs and drawings that were prepared by someone else. There was no real areas of work opportunities that you could get as an architect at that time. But the skills that I learned came in valuable in an engineering context. I graduated from high school in January of 1951, which was a little bit earlier than normal, because normal graduation period was midyear. But because of the number of classes that I'd been taking and the number of things that had been done, so [acquired?] the necessary credits to graduate early. And I enrolled [00:13:00] at Contra Costa Junior College, again, in architectural drafting with an architectural focus, and

attended Contra Costa. Then, about this time, the Korean War had been going on for a while, and many of the classmates that I had either went into the Army or went into some branch of the service. I, in some sort of a strange piece of luck, wound up going to work for the Navy at Mare Island Naval Shipyard, which is located in Vallejo, California. Initially coming in as a laborer in the rigging -- we called it the "rigging loft," which is the department that dealt with just basic labor support or the handling of materials and what have you for the ships. [00:14:00] Shortly after that, got transferred to the engineering section of the yard, which dealt with all of the engineering issues that confront the Navy yard infrastructure, whether that be streets and highways and railroads and water and electricity and what have you. And worked there for a couple of years, from 1951, the tail end of it, till early '53. And, again, one of these strokes of luck, I was called by the county of Contra Costa and asked if I would be interested in applying with their department of public works as an engineering aide, which was the entry-level participation into the engineering series in that county. And I didn't seem to have anything to lose, so I applied, [00:15:00] and then waited for a while, and luckily they called and asked if I'd want to come in for an

interview and take the examination, which I did. And shortly after, they offered a job, and I bid farewell to the US Navy and went to work for Contra Costa County. (laughs)

PM: This was about 1960?

WL: This is about 1953. Tail end of ’53, early ’54.

PM: [So you were 20?] years old.

WL: Right, right. And I worked for the county for 13 years, from 1953 to 1966, in the Public Works Department, and sort of traversing your way through the department. I started first in the materials and testing laboratory and, in 1953, you may recall, the federal government passed the massive highway construction program, what they called the Federal-Aid Secondary Highway construction project. And all of the states, [00:16:00] in order to participate, had to have an engineering component that would be capable of meeting the legislative criteria for financial participation and grants. And the theory, and I guess it was Eisenhower’s, was that, if we opened up the country with decent highways, good highways, in the state system, and support the construction of good farm-to-market roads, as they call them, at the county level, that goods and products would move a lot easier. And our state, the state of California, was just a leading state in the development of a state

highway system. And our county, which was a strong industrial county but, at the same time, a strong agricultural county, had got into this process. And so they were in these early stages of developing a strong Public Works Department with a strong engineering section to [00:17:00] meet that criteria. So the laboratory was being set up for the quality control purposes of the legislation, and so I was one of the early members of the materials and testing department. Worked there for about a year, year and a half, and then got transferred into the surveying section of the department, and then got transferred back to the materials and research laboratory that had developed a little bit stronger at that point. Worked there year-in, year-out. Construction projects, highways, bridges, you name it. All of those things that a public works engineering department do. Later on, as they upgraded the criteria for personnel, they created a position called supervising materials tester, which was the person who supervised [00:18:00] the activities of the laboratory, both inside the lab and field personnel. And I was, again, lucky. I think most of my life I've been lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time. I was granted the position and proceeded to work with the materials engineer to expand the role of the department and

develop more testing procedures, to train personnel how to use existing procedures for our quality control work in virtually every aspect of a highway and highway construction. And I stayed there until 1966.

About ’54, ’55, I became involved in what was then the County Employee Association, which was an organization that essentially had had a sort of a representational role for virtually all [00:19:00] of the county employees. Not a collective bargaining agent as we would know it, but it lobbied before the board of supervisors, it lobbied to civil service commissions and made representation on pension programs and things like that. Which was, for that time, a useful function and role. California, then, and I think as well as now, had a tremendous civil service system. And, unlike some of the systems back East where they were so subject to manipulation, I mean, it was a good system. The wages were good, the benefits were fair and decent, but they came out of this concept of trying to get and maintain that quality personnel. But the shortcoming that it had, that it was the bosses’ system. It was the political [00:20:00] leadership’s system. It didn’t allow for a direct role for employee organizations. And the County Employee Association had, for years, been quite successful, but it did not have a legitimate right to

participate as a representational agent. And in the mid- to late ’50s, this became a real issue of debate. As I said, our county was a strong industrial county and had a broad agricultural base, and all around us were strong unions working on behalf of their members. And the debate that came to the forefront was, we have a right, as public employees, to participate in every aspect of what affects our work life. And not just as [00:21:00] workers who have the right to complain after something happens, but we have a right to participate before something happens. And this sounded like a fairly simple piece of logic at the time, but what it raised was the issue of collective bargaining, in the true sense, for public employees in our county. And while some of us may not have known, you know, philosophically, what issues we were raising, it certainly became clear in short order that we were saying, “We have a right to sit at the table.” And not just talk about these things, but bargain a contractual agreement with the employer that spoke to and spelled out wages, hours, and conditions of employment for all of these people that we represent.

PM: And your job, for these 13 years, you indicated that there were advancements, the challenging assignments and the like. I assume the salary [00:22:00] was increasing --

WL: Yes.

PM: -- proportionately, and the like. Were you and others satisfied in some aspects with your work employment?

WL: I think we were satisfied, and I certainly was. I didn't really see, at that time, a great need to talk about a union, and I have to confess, I didn't have a great understanding of it. Our staff at the laboratory were all professional engineers of one grade or level or another and felt that, whatever problems we had, we could get them resolved. And I became the spokesperson for the engineering group in the laboratory, and a couple of other groups whose salaries and benefits were paid to the same sort of position on the pay scale. We had titles, and then, in the civil service systems, those get locked into other [00:23:00] functions, they say, "Of equal importance." Well, I became the spokesperson for that group and, as such, became involved with the civil service commission in the salary-setting process. And that's when -- I thought I had an education before, that's when I got a real education about how the process works. (laughs) I served as chairperson of the salary committee for one year, and after that year, it was very clear that we needed something different than what we had. And we may not have known what that was, but we certainly knew it was not going

down and appearing before some commission and talking about the problems of recruitment and retention and expecting that to have some impact. We believed that, [00:24:00] in order to have quality personnel, you had to be competitive in salary and benefits and there had to be respect for the work that was done, and this was not a political relationship, this was a relationship based on right. The debate actually started and took off like a shot without us clearly understanding what was driving this, but the employees who were members of the organization at that time took it upon themselves to say, "We've got some decisions to make." A, in order to get in the relationship we want to have, we've got to be a union if that's what we want to be. And if we want to make that decision, then the question is, what union do we want to associate with and what are we willing to pay for all of this? And [00:25:00] that became the -- that debate grew out of our salary discussions with the county. After a year of discussing among all of the various groups that made up the membership, this thing went to a plebiscite. I mean a vote of the membership on those three questions. And, surprisingly, there was a positive response on the first one -- "Yes, we ought to be a union, given the environment that we work in and so forth." The second question was put

off till later because we didn't really know what organizations we would be a good fit with or who would have an interest in our kinds of employees. So we resolved the first. We then started to look around and to contact other unions to see what interest they may have in taking on an organization such [00:26:00] as ours. At that time, we had about 7500 members, including courthouse lawyers and social workers and hospital -- we had a --

PM: Take a minute, though, just go back a little bit. You represented one of the more elite groups within the workforce with the county.

WL: Mm-hmm.

PM: Did the other groups in other areas take the same route that you did?

WL: Not at that time. California is a unique state. It has very strong employee associations at the county level, and even at the state level. But we were a county -- I mean, you had Los Angeles County, San Francisco City and County, San Bernardino -- I mean, you had a whole host of very strong organizations whose interests, at that time, may not have been the same as ours. Many of the associations had a very [00:27:00] strong policy role in the setting of pensions and pension benefits. They had a very strong role in trying to protect the integrity of the civil service

system. And many of them thought we were off-base because, their argument was that it's an either-or. Either it's collective bargaining or it's civil service. And our argument was that they can live side by side, there are just some unique advantages to collective bargaining. So we didn't have a whole lot of allies in this. And it is true, we represented, by and large, the white-collar sections of county government. Although there were blue-collar membership because of the Public Works Department, but by and large, it was white-collar. It was social workers, it was assistant district attorneys, it was [00:28:00] registered -- it was the whole gamut. Well, we had laborers and truck drivers, but numerically, they were a smaller piece. And so it was quite a surprise to us that the issue of unionism won by such a large margin in the plebiscite. So our task then was, in light of this uniqueness, what union did we want to talk with and to talk to? Among those that were looked at, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees was the one who appeared to have the greatest likeness, nationally, in terms of a membership like ours. Even though we were, in those days, pretty much a blue-collar union, the issues around the protection of [00:29:00] public sector work, quality work, decent pay, the right to

be involved in the collective bargaining process. All those were issues that rang, you know, pretty good with us. So we sort of asked the leadership to sit down and talk with us about an affiliation of our organization and AFSCME. And at that time the AFSCME was led by a fellow by the name of Arnold Zander who had, oddly enough, been the head of the civil service system in the state of Wisconsin. So he had a great understanding of that system. He wasn't terribly impressed with our argument about collective bargaining, (laughs) but at least that system, he understood, and could certainly speak at great length about the value of public service and the role that it plays in the total scheme of [00:30:00] life. So our leadership, at that time, made a decision that that's who we wanted to go with.

PM: How did you go ab-- first of all, what other unions were considered, as you recall?

WL: In our county, one of the strongest unions were the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union. Because we had, in our county, we had Shell Oil, Union Oil, Standard Oil. And their power and influence with the board of supervisors, and with the state level, was considerable. We then had, in our county, a part of the Operating Engineers, which was a very strong union up and down the state, but had very

little knowledge -- both of them -- very little knowledge of our pension systems and the systems of public sector wages and benefits. There was another union [00:31:00] there which was, at that time, was Building Services Union, and I think the local in our county was local 302. But they were, at that time, strictly just that: building service workers. And one of our leadership, at that time, a fellow by the name of Benjamin Russell, he and some of the others, through process, I'm not sure how it worked, but met with the leadership of AFSCME and brought back this positive response that they would be willing to talk to us further about this. And in short order, we put this issue into some decision-making process and said, "Here's what we think." And since we didn't have a whole lot of alternatives, I mean, it wasn't like there was a long ballot that folks -- [00:32:00] we had a series of meetings and discussions. And decision was, AFSCME is one that we ought to look at and sort of at least get engaged, if not married. So we began to participate with them, with AFSCME at that time, in a series of their programs. Their conventions and regional meetings around issues of public sector workers. And finally we said, "This is where we want to be."

PM: Did Mr. Zander come in, or any of his top officials come in to meet with you?

WL: Yes. In those days -- I'm trying to think who was at the top of the leadership then. Names escape me now, but there was a fellow by the name of Leo Kramer who was Mr. Zander's principal assistant, if not executive assistant. And then Jerry Wurf was also [00:33:00] one of his principal people, although Jerry's role was principally in New York. But he was a top leader with Mr. Zander. And either one or both may have met with our folks at that time. I think Leo, especially, had a role in it. I'm not exactly sure what it all was. But in 1956 we became a total part of the AFSCME family, and remained as such as we moved toward the '60s. I guess our zeal for collective bargaining and sort of the true status of unionism as trade unionists wasn't totally bought by Mr. Zander, [00:34:01] although many of those who were key parts of the AFSCME family were beginning to talk in this context. And I remember specifically that Michigan, New York, Pennsylvania, certainly the city of Philadelphia, Boston, many of the cities were starting to argue for this particular right to bargain collectively. And were really unprepared to wait for all this legislative acceptance of the idea.

PM: What impact did you have upon California in the other counties?

WL: It clearly began to shift. When we affiliated with AFSCME, we did so with a very clear theory that our successes in this process would be used to convince other associations [00:35:00] of the value of affiliation. As a matter of fact, the constitution was amended to give the president the authority to consummate affiliations where independent organizations wanted to do that. And a number of them became, as I called it, engaged. They didn't rush to affiliate, but they certainly wanted to know more about it. And we formed a number of organizations in California for the purpose of sort of gradually exposing more and more people to this issue of a trade union approach to our relationships with the counties as opposed to the way it had been in the past, and while we didn't get an awful lot of county laws or ordinances passed, we did find a number of organizations taken more seriously for the power that they had. San Bernardino County, Los Angeles City and County. [00:36:00] San Francisco was always a very strong county on its own. I mean, it existed by charter, so they could just shift gears and do what we were doing as opposed to going through this formal affiliation process. I think we had a tremendous impact in raising the level of

awareness of county organizations about what they could do, and ultimately, to their political strength, getting the state legislature to pass collective bargaining legislation that would allow them to what they call meet and confer, now, I think it is. So in the ’60s, I think, we had that impact that we’ve seen culminated in the ’70s or the early ’80s. Even at the state level, you know, state employees, the state employee association, came in under the new law and became, in effect, a [00:37:00] trade union with bargaining relationships with the state. But the idea, nationwide, nationwide, took on a tremendous importance to many areas of the country. New York City, as I said, Boston, Philadelphia. Philadelphia, incidentally, was the place where the first collective bargaining agreement between a municipal union and city government ever happened, and it happened outside of the law. But what began to be very clear is that where we would organize and press for collective bargaining rights, if we were politically strong enough to do it, it made the law easier to pass, either at the city level or the county level or the state level. Example: certainly, it’s right here in the state of Michigan, 1965, [00:38:00] I believe it was, thereabout. Where we had developed strong organization, certainly here in the city of Detroit, and moving

statewide. With this labor history in the state, many political leaders felt that it was an acceptable idea. Might have a different wrinkle here and there because of the nature of public service, but by and large, workers were entitled to bargain collectively. In Ohio, I mean, the idea gained currency across the board and, at the same time, aided in our organizing efforts. In 1964 -- well, I'm getting ahead of myself, let me go back a little ways. This debate, coming into the early '60s -- '60, '61, '62 -- began to be the critical issue that confronted the membership of this union. We [00:39:00] were an Eastern and Midwest union. Those organizations that were a part of our early history were totally committed to civil service and merit systems. New places that were organizing were totally committed to a collective bargaining relationship, not suggesting that you do away with the civil service and merit systems, but this would be the key process. And Mr. Zander and some of his followers felt differently, and I think it was around this issue that he and Jerry Wurf found their largest area of disagreement. Because Jerry was an old social activist and certainly a strong trade unionist and he believed in the fundamental right of workers to organize and bargain collectively irrespective of whether they were public or private. And that debate consumed the

union. I mean, it was the [00:40:00] principal criteria that defined who you were. And in the election of -- in the convention, I should say, of 1962, while I wasn't there, I'm told that that issue was sort of the central issue that defined the two different candidates. By '62, Jerry had broken or was breaking with Zander, and forming another organization called the Committee on Union Responsibility, COUR. And the '62 convention was in Philadelphia, and it was very clear that the overwhelming majority of the leadership was beginning to believe in the debate itself that collective bargaining rights should be [00:41:00] inherently ours. And Mr. Zander and his forces, as a matter of fact, they brought Walter Reuther in to speak to that convention, and it was low-level chaos. (laughs) But the forces for collective bargaining clearly prevailed, and whether Mr. Zander recognized it or not, I mean, the union turned around on that convention. So at the end of it, the issue was not who you're for, but what are you for?

PM: He tried, as you may recall, to confuse the issue by having the per capita increase.

WL: Yeah.

PM: As the main issue. (laughs)

WL: Yeah.

PM: That's what Walter Reuther spoke on behalf of. But let's go back a little bit. From the time that this principle was approved in California and the vote was taken, a plebiscite was taken, on behalf of affiliation with the union, what was your role?

WL: [00:42:00] I was just a rank-and-filer at the time. An active rank-and-filer, but I didn't hold an office in the union at that time. I was, as I said, representing the materials and research laboratory in the union's operation. And I guess I was beginning to learn more and more about, not just how the organization worked, but really what the role of a union ought to be. I had, as I said, served as salary representative or a member of the salary committee, so I had some clarity about how that worked. But I really didn't know a whole lot about, you know, grievance mechanisms and arbitrations because we didn't have any -- there was no role for it in our county. But we did have some who had served in these areas before. [00:43:00] And so it was a learning experience for me and for a lot of other folks. But our organization was becoming more and more important in the whole scheme of things as the state was concerned, because we were clearly advocates for a new relationship between worker organizations and their employers. So there were a lot of employee independent

associations who were urging us on and admired what we were doing, there were a lot of them who was very concerned about what the long-range implications of this were. Because many of them were politically connected, had great strength in Sacramento and in their counties, and the unanswered question was, how does this disturb those relationships? So my role was simply keeping our people informed as to what the organization was doing, how it was going, and keep them aware of what the concerns of the engineering [00:44:00] sector was. I later became an officer in the organization around ’62, ’63, somewhere in there.

PM: How did that come about?

WL: Each of the major departments who were active in the organization had the chance to recommend or nominate people for office or to the executive board, and I was nominated to the board by the public works department. And subsequently, from the board, became an officer. And that was a membership-wide election process where all of the departments vote. I mean, I’m not altogether sure you could say it was a true election, because by the time the powers to be had decided who was going to be a part of the process, everybody was pretty much assured of [00:45:00]

not having any competition for the position you were being put up for.

PM: But this was the beginning of your career in the politics of a union. Running for office and being elected.

WL: Yeah. Once on the board, there were committees and areas of responsibility that were assigned to you, either by the officers or by the board itself. And so, I took on a number, because I thought it was terribly interesting work, for one thing. But I continued the role as salary, as chair of the salary committee for our department, and began to learn a lot more about the politics of the county. You know, how things get done, how to organize and mobilize around issues in order to get the political [00:46:00] support from a member of the board of supervisors, how to develop campaigns in your community. Our county seat was in the central part of the county, where I lived was in the western part of the county, so we began to develop a little bit of community organizational support. Began to get engaged a little bit in the electoral politics, both in our city and the county. Each member of the board of supervisors represented a sector of the county, and we began to understand that, to the extent you can help or hurt, you have influence. And our membership was a countywide membership, and one of the unique things about

public sector employees, in particular white-collar, is that if you [00:47:00] convince them to become politically active, then the issues of organization and mobilization and strategies, you know, they take ownership. And play a big role in trying to carry out the plans and the programs that the organization approved. So we were able to get engaged in that early on. And in my town, which was Richmond, which was, I think, at that time, the largest city in the county, we became quite active and quite involved around, not just bread-and-butter issues, but other social issues that many of us felt were important that an organization engage in.

PM: There were also things going on at this time statewide in the political system and nationally. Kennedy coming in early in the 1960s. What [00:48:00] offices did you get involved in within the union?

WL: I became president of the local. When we were affiliated we were assigned the number Local 1675 from the national union. We retained our old number, Contra Costa County Employees. I became president, I think, around ’63 or ’64, and we were, as most county organizations, after we went through the election, I think it’s important to note that not everybody agreed with this. I mean, (laughs) we won the vote, but we didn’t win the hearts of everybody. We

lost about 1,500 members as a result of this direction, folks who just figured that their careers [00:49:00] didn't dovetail with where we were trying to go. But we had had such an extensive discussion and debate about it that it was not a surprise to anybody. We didn't lose as many as we thought we would lose, so we had, oddly enough, a very tight-knit, very ideologically focused group of members. I mean, across all sectors of county employment. Those that stayed knew why they were staying. They knew what the sort of philosophical outlook of the leadership in the organization was, so they weren't surprised by anything. I mean, they knew that we would be a group that was concerned about social rights, civil rights, human rights, because that was a part of the debate. They knew we would be politically active and would engage the political [00:50:00] leadership of the county on a whole series of issues, majority of which related to workplace stuff, but others that were not. I mean, we had social workers whose concerns for their clients was not just the implementation of the rules, but, how do we make the system better? We had hospital workers who thought that, while the care was good, can it be better? I mean, so we went through this debate, and everyone who stayed knew this was the agenda.

PM: Were there any specific groups that chose not to? For those that you said didn't buy into the new plan, the 1500, did they represent --

WL: Not an organized group. No. The largest, I guess, segment that we lost was from the legal side of the county employment. The district attorney's [00:51:00] office and some of the regulatory agencies, which were highly professional, and an employee association has everybody in, you know, from the department heads on down. But when this decision was made, we had the department head and principal department administrative staff, some of them just took a hike. And it probably wound up being good for us, because as we moved towards this whole bargaining process, who's in, who's out, we didn't have to go through all of that.

PM: When you started the union, what happened to the existing employees' association? County that --

WL: It became the union. As I said, they just --

PM: It didn't continue, then?

WL: Not -- well, how best to put it? The employee association became the union. There was -- I mean, we didn't go out of [00:52:00] business, or anything like that.

PM: Well, I wondered, the ones that chose not to go into that system --

WL: No, they just --

PM: -- were they represented at all, or were they out -- ?

WL: No. No, they were just out. Right. Right.

PM: Okay. Perhaps this is a good time, for lunch?

(break in audio)

PM: Okay, so let's go back to 1963 if we can. You had mentioned earlier that, of the struggle going on nationally between groups opposing Zander in his approach and others led by Joe Ames, Hastings, Father Blatz and Jerry Wurf and the like. I don't know others, but there're a long list of them that've been in that category. What was your position as president of the local by this time?

WL: I think I was either vice president or -- I must have been vice president at [00:53:00] that time.

PM: But you were active in the leadership.

WL: Yeah, in the leadership, yeah.

PM: And how did you become aware of the struggle? Was this well-known? And what pressures were brought upon your union?

WL: After 1962, it was very clear there were two different trains of thought in the union as to what direction we should be going. And bear in mind, we were not a massive union in those days, but we were trying to win the hearts and minds of public sector workers. So the debate was rather clear, and the COUR forces certainly reflected our

view -- *our* being Contra Costa County -- our view of what kind of relationship and philosophy the organization ought to have. And I became a part of that debate. And we had leadership in the union like fellows by the name of Ben Russell and Ruby Wicker and people from up and down the state who [00:54:00] had began to say, "Yeah, we think we're right, this is the direction to be going. So we were not locked-in Wurf supporters or operatives, but we certainly were philosophically in tune. And I think what tipped our union one way or the other, we were still open enough to have a debate and discussion about this, and I distinctly remember a meeting that we held at the Claremont Hotel. And we invited Mr. Zander -- this was in '63 or early '64 -- out to talk about his view. And I think it was an open and honest invitation, not a sandbagging job or nothing like that. So he came out and, I mean, it was a magnificent show, but at the end of the show, his (laughs) [00:55:00] staff -- and I don't know if you've ever been to the Claremont Hotel, but in the ballroom, there's a series of windows that face the bay. And they let the Venetian blinds down, and on the blinds were taped this banner that said, "Contra Costa County loves Arnold Zander." And what had been a friendly gathering up to then turned into absolute chaos, because not only did we not any longer

trust the national leadership, we just fundamentally believed that it had no clear understanding of what we were trying to do. And so we became Wurf supporters almost overnight.

PM: And it was that use of the banner, is it crystallized the opposition to him?

WL: Yeah. Yeah. And we had lots of first-level leadership at this meeting, but an awful lot of second- [00:56:00] and third-level leadership, who may not have been convinced one way or the other as to the personalities, but they certainly saw that as misusing the presence and the invitation. And so we just became an active part of the opposition, we became a leading part of what was called the bear flag caucus. (laughs) And we then began to make contact up and down the state and promote the COUR line. I had never met Mr. Wurf at that point in time. I had, I believe, met w-- not with, but been in the presence of Bob Hastings or Al Bilik, some of the others who were actively engaged in the campaign effort. [00:57:00] I didn't meet Mr. Wurf until probably at the 1964 convention. And I, like many others, you know, was just sort of captivated by his ideas and insights. Because many of them were identical to what we had believed we ought to be about as a part of this issue of affiliations debate that we had. But

we became part of the loyal opposition, and as the Zander crowd called us, the forces of darkness. (laughs)

PM: Did you go to the 1964 convention?

WL: Yes. Yes, I --

PM: That was the first one.

WL: That was my first convention.

PM: First convention.

WL: And I believe -- and I'd really have to check -- I believe I was president, either president or first vice president by that time, because I was chair of our caucus, and I think the two things sort of went together. [00:58:00] But the '64 convention, as -- if you've obviously checked the records, was a turning point in the life of the union. The election was a very close election, very hotly contested, and I think the fact that the international had a policy of staff carrying the credentials for local unions who were underrepresented in the convention, and carrying the credentials of some who were represented in the convention. You know, the contest to, again, change the minds of people was one that we've really relished, because we were not talking about personality, we were talking about ideas. And, in the end, people began to ask for their voting credentials back from the staff. [00:59:00] I mean, I'm told -- and I didn't collect the count, but I'm told at

least 65 to 67 percent of the votes in the convention were in the control of staff people at the beginning of the convention. And this was International staff people. So there was -- a real revolution took place among the delegates to the convention.

PM: Where was the convention held?

WL: In Denver, Colorado.

PM: Denver, Colorado. And what was it like for you? If, indeed, this was your first convention, you were aware, beforehand, I'm sure, that these issues were going to be brought up.

WL: Well, I wasn't quite sure what I was in and what role I was playing, because I'd never been to one of these before, and certainly a national convention, for somebody like myself, was pretty heady stuff, you know? (laughs) So I arrived very unsure, other than what our [01:00:00] basic political position was, unsure of how to go about advancing this. And our small delegation from our local who went, we were very clear on what roles we were going to try and play. One of our folks was on credentials, somebody else was on legislative committees. And we were going to try and just carry out what we were asked to do. I remember -- and I've said it often, too -- this lady, just going into the hotel, I met a lady from New York, a lady by the name of Miss

Carrie -- can't remember her last name, but her first name was Carrie. She was a delegate, and I was lamenting the fact that I really wasn't quite clear what this was all about, (laughs) but we were going to try and win. And she sort of gave some sage advice, and that was to [01:01:00] be clear on what you believe in and go out and try and convince other folks to believe the same thing. And I didn't put much stock in what it meant, but for us, a delegation of about five people, we became quite actively engaged in the workings of the convention, both the goods and the bads and the uglies. I mean, we were pretty political, and we, like, I guess, other people, did things that you probably would rather not talk about. But, I mean, they say all is fair in love and war and union politics, and I think that's probably true there. But we had a serious discussion at that convention. We managed to force sort of a candidate debate among the delegates at that convention, and I think --

(break in audio) [01:02:00]

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PM: Before we took the break, about the 1964 convention, Jerry Wurf defeated Arnold Zander. Can you tell me, or fill this in as to, what reaction did Jerry Wurf have toward Zander? Who, up to this time, was an extremely close friend, and he often referred to Arnold as sort of a father figure and mentor, and suddenly, within a year or so, they had become -- not enemies, but --

WL: Adversaries.

PM: -- adversaries. And the battle was a very difficult one. Heated one. How did Jerry Wurf, the new president, respond?

WL: Well, I can only go by what I was told, because I was not a part of the administration at that time. But [00:01:00] from all I could hear and get from others, is that Jerry, while he differed with President Zander on the basic philosophy and direction of the union, he had great respect for him in the contribution he had made towards building the union. And, as far as I know, treated that record and that history with respect. I later found out that the union was in dreadful shape, both financially and otherwise, and part of this, I think, was as a result of the changes and the transitions that the union, and labor in general, was going through. And we did not apparently have a vision and a view of how to reposition ourselves to

meet that, and consequently our staff was small and relatively poorly paid. The benefits were certainly not [00:02:00] nearly as up to par with what they ought to have been.

(phones ringing)

PM: Yes? Yes? (inaudible).

WL: So, you know, without denigrating Zander's contribution -- or Gordon's, for that matter, the two of them -- I think, Jerry went about, on a prioritized basis, setting the union into some shape. He and those who came to office with him spent no time on talking about what Zander was or was not.

(phones ringing)

PM: Excuse me. [00:03:00] Hello? I'm sorry, Carolyn isn't here? (inaudible) call, we're doing a filmed interview (inaudible). (inaudible).

WL: I would say it was a whole year before I came on the scene at headquarters. But talking to others who had been there during that year and through that transition -- Joe Ames, Bob Hastings, and others -- I think it was their collective view that Zander was sort of a product of his times. And wasn't inherently a bad person, just didn't recognize the changes that was taking place in the minds of public sector workers.

PM: What arrangements did the union make for Arnold Zander at that time?

WL: It's my understanding that Jerry made a decision to carry him for a period on full payroll. [00:04:00] And I don't know what perks he may have had, but he certainly didn't cut him off, but treated him with the respect that a person should have for the amount of time that he led the union.

PM: You mentioned that, within a year after this convention, that you joined the staff in Washington. Please tell me how that came about.

WL: Well, as I said earlier, my local and other locals in California had an idea about, one, what California ought to look like and what the nature of programs ought to be. And some ideas about what the national departmental structure and services ought to be. I mean, we knew what we needed in the national union, we assumed that others might need the same thing. And we attempted to structure California on a one-council [00:05:00] state with subordinate bodies, and if that was to be approved, then some of us would work in California, some of us would consider working in Washington, DC. The key thing we thought was necessary was for the union to become involved in the legislative and political side of public sector unionism because so many decisions that affect public sector workers at the city and

county level were being made in Washington, DC, by the Congress. And we didn't have any relationship, any ongoing formal relationship, with either the federal Congress or state legislators or county boards of supervisors, where we had sort of a common agenda in terms of public-sector issues. And Jerry -- in, apparently, [00:06:00] 1965 -- not only approved sort of the direction we wanted to go in California, but also the structuring of this particular department, which was of interest to some of us. And that went on the drawing board, and then they began to look around for someone to do this. And apparently Al Bilik, who at that time was head of the Cincinnati Central Labor Council but had been a part of the struggle from the beginning, was to take on this task of structuring this legislative, political, community affairs department. And I met Jerry Wurf in a formal way for the first time in 1965, because I did not know him on an individual basis. And he came to a local union [00:07:00] party that we were having, and it was in conjunction with the 1965 AFL-CIO convention, I believe, that was held in San Francisco that year. We had invited him to come and be with us and he accepted, and he came, and he got a chance to see us and our leadership, and we got a chance to see him up close and sort of reaffirm what we believed. And in turn, he took a

liking to our local union. I am told that shortly after that they discussed the question of whether or not some of our staff and myself would consider joining the national union in a staff role. Well, you know, it wasn't something that I had in mind because I clearly didn't -- A, didn't have the skills, in my opinion. Had never been exposed to the union at this level. But, as we discussed it more and more, [00:08:00] Al Bilik took on the responsibility of talking to me and explaining what they saw as a possible program. And we talked through the end of '65 and the beginning of '66. We sort of agreed that we would come back and take a look at Washington, DC, and see what kind of resources were there, what kind of ideas President Wurf would have about the role of the department. And I agreed, on the assumption that Al Bilik would be there (laughs) to participate in this. I agreed that this would go on for a year for sure, two years at the max, and I would be coming back to Contra Costa County. Well, you know, Al never showed up (laughs) [00:09:00] after agreeing that this is what we both wanted to do. So, when I came to Washington, it was to take on the responsibility of organizing this department and structuring it pending Al's coming. (laughs) So he never showed up and I wound up having to do this myself. And, while this was all very brand-new to me

-- I didn't know Washington at all -- but at least we'd kind of focused in on what kinds of issues we thought the union ought to be advancing and what kind of issues at a state and local level the union ought to be defending. And it was on that basis that the department came together. It had a staff of two: a young secretary by the name of Gwen Hemphill and myself, and that was it. So we managed to pull together a program, [00:10:00] start our relationships with the federal congress and the federal government agencies that had impact on our programs back home. If you recall, social services or welfare or public assistance was certainly a major topic of the major part of the federal budget. Highways were continuing to be a major part of highways and transportation. Education was a key part of the discussion in those days, and not just the professional but the support personnel, custodians and recreation people and all of those who make the school systems work. Well, we began to see a larger and larger menu of issues that we were concerned about and the department came alive. I came to work in June of 1966, and by the [00:11:00] end of the year we had a pretty clear agenda as to where we were going. And we began to work on that series of domestic issues, some international issues, and what is now our political action department and legislative department was

formerly Legislation and Community Affairs. We set out to mobilize in all of our affiliates, what we called a community affairs committee. It was a polite name for politics. It was a way we could get engaged without having to really say we were going to become engaged in partisan politics. Ours was not a partisan effort, it was just simply an effort to get our people more politically active and aware. And we became quite good at it. The big states where we had big membership, big cities, large counties, people, [00:12:00] in a way, formalized what they had been doing already. We began to develop allies on both parties, in both parties, and began to rally people to the support of public sector issues. And our principal issue was collective bargaining rights for public employees. And I would say, probably, by the middle of ’68, we had a full-blown program that was operational. There were some hiatus breaks taken. I spent two years, a year and a half, almost two years, here in the city of Detroit working with our Detroit-Wayne County group around issues of administration, issues of proper servicing and bargaining and so on. During the course of this two-year stay here, the [00:13:00] sanitation strike in Memphis, Tennessee became a part of our union’s much broader responsibility. And that was, I believe, from February of ’68 through April of 1968.

But Detroit was a learning experience and a valuable one, because it gave me an opportunity, and certainly our union, to really become totally acquainted with city government in a collective bargaining environment, where I had not had that experience before.

PM: Now, this was a very difficult time in Detroit and in other cities, ’67. The riot took place in the summer of ’67. How did you find your assignment in terms of from the context of this unrest? [00:14:00]

WL: Well, the unrest was not such a troubling factor as was the conditions we were working with in terms of building a relationship with the city, that had a good deal of labor history but not a good deal of public sector labor history. We were going through one mayor into another in the course of this. We were dealing with a structure, at that time, which was not the best structure for the responsibilities we had. We were dealing and trying to build membership with folks who may have had union experiences in industrial unions and was not quite clear how that transferred into public-sector unions. So it was an interesting period, not especially difficult, [00:15:00] but interesting.

PM: The mayors that you dealt with were Jerry Cavanagh and Roman Gribbs?

WL: No, Jerry Cavanagh -- I believe Coleman Young succeeded Cavanagh.

PM: Gribbs.

WL: Or Gribbs -- then we dealt with Gribbs also, yeah. I think I left a little while after Coleman became mayor and then sort of came back in and out on different kinds of situations from time to time. But Detroit, it was a good learning experience. Good learning experience.

PM: How did your experience in California, the previous 13 years or thereabouts, assist you in what you had to deal with when you came to Detroit?

WL: Well, I always believe that the union, on its own, just the union and its membership, really dealing in an urban environment, was not capable of moving its agenda without community support. [00:16:00] Without being rooted in the life of the community. And what I learned in Detroit, substantially, is I think we had a rich UAW history where it was involved in the social life and the political life of the city and the county and state. Well, I set out to try and get our union in that same direction, and most of our people were already active in social activities, already active in local political clubs, already active in a number of areas. What I saw, the difficulty was, they were just active on their own. I mean, it was not a

coherent agenda, but personal agendas. And I don't mean that in a negative sense. And we set out to try and make this our public sector trade union agenda, and we had some colorful leaders [00:17:00] and effective leaders in those days. And I think maybe what I brought to the table was the ability to make all of those agendas as close as we could to one, on behalf of all of our workers, because there were a number of issues that were common problems for all of our members.

PM: What other labor leaders did you deal with? You mentioned a moment ago that -- the powerful and long tradition the UAW had, for example. Did you have an opportunity to work with that union?

WL: Oh, yes. Fortunately -- and I'm, I guess, again, going back to right place, right time kind of thing. I had an opportunity to meet Doug Fraser in those days. I had an opportunity to meet Robert "Buddy" Battle, had a chance to meet Horace Sheffield, had a brief opportunity to interact with Nelson "Jack" Edwards. I mean, people who, for me, [00:18:00] just reading labor history, were sort of icons. I mean, I met once with Walter Reuther, but as a part of a much broader meeting. Had a chance to talk with Jack Conway. And these are all experience-building things for me. Tom Turner was an awful lot of help in a lot of areas.

Later on in years, I met with Mark Stepp. Just people who had a tremendous history of contribution to their union and also to the community. Some of our own leaders and members were Bill Sharon, who was a part of the Wayne County public sector leadership; Walter Oliver; Lloyd Simpson; Alton Cobb; Bill Barnes. People who had spent a lifetime working in and around trade unionism, both in the private sector and public sector. [00:19:00] So I -- Wes Solomon, who I think history has forgotten, but played such a major role in just the establishment of our union.

PM: People like Richard Cordtz --

WL: Dick Cordtz was around --

PM: -- would have been here then. Al Barber. I forget whether all Al was still (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

WL: Al was, I think, the head of, I think, either the Wayne County council or --

PM: That's right. (inaudible) AFL-CIO (inaudible).

WL: Yeah. So, I mean, it was a lucky period for me to have had the chance to work for our union but in this environment. And I like to think I learned something from that, and from that experience was able to make a contribution in different ways.

PM: Was this a breakthrough in terms of the traditional approach that AFSCME had taken in this community or other

communities? That is, of working through the broader labor organizations?

WL: I can't really say if it was at that time. I mean, [00:20:00] then, it was really just an effort to straighten out a bad situation and, at the same time, integrate what we were doing more into the political life of organized labor here in the city. I mean, we were by no means a leading force in anything, it was just that we did not realize our full potential simply because it was so fragmented. We had strong leadership in the DPW, we had strong leadership in the DSR, we had strong leadership in many places, but it was not leadership that had a history of working together. And, as a result, the city and the county could deal on individual problems but would refuse to deal on global problems, coming to our union as a whole. And what I tried to do is make all of our leaders work on a common agenda. And I think, to a degree, was successful in doing that. I wouldn't want to say we achieved [00:21:00] milestones, but we were able to refocus the energies so that they would look at public sector workers as a group, as opposed to individual pieces.

PM: While you were here, you had some association with one of Detroit's most colorful natives, Coleman Young, who himself came out of the labor movement. Out of the UAW and was in

our state senate before he went into city politics. What were your reactions to Coleman Young? A man of the political side, a labor background, was he tougher to deal with because of his experience in the labor movement?

WL: No. First of all, let me say I loved and admired Coleman, not only for his personal characteristics, but he understood labor and understood the issues of workers. And, contrary to popular belief, it is easier to deal with someone who is strong and tough than it is with someone who has no idea [00:22:00] what they're doing. I think this whole area of labor relations is about leverage and it's about support and it's about personal relationships. It's about common agendas, and I think Coleman was a person who had a basic philosophical belief himself and an ideology, and favored policies that helped working people. And so if you came in with a case or an issue or a project, if it made sense, he would be for it. He might even be for it if it didn't make sense, (laughs) if it was something he thought needed doing. But, in terms of our contract administration, in terms of handling the day-to-day problems, I found it easier working with someone like Coleman when the problem got to his level than someone [00:23:00] who just saw themselves as the chief executive and was locked into that kind of a thing.

PM: There was one incident that came to my attention recently about workers that you represented that were involved in the zoo, was that correct? Tell me about that (inaudible).

WL: (laughs) This was one of those things that you never put on paper. But it involved our Parks and Recreation workers, where a couple of the animals that they were responsible for got out, got loose during the feeding process, and the line supervisors took the immediate action of dismissing employees without any analysis of the situation. And eventually, that day, the problem got to the mayor's office because I took the position, as the head of the council, that you [00:24:00] just can't dismiss people without due process. And particularly in this case, where these two workers had to risk life and limb on behalf of the public, and their reward was to be discharged. And while Coleman may or may not have had all the facts, he wasn't buying that quick argument. And I sort of took the position that these workers were entitled to be honored rather than discharged. (laughs) And Coleman, in his own way, he responded that -- I won't say what he said, but we set out to make a case for our own positions. Mine, that these two were heroes, his was that they ought to be taken off the city payroll. I think when we discussed the PR implications and the downside, he finally gave in. Not

that he agreed I was right, but he just didn't need the aggravation. Finally he agreed, not only that they should be kept on the payroll -- that was about as far as he was willing to go -- but I argued just to keep them on the payroll, [00:25:00] that doesn't do justice to their contribution. What they ought to have is an award for their valor, for which I thought he was going to drop dead. (laughs) But eventually I convinced him that what he ought to do is give them a plaque, and that way he'd get a piece of the action, too. And he agreed to this. And on the final day where this ceremony was to take place, the workers in question showed up, you know, stoned out of their minds. (laughs) And Coleman looked at me and simply says, you know, "I understand what's going on." But he was a person who did not take himself so serious. He recognized, I think, that he was the chief executive officer of a major city, he was an employer, and along with that came some goods and bads. But I think he had carried with him, throughout his professional life, a sense that workers are entitled to due process and fair treatment, and [00:26:00] he would give you an edge if you made your case. And, I mean, there are a thousand different incidents that I suspected, both in my experience and other people who dealt with him, where his sensitivity and his understanding

of these dynamics were shown. I enjoyed working with him, I --

PM: But the animals, in this particular case, were red squirrels or raccoons?

WL: Polar bears. (laughs) No, they were polar bears.

PM: Polar bears.

WL: (laughs) And the employees were put back on the payroll, and perhaps they're still there, for all I know.

PM: But, again, you say it taught a lesson, or at least confirmed what you knew, that a knowledgeable chief executive can be, sometimes, a good one to work with.

WL: Yeah. Coleman, I mean, we used to -- I shouldn't say we argued, but we discussed -- Coleman, I think, operated on the philosophy that, "I'd rather be effective than right." [00:27:00] You know, it may be important to be right, but if you're right and harm comes or nothing gets done, what's the relevance? And I think he tried to deal in the area that we had responsibility for as fairly and as honestly and as openly as he could. He wasn't going to give you anything. And if you made a case you'd get fairness. If you didn't make a case, you'd get zero.

PM: I know you've agreed with the position that we often overlook major contributions that labor leaders and labor members and workers have made, and based upon your

experience in Detroit in that certain period of time, what names come to your mind of people in that category that made an outstanding contribution to the benefit of working men and women?

WL: Oh, I think you look at a long list of [00:28:00] UAW leaders and former leaders who made such a tremendous contribution. I would start in -- I'm not sure order is important, but certainly totality. I mean, Horace Sheffield, who was such a principled and stand-up person, who was -- not just in his context as a labor leader, but as a community leader, one who stood up on so many difficult issues during his professional career here in the city. I'd say, certainly, Nelson "Jack" Edwards, who provided the kind of image that a lot of us who had no ideas about what labor is or ought to be could look at and say, "Wow, I mean, if this kind of guy can come through all the things and play the role that he did in the leadership of the UAW, that's [00:29:00] something to talk about." I had the pleasure of meeting and doing some work with Willoughby Abner, whose name gets lost in the pages of history around here, but played such a central role in getting the UAW to recognize a need to consider some more diversity in its leadership. And then there are many, many women who, I mean, memory fails me on all of them, but it's

folks like these that helped a lot of us understand what not only labor is but what it could be. Tom Turner, who, you know, for the time that he led the Metro Wayne County Council, made tremendous contributions to the life of the city and this region. Mark Stepp. I mean, I could -- Buddy Battle. [00:30:00] Marcus, Marcellus Ivory. I mean, folks whose contribution is not reflected in any way except in the halls of labor, but who had such a tremendous impact on this entire city.

PM: Was Alex Fuller active when you were here?

WL: Oh, yes.

PM: He seems to be another one that I can think of.

WL: Yes, Alex Fuller. I like --

PM: It's important to identify these people, because, as you say they're so often overlooked and forgotten. Even, as you know, within the union that they represented or were members.

WL: You know, you could go to a high school or a college or what have you and ask folks about labor leadership in general, Black labor leadership in particular, and the knowledge is simply not there. Yet the business community [00:31:00] is remembered for things that had to be joint partnerships in order to get done. And this is not a put-down for business, I think they're obligated to it, but I

think we have a responsibility to keep our history and our contribution alive, because ours go more to the wellbeing of the community than just the economic wellbeing. And I consider myself having been lucky to have worked with so many of these folks. And now, I mean, you can see that chain of leadership continue in the leadership of the unions that are here. Leon Lynch and the steelworkers. I'm blanking on names, but I mean, virtually every major union has diversity within its ranks. I think so much of that was moved by the agenda of the UAW and other unions who [00:32:00] saw this as a positive sign many years ago.

PM: Now, this was in 1967 that you came. Was this sort of an assignment given to you out of central headquarters?

WL: Yes.

PM: To come here and to straighten out the situation here and to develop the programs?

WL: Mm-hmm.

PM: It lasted for a year or two?

WL: Yes. Mm-hmm.

PM: But in 1968 you were involved in the Memphis strike. Can you tell me how that came about in terms of your assignment?

WL: We had gotten word at headquarters that there was something taking place in Memphis. We didn't know quite what it was,

but there was something taking place, and the president was interested in trying to be of whatever assistance he could. A few years before, there had been an effort to organize and an effort to have a strike in Memphis. Not necessarily promoted [00:33:00] by the union, but by the folks who were there. And this effort had been crushed by the city and by the courts, and whatever was taking place in February of ’68 at least signaled the president that that may be was taking place again, and he’d like to know a little bit more about it. So I, because I was from Memphis, while there was a lot of years in between, President Wurf thought I may be of some help in going down. So I left Detroit and went down to Memphis to just take a look and then get some sort of a feel for what may be going on. And I went to the Public Works Department and, principally, to the sanitation yards, a few days -- this was the early part of February. And just sort of listened in on what was going on, and there were other staff people who were there. [00:34:00] I didn’t know them, they didn’t know me. But it was clear that there was a good deal of unrest in the workforce for a whole host of reasons, part of which may have been that the city was in the process of going through sort of a political restructuring. A power-centered mayor’s office as opposed to an old commission system. Department heads

as opposed to the process of going to your friend and getting a favor. But there was lots and lots of unrest, and that's what I reported back to the president. I said, "I'm not altogether sure if there is a central issue, but there are issues that are clearly on the minds of a lot of people." I made that report and came back to Detroit. I believed, at that time, just based on the strength of the [00:35:00] conversation you were hearing, that this thing was going to explode in another day or so if nothing was done. And I wasn't given the authority to say, "Do this, do that," just to find out what was going on. Came back to Detroit, made the report, and got a call in a matter of a few days that the thing was boiling a little bit higher in Memphis, and would I go back down? And my question at this point is, you know, what am I going down for? And the issue was, if there's a strike, you're there to support the workers. If there is not a strike, then let's figure out what there is to keep there from being one. Now, this is February in Memphis and no sanitation strike ought to occur in February.

PM: [Right?].

WL: (laughs) So I went back down [00:36:00] that evening and went out to the yards the next morning, and at the yards, it was clear that the workers were not going to work. What

had happened in between was an accident involving the death of two workers on a piece of equipment that apparently had been cited for faulty mechanism for some time back. This had happened during a rainstorm, and like always, out of these kinds of situations, all of the other issues that have been talked about for weeks and months bubble to the surface. And in the discussions you find out that the workforce had no kind of health insurance, no kind of social security, no kind of health and welfare, no kind of nothing, and that the workers had to take up a collection [00:37:00] to bury them. So all of these things become workplace issues. The leadership, then, was headed up by a fellow by the name of T. O. Jones, and he and others were the face of the union. And they had tried, for some time, to get the attention of the department and the political leadership of the city to address some of these issues. And like I said, the city was just in the midst of a transition. The election had, by now, been held. The city had a new mayor, brand new mayor. A fellow by the name of Henry Loeb had got himself elected with absolutely no support from the Black community, so he figured he owed nothing to the Black community. A strong and opinionated person. And the workforce was simply saying, [00:38:00] until these issues got addressed, they were not going to

work. And day one, it was a fairly simple position. It was not a strike about money. It was not a strike about benefi-- it was a strike about the need to have a way to resolve day-to-day issues and problems. And we walked into that situation -- I'm able to interpret it now, but then it was quite different. And our role was not -- I mean, to this day, people believe the union called a strike in the Sanitation Department of Memphis, Tennessee. I mean, we would not call a strike in February, the middle of the winter, of sanitation workers if our li-- it just wouldn't happen. But these were men who had gone through, I mean, as much as you can go though, and had come to a conclusion they simply were not [00:39:00] going to deal with it anymore. So our mission became, how do we support this? How do we lend what resources we have to make sure that they are not beaten back to work and not driven back to work? And in the course of it, we began to understand the conditions under which they did work, and this was not something that any of us, at least myself, had encountered before. Memphis was still the South, and my work experience in California never would have me believe that supervisors or foremen would walk around the yard with arms, I mean, firearms. That their word was almost like law. That men had no idea whether they would work from day

to day, but they were subject to what, in effect, was a shape-up. [00:40:00] That the rights of the workers in 1968 had so little respect by the political system of a city. I mean, this was all sort of new. But we were of the belief that this wasn't complicated. I mean, this could be settled without any big hullabaloo. That those of us who were there, we just simply needed to meet with the powers that be and explain to them our best understanding of these issues. And how little did we understand about the city of Memphis?

PM: As we go along, were these sanitation workers members of an AFSCME local?

WL: There was an AFSCME local, but it was not nearly as large as the workforce that was engaged in this activity. Part of the issue there was recognition. There may have been a couple hundred members of the local [00:41:00] union, but this was something that involved 1300 plus workers. And, at the outset, while the records argue that they were all Black, that's not true. I mean, there were white workers in the Public Works Department who were caught up in this thing, too. Not to the same degree, but the issues that began to crystallize and polarize the situation were issues that revolved around color. And the union took on the struggle for recognition, and not just recognition for

Black workers, but recognition for all workers in the Public Works Department. And, as I said, we began to understand that this was not Contra Costa County, this was not Detroit, this was Memphis, Tennessee, and they had different views about Black workers who had challenged the political establishment by striking. And the mayor, somewhere down the line, made it clear in one of his public statements that [00:42:00] this is not New York City. You know, meaning that he wouldn't tolerate workers picketing and what have you. But I think he at no point during the strike accurately gauged the depth of feeling that the workforce had around their issue. The strike lasted for 67 days, give or take a little bit, and the thing that is troubling, clearly the assassination of Dr. King, which was a part of this process, the sacrifice and the contribution of the workers gets dwarfed in the context of the assassination. And I personally think that the issue that they were raising and their willingness to [00:43:00] struggle for it was the heart and soul of what Dr. King was fighting about, and that is the plight of the working poor. Because these were people who worked every day but qualified for practically every public aid program that existed. The wages -- and while this was not a strike about wages, I hasten to say -- the wages were, like, a

dollar and something an hour. You know, below the minimum wage that existed by federal law at that time. There was no health insurance, there was no s-- I mean, there was no nothing. Yet the reliability of this workforce was there and it was clear. And the struggle, at least in my mind, paralleled all the other great struggles that had taken place in labor.

PM: A number of you were [00:44:00] issued an injunction, and was this brought to court, you and Jerry Wurf?

WL: Yeah.

PM: [They take you in?]?

WL: Yeah.

PM: Okay. And Jones. What was the outcome of that?

WL: I think what's important is how it came about. As I said earlier, we believed then, and I believe now, that workers by themselves cannot win their struggles. I mean, it's just not something that's going to happen simply because you're a part of the union. I think the union is much more importantly a part of the total community. These workers, we encouraged them to tell their story to the community. I mean, these were sanitation workers who touched every house in that city at least once a week, if not twice in many cases. They had a system there where, in the white community, the garbage was picked up twice a week, in the

Black community it was picked up once a week. And you need just the reverse. [00:45:00] So we had, then, as a part of this community education process, to go back over their routes of responsibility and, not just talk to the people whose houses they serviced, but leave them a memo detailing what this was about so at least people would know. And we began to mobilize community support around the issues in the strike. We then held nightly forums across the city so that we could bring people in and tell them what is taking place. Well, the city began to react to this. These were open forums where anybody could come. Reporters for the newspapers, television was all there. The city deputized the newspaper reporters and made them agents of the court. And the [00:46:00] injunction came about because we would not order the people to go back to work. And the city and the court took the position that, if we did not order them back to work, we, in effect, were aiding and abetting an illegal action. And we were not about to order them back to work. A, we didn't order them out. So during the course of the early days of this thing, an injunction was issued. We were brought to court. Our position was, we didn't order them out and we're not going to order them back. And then one of the local leaders stood up and said, in effect, we all quit, which resolved the issue in total.

So we were then held in contempt of court, and those of us who were out of town, I think, were given 20 or 30 days or something like that, and the local people were given 10 [00:47:00] or 15. But it didn't resolve anything, it didn't accomplish anything, because the workers had made a decision. They were not going back to work until they got these issues resolved.

PM: What circumstances were you able to bring Martin Luther -- the Reverend King in?

WL: We had, by near the end of the strike, two-thirds of the way through it, it was clear that we were getting no national attention. And the reasons, later on, we learned were very clear that the FBI, under the leadership of Mr. Hoover, had made it impossible to get news of this strike outside of the city. There was this belief that the strike was some underhanded way of challenging national and local authority, that this was part of a broader conspiracy. So the news outlets, AP, UPI, the local newspapers [00:48:00] were simply not printing stuff and it was not getting outside of town. And we found out an awful lot from a couple of reporters from the *Washington Post* who was traveling with Dr. King during the early mobilization of the poor people's campaign that, you know, "What's going on down here?" Kind of thing. And they made the point that

there was no news of this activity going on. So we decided that, in order to attract some attention to this, national leadership, we would have, at least national outlets, we would invite to come down and take a look at what was going on and speak or share their views. So, I'm trying to think, Roy Wilkins was invited to come in as head of the NAACP. [00:49:00] Bayard Rustin. Maybe and someone else, I can't remember their names now. But, ultimately, the longer this went on, somebody suggested, "Well, maybe we should ask Dr. King to come in." And as much as the issues of this strike were central to his argument about the poor people's campaign, you've got the working poor who are simply asking for a better shake. Jim Lawson, a fellow by the name of Jesse Epps, and myself took on the responsibility of trying to convince SCLC and Dr. King that this is something you ought to take a look at. And ultimately we did. And we were right. I mean, the issues involved in this confrontation were so central to the problems of poor people nationally, and he thought he wanted to identify whether they [00:50:00] wanted to do something to help. And he agreed to come to Memphis and lead a march. And he announced this, and the establishment of Memphis sort of trembled. And all of the irony, the first march was scheduled -- I forget the date, but it had

the biggest ice storm that the city of Memphis had ever experienced on the day that this march was supposed to take place, so it was postponed for a later date. And this postponement, in the minds of many of us, gave the FBI and a lot of other folks time to both mobilize and organize, or organize and mobilize, to deal with a new set of dynamics. We think the strike and the workers got forgot about, and the issue became, how do we diminish the image of Dr. King? How do we [00:51:00] posture this question of nonviolence versus some of the other stuff that the more -- I don't want to say *radical* groups, but more militant groups, were agitating for? And Dr. King became the central figure in this. We know a lot now that we didn't know then as a result of the Church Committee hearings, but the FBI took a much larger role in the effort to destabilize Dr. King than it had in the past years. If you recall, the rescheduled march was much larger, and where the violence broke out, which brought the march to an end, was not by strikers, not by community people, but by FBI provocateurs. [00:52:00] People who had inserted themselves and integrated themselves into the worker's march and began to break windows and destroy property. Those were not strikers. These were, in some cases, members of the Memphis Police Department, members of the FBI. We later on learned that

there was participation by the DIA, which is that strange intelligence piece of the defense department. Some argue that elements of the CIA -- well, I mean, there are lots and lots of pieces that we don't understand to this day. But the issue that was raised was, is Dr. King's leadership still relevant in a nonviolent environment? No mention of the strike, there was no mention of the issues, it was just Dr. King. And [00:53:00] he was then in the position of, can you hold, any longer, nonviolent protests, nonviolent demonstrations? And I think that was the challenge that was created for him to respond to. And ultimately, you know, his death became a part of that whole process, with lots and lots of questions still unanswered.

PM: But that's been two key assignments you had since coming to Washington. One in Detroit, one in Memphis. At least the latter had international visibility. What impact did that have, or these experiences have, upon you?

WL: Personally, I began to see the union and its role and mission in a much larger context. I think that the role of a trade union is [00:54:00] really not just about bread-and-butter kinds of issues, but I don't believe that there's any other vehicle that really can touch society in a way that defends and promotes the rights of individuals. That can move individuals and groups toward a much more

democratic relationship with the powers to be, that can speak on behalf of or bring change about on behalf of so many people. I think the union has that responsibility. And having seen it, I think Memphis was a much more dramatic illustration of that. I just thought that this is how change will come about. I mean, I think that so many prior lessons of economic democracy, that this is a way it will happen. And more importantly, in our case, where our people work for public entities. [00:55:00] If we can get an active and proactive trade union movement in the public sector that not only has quality of service, efficient delivery of services, et cetera, but deals with quality-of-life kinds of questions, then we really got an instrument that can be extremely useful. And we began to talk about that. We began to talk about Memphis, not in the context of the strike and the struggle, but who else is able to take on these kinds of issues? And our members are not nine-to-five people, they're 24-hour people, and the kinds of problems that we can collectively resolve deals with those other 18 hours. And for me personally, and I think for the union, we began to see our mission in a much [00:56:00] broader context.

PM: Let's take a break now, it's [20 minutes to four?]. And take five minutes or so.

WL: Yeah, sure. You've got to wave your hand if I get too wordy, I -- (laughs)

PM: Not at all! Not at all! This is -- there's nothing like this!

WL: These were hearings -- not on the Memphis strike, had nothing to do with that. He was investigating something else, and all of the sudden, this stuff starts to drop out. (laughs) I mean --

PM: Are you on tape?

WL: Oh, no, no, turn the tape --

(break in audio)

PM: All right. Are we back on?

C: Yeah, go ahead.

PM: Okay. Bill, after the Detroit assignment and Memphis assignments, you returned to Washington. Were there any other major assignments you were sent on in that capacity?

WL: Well, one of the things that happened at the end of the Memphis [00:57:00] strike situation and the conclusion, negotiation, et cetera, Jerry then sort of restructured staff. I got promoted to something called special assistant to the president, which meant that he didn't have to have any reservations about sending you anywhere at that point in time. So we had ran into a major organizing effort in New York State. So, the tail end of '68 and

beginning of ’69, we went into the New York State service, we went into the city of Cleveland, we were just -- wherever an opportunity presented itself, we were trying to capitalize on it. And that went on for about a year. We had collective bargaining opportunities in the state of Ohio, Maryland, Georgia. We just really became focused on [00:58:00] organizing as many opportunities as presented itself. At the end of ’69, possibly the beginning of ’70, somewhere in that general area, I was fortunate enough to get promoted again. And these promotions are coming about for strange and complicated reasons. Bob Hastings, who had been Jerry’s executive assistant, left the union to go to work for the federal government, and I guess Jerry saw the opportunity to at least tighten us all up, so I became executive assistant to the president. I believe it was the early part of 1970. And at that point it reduced the fieldwork a good deal, because that position was sort of the principal staff position in the union. [00:59:00] And you’re sort of an extension of the president’s desk, but you have responsibility for the oversight of the departments and their work. And that lasted for almost two years.

PM: I don’t want to get through that without some -- covering stuff. Aside from overseeing, internally, the department

structure and reporting to it, what other duties did you have? But even before that, when the position was first offered to you, had you had the experience now to have been dealing with Jerry Wurf?

WL: Oh, yes.

PM: You knew the type of a leader he was, what was expected, his --

WL: Yeah, when I came to work in 1966, I came, as I indicated, to sort of work on the development of this department. And I think, for me, it was a golden opportunity to [01:00:00] be a part of a national thing and to get a chance to see how both policy is formulated and implemented and all of that, but also to take stock of someone who was themselves in the process of building a union, of which this department thing was just a part of. And I had had the opportunity to see how he reacted to different situations. The Detroit organizing effort being one, the Detroit strike being another. Memphis being another, New York being another. And you began to get a sense that here is, at least, an individual who you know or have a pretty good idea how they think about given situations. You know what they think about foreign affairs, you know what they think about domestic issues, you have a sense of how they see the union as an [01:01:00] institution committed to a lot of

these things. You get an opportunity to hear him discuss his views in contrast to other leaders' views and why, if there's a difference, he differs. You get an opportunity to judge what he thinks our union ought to be. And so it was a good learning experience for me. I can't comment as to whether I thought I was prepared for that job or not. I think I knew the job just by having associated with the guy who was there before and having a good feel for and understanding of the president. Now, I was not misguided about who the president was, what he thought and how he acted. But thought that you'd just do the best you could with it. And I had been around, by then, long enough -- because this was a fast-moving period -- to believe that -- (break in audio) [01:02:00]

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PM: [Ok?] -- do you think we lost much, Bill?

WL: I don't think so.

PM: Okay. We're talking about your early experiences as special assistant. What, in situations with Wurf, if you disagreed with him based on your experience, how would you

go about expressing those views to him and how did he respond to them?

WL: I -- and, again, I think everybody has a different experience. I would simply tell him on the basis of what I thought the fact situation to be. And, generally, these were situations involving conversations and interaction with other people, how I thought they would react, they would view the situation. And [00:01:00] I may be wrong, I may be right, but this is what I think. And he would, in some cases, say, "Well, I believe, I believe, I believe." So, all I'm telling you is, this is what I think. And I'm prepared to do whatever you suggest doing based on your ultimate decision which way to go. And these would involve organizing efforts, they would involve political campaigns, they would involve a host of things that he thought important enough to bring everybody together around. He used to have a process where he'd bring all of the principal staff together, once a week, twice a month, and do what we called a sort of around-the-country analysis of what's going on and how that played into any direction in policy that we were going to be taking on. And everyone, [00:02:00] because of the different responsibilities, obviously talk to and interact with different people, and only a few of us interact with a much broader group. And

so the views of everybody come from many different perspectives. And that's why I say, if you came to the meeting unprepared, it wasn't long before you knew about it because he himself also kept track as best he could of all of these issues and all of these situations. And talked to many people, some of which you may have talked to also. So it was an effort to bounce ideas around, and thoughts and stuff, and I think it helped to build a collegial relationship between staff, but it also, it was tough on people from time to time. [00:03:00]

PM: Was this, in effect, a regular scheduled staff meeting or was this just dealing with issues?

WL: It was issues, but on a scheduled basis. It was what we used to call the national issues, you know, sort of roundup. What's going on out there. And, you know, how do we relate to it? And, I mean, part of the '64 change was that the national union would be available to assist any affiliate whenever and however it could. And that we would not be an organization in Washington, DC, you know, 10 phone calls away, but would be available to give assistance. And in order to do that, he believed that we needed to keep on top of the issues that were principal issues in virtually every sector of the country, and [00:04:00] people did. I mean, he made you read reports,

he insisted that you read current articles, he insisted that you read the newspapers. (laughs) And it became habit-forming. And two people can read the same article and come away with a different perception of what was meant, and there're always nuances. New York is different than Cleveland, Ohio. And he took a great interest in all of these differences.

PM: At that time, did you or anyone else have to serve the function of listening to key staff members who either didn't agree with Jerry or didn't understand Jerry or wanted advice on how to deal with Jerry? He was a very [tough person?].

WL: Yeah, I think the executive assistant to the president plays that role. "How's he doing today?" You know what I mean? "What's his feeling, is he okay?" [00:05:00] And, I mean, part of the executive assistant's role is to counsel with department heads, and you had to have a sense of the kinds of things that Jerry wanted you to be clear about so that it'd help with his decision-making process. You had to counsel with him on most things that are priorities. I mean, you don't want to hear about everything, but you want to make sure that, if everything's going to get discussed, these are the things that you ought to focus more attention on. These were part of the responsibility. You had to

read the departmental reports prior to a board meeting so that, if there were clinkers, I mean, folks had to deal with that. If certain segments of it was not giving as much weight as others, [00:06:00] maybe you want to rework this so that you make sure the Board understands what's going on. There may be some that you want to talk to him about before you set it to writing. And I think the executive assistant's job is to sort of work with other staff people to do that, not to insert your own opinions about what it ought to be.

PM: Right. Now, this is the responsibility you had, did you enjoy this type of a relationship with the staff? It isn't the easiest one, as you (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

WL: I would have to say I was only doing it for a short period of time. I mean, it may have been better or worse over the long haul, but I was there for a couple of years and it was okay with me. And I also, I'm very clear that he had personal relationships with staff and principal staff that he enjoyed outside of the structural relationships. And I was always mindful [00:07:00] that you can't and should not cut those lines because you're destined to failure if you do.

PM: Did you have to travel at all in this new assignment? Travel, even with Jerry?

WL: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I mean, I think it was, as I said before, a golden opportunity for me, because as the executive assistant you've got access to a lot of different meetings and engagements that was pretty heady stuff for a young fellow from California. Whether it was meetings with presidents or principal leaders of the American labor movement or business or academia, I mean, yeah. Yeah.

PM: Now, today, you have a reputation of being a very effective speaker, one that I've heard a lot about. Now, what was your -- when you first had to go out and speak to public groups like this, either in California or after you took on these [00:08:00] new responsibilities, even in a situation like Detroit or -- how did you find that experience?

WL: I am always a little leery of addressing a large group or small group, but I think I lean on what I call the steward's prayer, where one or more of you have gathered together, I'll come among you and give a speech. (laughs) I think the issue is, what are we trying to get across? I mean, what message are we trying to deliver, what ideas are we trying to move, and try to deal with that in as an uncomplicated manner as possible. I'm always frightened by the notion of speaking to a group of any size, and I guess [00:09:00] I just assume that I'm the only one who knows what I'm going to say, so the quicker I say it and the

clearer I say it, the better off I'm going to be. But I think probably there was some preparation for this in the role as assistant in the materials and research area. Part of my responsibility was dealing with the results of broad tests and analysis of test data, and the recommendations as to what ought to be done based on that data. In that context, had an early opportunity to deal with technical groups. And there you're just reporting on a set of facts. Here's what they suggest, here's what we recommend. I can't say I've had any preparation for it, I'm not altogether sure I'm good at it, but if there's a message to deliver, [00:10:00] I mean, you just do the best you can with it.

PM: The period of time that you were active in leadership positions up to now in AFSCME was an extremely important period in the political history of the United States and of different regions. How did you -- and necessity was that you get involved because of the union. How did you enjoy that role?

WL: Oh, very much so. I think the interaction with other labor leadership within the AFL gives a chance to see how our ideas and views either paralleled or differed from. In the course of this role with him, we met governors and senators and congresspeople. You got a chance to get his view of

who they were and [00:11:00] what he thought about them. Not so much on a personal basis, but where they were on the issues that were important to us. Same is true of presidents. I found it, A, both exciting and quite useful in trying to give you some sense of what role you ought to play. I can pretty much tell whether or not Wurf was going to support a political figure at the end of a meeting, and whether or not he was not going to support them. Or at least -- and he wasn't bashful about telling them, but he would want to think about it some time, and I was pretty consistent on where he came out in the end. I think, again, for me personally, I'm probably one of the luckiest folks around, because during this period we're talking about, lots and lots of things were happening. Both in terms of [00:12:00] domestic politics and policy and international stuff. And I think, by being exposed to that, I was much better-rounded for not only the job that I had but for any other place I would go after that.

PM: When you chaired, or were head of this legislative and political action, was that the title?

WL: Mm-hmm, Legislation and Community Affairs, we called it.

PM: Community Affairs. Did you have responsibility for giving subsidies or assistance to candidates running for election, as many unions did?

WL: I had the responsibility of recommended it.

PM: Recommending it.

WL: Yeah. Yeah. And, in those days, we were much smaller with a much smaller pot to deal with, but on the basis of where candidates and parties stood on issues that important [00:13:00] to the union or issues that we just philosophically agree with, I could make a recommendation to the president. And he would decide what he wanted to do about it.

PM: When it came to giving out the money or assigning it or notifying a candidate that you're supporting them, were you the one that did it?

WL: No. In some cases yes, in some cases no. I mean, he had a great belief in the fact that local people ought to be dealing with their representatives, and that if we're going to give help to an individual, local people ought to be a part of that process. And maybe sometimes a local person would give the check or round up the volunteers or become integrated into the campaign, but he would not leave them out. Some cases, depending upon if it was a national party thing, and he wanted to be very clear that he would do it. In some [00:14:00] cases, he would say, "Pass it on to such-and-such with this letter." I mean, it varied over a

lot, but the principal issue was he wanted local people to be identified with whatever support came from us.

PM: In 1972, Joe Ames announced, or it was announced that Joe Ames was going to step down as secretary-treasurer and take over as administrator of the judicial panel, either a newly-created organization or a newly-defined.

WL: The judicial panel was a part of the new constitution that was put together. It was just that the role was not a full-time role at that point. And we did not, when it was written in, understand the volume of [00:15:00] business that it might get, because its jurisdiction was written out as elections and protests and all that kind of stuff. And in our union, I mean, people feel free to contest whatever they think is not right. So the judicial panel was getting a big volume of work that, in the eyes of both Joe and Jerry and possibly some others, it needed someone at headquarters on a full-time basis to coordinate the activities and keep the filing systems and all of that kind of stuff. And sort of the precedents and histories of all these cases accurately filed and sorted out. Part of this had been the job of the lawyers, but there was real belief that the chair of this panel maybe ought to become a full-time [00:16:00] responsibility. And the question then

became, who? And I believe Joe came forward with this idea himself.

PM: Yes, I believe that that's -- I think Jerry agreed with that interpretation too. Now, was this a surprise to the staff?

WL: I think so, yeah. Yeah.

PM: Joe stepped down as secretary-treasurer and --

WL: I'm trying to think. Joe became secretary-treasurer, I think, in about '66 or '67. I think he replaced Gordon Chapman. But he was still, because he felt so strongly about this judicial panel process, still doing a lot of the organizing and structuring, and it was becoming more and more work to be done. And the travel [00:17:00] of both that and the responsibilities of the secretary-treasurer, which was a good deal of travel also, I mean, I think he made a decision of where he wanted to use most of his time. And I think it was quite a surprise to a lot of folks.

PM: According to Joe Ames, as cited in Joe Goulden's book on Jerry Wurf, Joe Ames indicated that he was the one that selected you to be the candidate for the secretary-treasurer. Is that the procedure that you remember?

WL: I can't say, because that discussion may have taken place somewhere else. I think I did have a conversation with

both of them about it, but how the idea got translated from one to the other, I don't really know.

PM: What was your initial reaction when you were approached? This meant running for election on the national level. How did you think about it?

WL: [00:18:00] Well, I was still mindful of this earlier lie that I had told about this being a one-year (laughs) program, and I wasn't convinced that Washington, DC, was where I was going to sort of be forever. I was concerned about the implications for the union. You know, what does this mean? And I was knowledgeable as to know that there were no other African American secretary-treasurers at that point in time. I mean, what's the message and what are we trying to do? I don't have any real problem doing a token number if I know what it's about, and if what you're going to do is create a ballot, put Bill Lucy's name on it and then we'll see how that fly, I'm not interested in that. But if folks think that, by now, [00:19:00] you've made enough of a contribution to be worthy of this even if it's a competitive thing, now, that has some possibility. But I want to be comfortable myself that this is serious. And I guess the question I asked Jerry, when this question come up, is, what are the implications for the union? If the union is not ready for this, and people are not willing to

engage you on the basis of where you've been and who you are, if folks are just going to take a look at a picture of a thing and turn off, and then there's not going to be the basic support for service that's needed to get over this hump. I'm not interested in doing that, because that just makes sure we're going to have a long-term problem. So I said to him, I mean, let me do my own sniffing, [00:20:00] let me make my own trips, let me talk to people whose judgement we both value and see what they've got to say. Not assuming they're gonna tell you the truth when you ask them the first time, but at least you can look them in the eyeball and see how they react to it. And we didn't make a decision, as I recall, right then, but we were going to get back together in a couple days. I mean, make some phone calls and see who else might think it's a good idea. And that's what we did.

PM: I understand that you traveled around the country to get a sense of public membership opinion?

WL: Well, there were some people whose judgement you really had to test in this thing. Is a union ready for this kind of thing? And what's your [00:21:00] reaction? What do you think the downsides and upsides are? And there were a lot of good people who would tell you what they think rather than what you want to hear, and I certainly wanted to have

a chance to hear that. Whether or not they thought the record was strong enough that it would stand, and A, would you support it in a contest with whoever? And most people thought that, hey, it's worth a shot. If you're asking me, do I consider myself locked into it? No, but then you win me over in the debate. And I thought that was probably the most honest reaction you could get. And, yeah, I made sort of a loop around the country and talked to a lot of folks, and not just brand-name leaders, but rank-and-filers who would be a part of the convention. [00:22:00] And --

PM: Did you go back to your California group at all, or were you able to contact them in different ways?

WL: I went back to them in -- (laughs) and they considered me a sellout, you know what I mean? But this was my group. (laughs) It ain't enough that you're a pork-chopper now, now you're going to become a maximum pork-chopper, you know? (laughs) But they thought it was a good idea, but it ought to be won on the basis of ideas. It ought to be won on the basis of engaging in a discussion about where Jerry and you would be trying to take the union. And recognizing that you're second voice in that discussion, but at least as a reason for it. And I would say that Joe Ames's help and support [00:23:00] can by no means be minimized. Clearly Jerry's -- I mean, once he offered the thing, was

on board and was going to do what. But Joe, I think, did so much to give the whole issue credibility.

PM: Yeah, that's right. So you did, finally, after careful consideration, make a decision to be the candidate. And this was an election in 1972?

WL: Right.

PM: Right. And that meeting was held at the national convention.

WL: Mhmm.

PM: In what city?

WL: Houston. Houston, Texas.

PM: That's right. And how did that go about, the meeting?

WL: Well, it was a regular convention --

PM: [How was the whole?] process handled --

WL: The election, like all of our conventions, the president is nominated first. And we did not know, nor was there any real effort made to keep anybody [00:24:00] else from running. Our convention is, as you probably know, I mean, it's freedom hall. Anybody can jump up, as long as they're a paid-up member, they can run for office. So it wasn't a question of whether a brand-name leader would run, but anybody else who, once the office was declared open, could run. I took on -- I took the direction of, [in terms of?] the nomination process, because it was, for this point in

time, I thought, very significant. So I asked a fellow by the name of Norm Schut from the state of Washington who was, in my judgement, one of our most respected leaders. Philosophically, we may not have been in tune, but he was so well-respected that if he was a part of this nominating process it would give it, you know, good credibility. So I went to him and asked him if he would do it. [00:25:00] And, to my surprise, he said he would be honored to do it. And he did. I mean, he gave such a glowing nominating speech that I believed some of the things he said myself. (laughs) No, but it worked very well. There were other people who joined in, in the nominating thing. And according to Joe -- and for me, I'm just sitting there listening to all of this. He says the silence was deafening as we waited for further nominations. And you know the Robert's Rule thing, you've got to wait for three calls, and this was about the longest period of time (laughs) I had ever experienced. And when no other people were nominated, I mean, the convention sort of erupted in this happy thing. [00:26:00] I think the way we went about it collectively, A, did not take the membership of the convention for granted, and did not project this as anything other than a serious campaign for a new and different office. And I think I, in all honesty, won some

folks over because of color, lost some because of color, but the big hunk in the middle really believed that it would be a positive thing to have this happen.

PM: What opportunity did you have, once you decided to run or be a candidate, did you have to express your views on the future of that union?

WL: Oh, lots of them. Lots of them, lots of them. Bearing in mind I was, at that time, executive assistant. So meetings and conferences and special meetings, filling in for [00:27:00] Jerry or whatever, gave you a chance to share views. And I go back to the point you raised about Jerry. Jerry was not afraid of folks having a different view than him. He certainly wasn't in favor of you trying to suggest the union go in some strange direction, but the ideas about what the union ought to be doing as a part of a broad agenda of items, he didn't have any fear with that. So, when we were talking to big groups -- you know, New York or, at that time, Pennsylvania was getting fairly large, or Michigan, or Ohio -- I mean, the simple theory was, tell folks what you think. There'll be some who agree with you, there'll be some who disagree with you.

PM: Were there any specific issues at this convention, as there had been earlier, in terms of the union? Different [00:28:00] points of view?

WL: I can't think of any on different points of views. Well, now I'll take that back. There had been some discussion about renaming the union, and while we didn't get into a big public debate about it, I, for one, didn't agree with it. I think Joe, for two, didn't agree with it. And while neither of us campaigned, we simply said, it will not pay to push this issue. And we were so right. I mean, the resolution to introduce the name change went down the sewer in nothing flat, you know? (laughs) We were going to change it from the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees to State, County, and Municipal Employees, and the acronym would be S-C-M-E, which would pronounce "scum-wah." (laughs) We decided that wasn't going to go anywhere. [00:29:00] We talked about laying the groundwork for a different financing system. And every union convention, per capita, is always an issue. We proceeded to try and take out of the convention process this ongoing fight about financing. I mean, we didn't do it that meeting, but we certainly laid the groundwork for it so that the financing system, ultimately, two conventions later, became automatic. It was tied to wage increases as opposed to convention politics.

PM: Well, in 1972, then, you had a new assignment, and that's the first African American secretary-treasurer of any major

international union. What did that do to your status in the city of Washington? How did that new title, new responsibility change your responsibilities?

WL: Well, I think the [00:30:00] responsibilities changed in that you're now directly responsible for a business piece of the union and a part of the elected leadership of the union. And I think both of those had different impact. I had always tried to be what I am. I mean, the title don't change that. And I think, to a great degree, folks gave you credit for that. I had always, at least for the time then, I had been a part of the political process in the union. While one was not making the final decisions, whether it's on a candidate or an issue or a program, you were part of the discussion. I just continued to be that. The responsibilities of the secretary-treasurer, in our union, [00:31:00] and it may differ from union to union, is you're the principal financial officer of the union, and you're responsible to the board for giving them a clear picture of where the union stands financially. How its funds are being allocated in line with the budget that it adopts. So I then began my quarterly reporting to subordinate bodies and report to the membership on each meeting that it has on the financial status of the union. Auditing responsibility, the monitoring of subordinate

bodies and their fiduciary oversight of funds and -- all of that's just part of the same package. We had never had the financial side of the union used in any political way and we certainly weren't about to change that. And so it was, for me, an easy transition. [00:32:00] And in those days, you know, Jerry allowed for you to continue, to the extent you wanted, the broad contacts that you had with people and organizations that you had built relationships with. And he saw those to be ultimately beneficial to the union.

PM: Did your relationship to Jerry change, now that you're an elected key official with the union?

WL: I don't believe so. I think it probably changed in some respects. He still saw it as -- and I, too -- as a learning experience for me in a different way. Before, you were taking on assignments that he gave you, now you had constitutional authorities and responsibilities of your [00:33:00] own. And I think he still saw himself as president, and therefore there's a relationship that has to exist if you're going to work together effectively. And I think that's the value of the prior experiences, came into play there, because you just knew that conflict just won't work. And he was president, and you had to recognize it, not that you had any difficulties with it. So for the years that we worked together were enjoyable years, as far

as I was concerned. I think we did some good things. We raised some serious issues, we gave support to some serious issues and projects.

PM: I want to get in, tomorrow, to some of the more important issues that came up later in your career. But let me turn, 1972, you helped found and form the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. In our previous filmed interview, we discussed that in more detail, but just for the sake of this context, now you're secretary-treasurer and this comes in. Did not the establishment of CBTU reflect in some instances, and certainly in some unions, that African American members were not given the proper recognition they deserved?

WL: Oh, I think so. I think so, and I think virtually everybody recognized that fact. It wasn't a question of whether it was true, it was a question of, what do you do about it?

PM: Well, all right, (laughs) I was leading -- [00:35:00] that's just a way of bringing it in. Well, there you are, secretary-treasurer, and you're active in this movement, which has certainly some reflection upon the union. You represent it. Other unions more so, but how was this viewed? I don't think I've ever asked you before how Jerry

Wurf viewed this and how other officers within AFSCME viewed this.

WL: I don't think I ever had more than one conversation with Jerry about it. And that -- well, let me backtrack. At the AFL-CIO convention, and maybe even the convention of the Democratic Party, where all of this sort of came about, the Black labor leadership who was there, who was outraged by the non-endorsement position and posture of the [00:36:00] AFL-CIO, the question was, you know, this is insane. And our decision was to find a way where our views were put into the process before a decision was made. Everybody was concerned what we had to say after we had made a decision, but there was no way to change the decision, no interest in changing it. But still nobody suggested, "Well, in the future, here's what you ought to do." So we decided that this issue was large enough where we needed to find our own way to deal with it. So we didn't consult any of them as to whether or not we ought to do this. When we said what was going to happen, his comment -- at least in the discussion that I remember, the first was, you know, "Where are you trying to go with this and what are you trying to achieve?" And at that point, the answer to both of those questions was, "I don't know, but here is [00:37:00] the problem." And once we

collectively began to talk about, I mean, Charlie Hayes and -- we started to see all these other issues in a much brighter light that reflected this lack of status, this lack of input, this inability to affect decision-making in the process. And he had no -- I mean, his view was that there's very little that I can do to make these things happen, you've got to row your own boat. And so we did. And he gave great support to it without really knowing where we were trying to go. It did present, I think, some heartburn for him in one or two situations, particularly in the context of some of our differences with the AFL-CIO. I mean, he was on the executive council, and to the extent that I was a spokesperson for this other thing, [00:38:00] the general view of the AFL-CIO was, "You tell your guy to behave himself."

PM: And that guy was you.

WL: And that guy was me. And he never did that. He never came and says, "Well, here's what I want you to do on this issue." I mean, there were some very trigger issues that came up, and then the fact that folks were really trying to put us out of business early on put him in a very difficult situation. But he never said, "You ought to stop this, you ought to do --" He never once said, "I want to come to a meeting and tell you what I think." He says -- I mean, he

recognized that all of the people who were participating in this were serious trade unionists and were not going to play any race game that would jeopardize the integrity of their [00:39:00] union. I mean, you know, I could get every Black vote in our union and lose by a landslide, so it's not an issue where you're mobilizing Black workers against the establishment. That's silly. The only difference we had was on one occasion where he wanted me to take a position on something that I didn't want to take a position on, and so I didn't. And he says, "You would think after all we've been through you'd do this one thing." I said, "Well, that one thing is inconsistent with what I think." And he didn't argue about it, it was inconsistent with what I thought, but it was consistent with what he thought, so he never said anything else about it.

PM: Were you put under any pressure from other people in the labor movement? Through, I mean, in this particular aspect, of CBTU?

WL: I think there were other international union leadership who put [00:40:00] pressure on their people to isolate us. They tried to suggest that we were somewhere out of the mainstream, that we were so far left of center that we were not to be considered a part of the movement. And, you

know, for some of us, these things kind of have held some difficult -- and kind of hurt, because most of us, if not all of us, had really spent a lifetime advocating sound trade union policies. And all of the sudden, because you might have a difference with the AFL-CIO as a structure, all of the sudden, folks got to be leery of you. And we had these debates and discussions with the AFL-CIO. And in a very strange way, we had a better relationship with Mr. Meany [00:41:00] than we had with the AFL-CIO staff. I mean, (laughs) he says, "You know, I may disagree with you, but you guys got an obligation to argue your issue." And he says, I mean, in his exact words from one meeting, he says, "I do not have the capacity to change tradition." And at that time, we were discussing the question of Black leadership at the executive council level and within the AFL-CIO structures. And not just headquarters, but central labor bodies and generations, et cetera. And he says that the only way leadership could come onto the council is with the acceptance of the other presidents, and you certainly weren't going to get anybody on the council whose [00:42:00] president was not on the council, or whose president disagreed with you coming on the council. Our response was then, how do you think this process ever changes? He says, "It may never change."

PM: Was there any basic issues that you favored and supported on behalf of CBTU that were inconsistent with the objectives of or policies of AFSCME? Such as membership. Not the broad issues of diversity and the like, but enlarging the AFL-CIO council, for example. Memberships for minorities, automatically, on the council. Things like that.

WL: I would not know whether or not there was disagreement with it, all I would know is whether or not we had a conversation about one's feeling about it. I strongly favored, for many years, urban organizing. [00:43:00] You know, meaning cities and counties as opposed to states. Because the ability to organize around issues broader than just workplace issues were there, and our history had shown that we can organize a New York City, we can organize a Philadelphia, we can organize a Cleveland or a Detroit. Because the bulk of the people you're going to be organizing can identify with the broader agenda. And this argument held for a while, and then Jerry decided that our future lied in state service and that we were going to drift in that direction. And we argued a little bit about that. And while the national union, we had no defined entity who was responsible [00:44:00] for organizing, so if we were going to take on state government, that was clearly

going to be a national union responsibility. Whereas local government was a combined responsibility that we could do, in my opinion, from an economic point of view, much more effectively. Our political strength would grow proportionate to our ability to organize. And he listened and thought it was a great argument, and went right ahead and did what he wanted to do. (laughs) I think we probably -- we didn't differ on the issue, but differed on the timing of what we'd do about the South. And there's no ability to say who was right or wrong on that.

PM: I think this is a good time, Carolyn, to stop for today. I'd like to spend a minute with Bill, if I could, about tomorrow, [00:45:00] and see what his ideas might be on what we should --

(break in audio)

PM: This is January 11, 2002. We're continuing with the oral history interview with William Lucy. Bill, as a follow-up to yesterday, taking the period 1972 to 1981, when you became secretary-treasurer, some of the basic issues or major issues facing AFSCME, and in which you were involved and had to deal with. Let's start off with the whole issue of the Vietnam War. What impact did that have upon the union and you?

WL: I think the Vietnam War period was a time of, I guess, great inward-looking, because our union, as you all know, [00:46:00] is a fairly conservative union. I mean, it's made up of public sector workers from all over the spectrum. People who are very, very patriotic. People who are very, very committed to the goals and objectives of the nation, and certainly the nation's administration. But a large segment of our union was conflicted by the war itself. I mean, we were not convinced that, A, it was a popular war. One, it was a war where what I would call our tangible national interest was involved. And, as a result, there was a great debate taking place in the union as to whether to blindly support the administration in spite of the fact that some very good people were at the forefront of the buildup in Vietnam. I, along with others, thought it was not a war that was, A, in the best interests of the country, nor had we been [00:47:00] sufficiently informed as to all of the factors that went into our involvement. And that debate consumed a good deal of the union's energy. President Wurf was also conflicted, although quite committed to the goals of our country, quite committed to the principles of the AFL-CIO, fundamentally thought that this was not a war that didn't need a lot more debate and discussion. But secondly, and I think much more

importantly, the amount of resources that had to be committed on a build-up basis to that effort began to have its impact on public sector budgets. To the extent that federal dollars, federal programs, had to be down-funded in order to increase the military budget for that specific [00:48:00] purpose was another source of great debate. And we began to talk about what could be done if those resources were directed to domestic problems. Problems of education, of health, of housing, of jobs, of roads. It became very clear that there was a priority question that had not been resolved anywhere in this debate, and internal to our union, that issue began to resonate among the members. You know, moderates, conservatives, what have you. The impact that the war was having on domestic programs and domestic spending. And that debate went on for a number of years, and we attempted, on occasion, to see whether or not we wanted to have some process by which we could get a [00:49:00] sense of the union as to what position the union ought to take in support of or opposition to. Many of the leaders, individually, were opposed to the war, and many were supportive of the effort, but I think what triggered our real movement towards out-and-out opposition was the incursion into Cambodia and its surrounding countries. The bombing that was unleashed by

the Nixon administration. I forget what year, but in any event, I mean, just out of the blue. And there was no declared war. I mean, it was just such an outrage. I believe, in Convention, our delegates voted almost unanimously to oppose our involvement in that war. And this caused us a great deal of problems, certainly within the AFL-CIO. And I think the board and [00:50:00] President Wurf and we felt it was time that at least our voices be heard in this debate. And I think we were on the right side of history. We may have been a little bit late getting there, but eventually we made the transition, and as history has shown, the country is still not clear what the war was about, our involvement. What is clear is that the economic interest was certainly the controlling direction. Those who so actively supported our engagement and opposition to the Vietnam governments and leadership are back there now, you know, by the hundreds, doing business in an environment that they said was so morally wrong. So, I mean, it raised a number of questions. We're now 50,000 lives later, if not more, and we're [00:51:00] doing business as usual with who we said was our forever enemy. So we think our union played a positive role in allowing our membership to move to the point where it

understood what the issue was and gave us the direction to voice our position.

PM: Well, you've described the internal dispute, or the dispute within the union and the membership in trying to arrive at why they accepted policy, and allowing the membership to have a role in it. What pressures were put on you by George Meany and the AFL-CIO to take a different stand?

WL: Well, I'm sure there were discussions that took place between Mr. Meany and President Wurf, which I was not privy to, but certainly the common, I guess, strategy was isolation [00:52:00] or not having access to all that you may have been entitled to as a major affiliate. I never heard Jerry say that there was any clash of ideas between him and President Meany, but certainly his ability to take a seat on the executive council early on was a factor in this. And I think Jerry went through a great deal of thought weighing those two things. Can I do a more effective job on the council? Do I be so outwardly expressive of my views? And he went through a great deal of self-searching, and, you know, some says that he was not as actively engaged in the debate as he could have been or should have been in the interest of trying to gain a seat on the executive council. Eventually he did [00:53:00]

both things. He got the seat and, I think, was an active advocate of our union's posture while he was there.

PM: Did your position you took on Vietnam affect you in any way in terms of the growth of the union around the country?

WL: I think it probably helped us. I think in the public sector, those people who we were organizing were first of all coming to the realization that they, as public sector employees, had not and were not being dealt with fairly by the systems under which they worked. So just the idea of collective bargaining and an aggressive union was okay. And I think they respected the views that we held and expressed on major public policy questions, the Vietnam war being one of them. Nobody was surprised about what we stood for, [00:54:00] and in many cases, even if they disagreed with us on some of the policy questions, they believed that we were aggressive enough to represent their interests at the workplace and would do it equally as strong. So I think we gained a lot of credibility in those years. We were being successful in organizing campaigns like no union has ever experienced before. We were averaging probably 50, 55,000 net new members per year. And this was an exciting period of time. At the '64 elections we had, as a membership count, about 275, maybe 300,000 members nationwide. By the time we hit the

middle ’70s, we were approaching 600, 650, 700,000 members. And still growing. And I think this was [00:55:00] not only due to Jerry’s sort of aggressive pursuit of fairness for public sector workers, but he was an outspoken advocate for new ideas and new and creative approaches to issues. And I think we benefited from it.

PM: On the AFL-CIO, AFSCME was certainly one of the major unions to campaign for a special department representing public employees. A long struggle with Mr. Meany about this. Just tell us about this.

WL: Well, you know, historically, the AFL-CIO has been fairly narrow in its view as to which sectors of the workforce were important. In those days, the building trades section of the AFL-CIO had power far beyond its numbers. Its [00:56:00] philosophy permeated the organization, not arguing whether that’s good or bad, but, I mean, it was a building trades philosophy. The industrial union side, certainly as reflected in the views of Walter Reuther and others, was not in the top echelons. We held a view that was much closer to the industrial unions’ than to the building construction trades’. And the AFL did not see the public sector as a real place where growth was going to take place. As a matter of fact, in those days, it was not AFL-CIO concern as to whether growth did or did not take

place. They didn't see themselves as responsible for organizing a workforce, nor did they have the capacity to do it. So Jerry's view was that, unless we had a department whose special responsibility was to focus on the issues of public sector workers, we and the other [00:57:00] smaller unions were never going to make it in the arena of, A, public policy, and B, convincing the public sector workforce that trade unionism was the path it ought to take. So we began to argue for a public employee department, and we were kind of lone voices in that debate, because a department is a budget question first of all. The industrial unions were still fighting their battle to find their place in the sun, and the building trades had no particular interest. (laughs) But we did have a couple of good allies. Certainly, Paul Hall was an ally, and Reuther was an ally, but as I said, they had their own issues. We could not, for a number of years, get attention paid to the specific issue of the department, so we [00:58:00] formed some relationships with other groups. AFGE. We formed a relationship with the National Education Association, trying to bring large groups of public sector employees together to work on common issues. We formed something called CAPE, that was the Coalition of American Public Employees, and I believe, if I'm not mistaken, James Farmer

was its first executive director. And it began to push the issues of public employees. And I think the existence of CAPE, along with a shift in some thinking, was the impetus for the AFL-CIO beginning to look at the question of public employees. And because AFGE, the AFT, [00:59:00] and several others were active in the AFL-CIO, once we formed this thing outside, it became important that there be an alternative to it inside. And I don't recall the year, but eventually the department was chartered as a full department, but the interesting thing is that affiliation was allowed for all members of the AFL-CIO. So you could be an industrial union but still belong to the public employee department, whereas if you were not a building trades union, you could not join the building construction trades department. So one way of meeting the requests but watering down the impact was to allow non-public sector unions to participate in the policy process for public sector unions. So the principal issue that concerned us, collective bargaining rights, [01:00:00] could not be purely advocated by a department whose mission it was to work for public employees. We could not get a resolution or a policy proposed by the public employee because the non-public employees were opposed to the issue. You understand what I mean?

PM: Yes, I do.

WL: So it was complicated from the start.

PM: Well, and to add another complication, for example, when the AFT was not enthusiastic about this department but you formed an alliance with the NEA, which was outside of the AFL-CIO.

WL: Right, and I think it added great pressure to force, I believe either David Sullivan or Al Shanker, I don't recall which one was president at the time.

PM: Sullivan was president and Shanker would have been vice president then. So they both.

WL: Right. They, then, at a point, [01:01:00] joined with us and the AFGE and said, "Maybe the time has come." But as I said, they granted the request but then made membership open to all affiliates, which meant that you had just one more department that was acting like every other department, not specifically on behalf of public sector employee issues. And what was so very interesting is that we were never able to get a recommendation from that department for a federal collective bargaining law for public employees. I mean, that law came from the maritime trades department, (laughs) which is one of the great contradictions --

(break in audio)

[01:02:00]

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PM: Were there any other items relating to this establishment of the Public Employees Department? Did you, for example, have a role in the operation of that department?

WL: I was a member of the executive board and sort of a substitute member for President Wurf when it was put together. And, essentially, it was a structure that allowed for maximum affiliates to have established representation, so I was one of our representatives on the board.

PM: But you had a separate staff, then, or that department did, to operate. And you reacted and was involved with it. At this time and this decade, a very important 10 years, when you became secretary-treasurer, did you have other responsibilities within the [00:01:00] AFL-CIO and any of the other boards?

WL: I was -- because Jerry worked very closely with a number of the leaders from the other unions, I was elected as a member of the Industrial Union Department executive board

and the Maritime Trades Department, which was the seagoing unions. And there were other boards and commissions on an ad hoc basis that would be put together by the president that I would serve on at their request.

PM: Did that take much of your time or energy on those boards?

WL: Not a terrible amount. Those boards tended to meet once a month or on call, or around issues. And the office of the secretary-treasurer had a large staff component to deal with the day-to-day [00:02:00] issues of budget, of accounting, of audits and what have you. It was nothing that I had to have a direct involvement in. And our structure was such that the business manager of the union, through his office, oversaw much of the staffing responsibility that there was time for these other kinds of involvements.

PM: Well, on a personal basis, you came in from California, executive assistant to the president of the union. In 1972 you were elected to an extremely important position, secretary-treasurer. And now you're involved in another realm or area, and that's the operation of the major federation. Did that expand your own responsibilities at all, and experiences?

WL: Oh, yeah. I think one of the things that I guess you could say for that period [00:03:00] was it was a time where many

things were happening. Our union has forever had a relatively small staff for the size of the union we were, and Jerry believed very much in getting quality people who could stand the heat, and was willing to branch out in any number of areas. And, luckily, I and a lot of other folk were fortunate enough to be part of that. And so we saw these other challenges as just part of the total process. We didn't really have time to be specialists in anything. You had to be a generalist in practically everything. And we were so driven by this notion to build a strong union that we were trying to take advantage of every opportunity that presented itself. And the AFL-CIO was one more arena that we could drive the importance of [00:04:00] organizing in the public sector, specifically, and the rest of labor in general.

PM: But, on a personal basis, it also gave you an opportunity to come in contact with --

WL: Lots of other --

PM: -- key people in the labor movement --

WL: Very much so.

PM: -- and important Washington (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

WL: I think, you know, one must never forget that the right place, the right time, is the key to an awful lot. I had

the good fortune, during this timeframe, to meet the Jack Conways of the world, the Jack Beidlers, Evy Dubrow, people who were having such a tremendous impact on public policy. And by having had this prior responsibility in Legislation and Community Affairs, meeting them, having a chance to get to know them and vice versa. You always had somebody that you could go to and ask how to deal with this [00:05:00] issue, how do you advance this issue, and folks were always willing and always had the time to share their views with you. I would have never thought of meeting a Paul Hall or any of the legislative or political staff at the AFL-CIO, other than through this process. Or meeting Mr. Meany himself, or Lane Kirkland, or Tom Donahue, or any of the other folks who played such a major role in organized labor at that time.

PM: Did this organization of secretary-treasurers have any influence or impact during this period? Was it an effective group?

WL: It was effective in a technical sense, but it had no ability to affect the policy of the AFL-CIO. It was not designed for that, although some of us [00:06:00] certainly felt our views (laughs) ought to be put into the mix. And depending upon how individuals related within their own institution, it possibly did. But as an AFL-CIO

institutional committee, it had very little impact on the policies of the AFL-CIO.

PM: Another big issue facing AFSCME and the labor movement during the 1970s had to do with a political situation. In 1972, when you came in, it was the issue of the presidential campaign, a very controversial one. Can you tell me about that, your experience in that area?

WL: Well, we had spent four years under Nixon, the Nixon administration, at that point in time, and collectively, we thought these was probably the worst four years that [00:07:00] organized labor had ever had to deal with. And, certainly, we'd dealt with Republican administrations before, but none which had some of the kind of bias that the Nixon administration showed, both towards organized labor and certainly toward groups within organized labor. Nixon, among a lot of things that he did, also was sort of the mover of the so-called Southern strategy, which was really designed to polarize the South along race lines. Where states of the deep South would, almost by public policy, be moved away from its Democratic roots and the voting populace would be divided along lines. This was a big thing within the African American community. Along [00:08:00] with his other policies, that seemed to hold the greatest danger for where many of us thought politics

should be going. And this became a reality. So, in 1972, in that process, you had the Democratic party nomination campaigns between McGovern and Humphrey, and this was, you know, a real contest. One that, we didn't think there was a whole lot of rationalization had to take place. In the end, McGovern won the nomination and the AFL-CIO, through its own process, took a position of neutrality between George McGovern and Richard Nixon. And [00:09:00] we -- *we* being African American trade union leaders -- thought that this was a slam dunk. But it turned out that our four years of trying to raise the level of awareness -- not only among African American trade union leadership in our communities, but the rest of labor -- was treated with a sleight of hand. And that, in good conscience, we could not go back and debate the question. Neutrality means either is acceptable, and we certainly saw a large difference between McGovern and Nixon, both ideologically and in what have you, and we were not about to go back to people we had worked with for four years. And not on such a partisan basis, but on an issue basis. And say, "Well, we can't take a position between these two candidates." And that is, in effect, what triggered this [00:10:00] movement towards the formation of what is now the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. It wasn't so much that we were -

- at the outset, I should say, we were very much pro-McGovern, but then, as we thought about it and discussed it, (pause) it became clear that there were much broader issues than just this issue which had given us such concern. And we may not have understood all of the procedures of the AFL-CIO, but we believed that how they came to that decision certainly did not reflect the interests of minority workers within organized labor. And certainly did not take into account, by any stretch of the imaginations, their views on the subject. And we told the leadership of the [00:11:00] AFL-CIO that, and were told that the process is what the process is. And what became very clear to us is that if we couldn't affect that process on an issue like this, then there are a whole host of other issues that we've got to figure out how to deal with.

PM: Wasn't this the election that you did give some support to Muskie? (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) the --

WL: The Muskie campaign was earlier. I'm trying to think, I want to get my years straight. We gave support to Muskie, I think either Muskie dropped out --

PM: Dropped out, exactly.

WL: Yes, we were supportive of Muskie early on, and he dropped out after the situation in New Hampshire, I think it was.

PM: That's right. Because Mr. Wurf had a very difficult task in going to visit McGovern and telling him that the union was not [00:12:00] supporting him.

WL: Right. Right, this was early on. As a matter of fact, George Mitchell, who was one of Muskie's aides' names, [have to find?] that. We had signed on with Muskie early on and was trying to be quite helpful in the campaign. A tough campaign, but in the end, he withdrew, and I think our support then shifted. And Jerry was very close to Senator Muskie.

PM: Shortly after the election, we faced the whole issue of Watergate. Did the union have any role in clarifying those issues involved in that whole controversy?

WL: Not that I can recall. We were, like everybody else, sort of dumbfounded by (laughs) what was unfolding. And [00:13:00] we did not understand all of the issues surrounding Watergate. I mean, we, like a lot of other people, thought it was a low-level break-in until things started to unfold. And, at a point, it was very clear that this was bigger than that. But we never took any, to my knowledge, any active role in positioning the union as a policy thing on the question. We just, like everybody else, sort of watched it.

PM: In 1976, the issue of the campaign with Jimmy Carter occurred. What was the union's position, as you recall, on that campaign?

WL: We were slow to move towards Jimmy Carter's campaign, by and large because he was such an unknown. We didn't know him as a national figure, had no dealings with him as a governor, [00:14:00] and we were simply, like everybody else, sort of waiting to see how this thing unfolded. Ultimately, we wound up being very supportive of him, but we weren't totally clear on what President Carter stood for or what he was against, you know? He was an alternative to Nixon, but we didn't know what the implications of that meant for us as a public sector union or for us as organized labor. Because, I mean, from the governor of Georgia, you know, there ain't a whole lot of labor activities that go on. But clearly, as a visionary, he certainly held better views for us than Richard Nixon. We'd had, by then, eight years of sort of looking at him, or at least years of Nixon and then of the vice president who replaced [00:15:00] him. So we were ready for a change. And we were trying to be quite supportive and, luckily, succeeded. And I think, for us as a union, there were some great victories, but there also were some rather large disappointments with the Carter administration. The

whole question of the beginning of the downsizing of the public sector in areas which were critically important, the whole issue, as we call it, of deinstitutionalization, of privatization, of major public entities, really started with the Carter administration. The whole question of the phasing-down and phasing-out of mental health institutions as large institutions. The whole question of whether or not people really should be -- began to be [00:16:00] placed back into community settings for treatment when those communities had very little capacity to provide that treatment. I think a good deal of the jumpstarting of our homeless situation flowed from some of those policies.

PM: When Carter was president, did you have access to the White House?

WL: Mm-hmm, yes. Yes, we had any number of meetings at the White House with White House staff, and, in several occasions, with the President himself.

PM: During this period, also, between ’72 and ’81, there were some internal, if not problems, certainly developments within the union that posed some challenges, namely -- what do you call them? Staff firings, or people who left the union. [00:17:00] As I recall, for example, I heard one phrase by one of your key staff members that AFSCME had become the revolving door of the labor movement. Now,

whether that was accurate or not, Bill -- but there were these changes, and it affected or involved the president of the union. What impact did this have upon AFSCME?

WL: I think it had a tremendous impact because these were not low-level people. I mean, these were folks who had a key role. I'm not sure it slowed down our drive for organizing so much as it impacted our administrative mechanism. We've always been an autonomous organization, where our subordinate bodies have had great latitude in the areas [00:18:00] of their work, and our organizing drives were always combined efforts. But at headquarters, I mean, where you had people who were -- I don't want to use the word *constantly* changing, but certainly frequently changing responsibilities, it posed some problems in coordination of activities and administration of staff. In particular, those who had field staff responsibilities. We had Tom Morgan, Al Bilik, Bob Hastings, and a number of department heads that, some were going, some were being realigned. And it certainly had an impact on morale. But you have to keep in mind, our structure was what I would call a fairly compressed structure. There were not a whole lot of places to move to towards the top. And so many of the people that Jerry hired were creative, [00:19:00] bright people who enjoyed a challenge and were accustomed to having one. And

these were folks where policy differences sort of reflected itself in strong debates, and Wurf was the one who held very strong views, and if you weren't able to deal with, you had two choices to make, to stay it or go.

PM: This came in in one of the more significant disputes involving Joe Ames. What was the background of that?

WL: Well, Joe, like Hastings and some of the others, were a part of the original planning group who thought about what the union ought to be and how it ought to go about being that. And while I'm not sure about what the [00:20:00] principal issue was, it began to be very clear that Joe and Jerry and others had very different ideas about how the union ought to be going, and the direction it ought to be going in, and the type of people who ought to be leading it. And I can't hazard a guess of how all this started, but it certainly became clear that it was there. And at this time, Joe was head of the judicial panel and a position of great importance in the union. I think Jerry was becoming not only concerned about the frequency of these differences of opinion, but what would that mean if there was a serious confrontation with a Joe Ames, a judicial panel chairperson, et cetera, et cetera. The panel person had a -- it was an appointed term and a fixed term [00:21:00] that overlapped the term of the president,

so the question of who has the political influence over this job, and particularly if it's a job where there's contention. And I think Jerry was becoming, and I think unduly, concerned about that. And so differences of opinion took on broader meaning. And then there were others who began to take sides in these debates, and it didn't matter whether it was a large issue or a small issue. If there was a disagreement, you know, folks wound up being for one side or the other. And I think it got pretty intense, up to the point where Jerry took steps to remove Joe from his position, which was a mistake [00:22:00] then, and I voiced my opinion that it was a mistake. Just based on what the constitution said, no philosophical thing. But he proceeded anyhow, and later on, the courts ruled in Joe's favor that that had been a wrong action. But the conflict and confrontation surrounding that, you know, left a scar on the union.

PM: What impact did it have upon you? You were a major officer, you knew these people personally, you knew them professionally, you'd worked with them on projects. How did that --

WL: I think it was distressing for me, personally, because they were friends. Both had been enormously generous in my career development and direction. But, in the end, this

was a fact situation. You know, either the facts support the direction you're going to go or they don't. [00:23:00] And I thought it would have an impact on the union, and while I didn't take a public side, I certainly shared both my view with the president and with Joe that, A, for the good of the institution, you've got to find a way to bridge that. But said to Jerry that the direct action to remove Joe Ames was a mistake.

PM: This dispute with Joe Ames was a forerunner to another dispute that came a few years later with Victor Gotbaum. I think it was the election coming up in 1980 or --.

WL: Eighty, yeah, thereabouts.

PM: From the union point of view, how did this come about or what impact did that have?

WL: I think it had more of an impact on a very small number of people than it did on the union as a whole. [00:24:00] Joe and Vic were very close. As a matter of fact, all three were very close for such a long, long time. Victor's ambition overshadowed, I think, his good judgement. He was convinced that Jerry was out of step with the membership, that he had lost the ability to inspire the confidence of the membership, neither of which I thought was true. But there was a real effort being made to at least send a signal of an effort to unseat Jerry. Nobody with an iota

of understanding of the union gave any credence to that, so the real disturbance was among a very small number of people. Even those who may have [00:25:00] believed that Jerry had lost a step or two didn't see that as a rationale for changing leadership, they saw it as a need to have more and more discussions about the union and a new and different mission than a replacement of leadership. And many of us told Jerry this. We have had, forever, a process in the union where the top leadership really had ongoing conversations with first- and second-level leadership about a whole range of issues to get a sense of how they thought we were doing on agreed agendas. I mean, our conventions are not just about willy-nilly passing resolutions, but really moving towards policy questions that affected our union top to bottom. So how are we doing? You know, are we, in your opinion, going in the right [00:26:00] direction? Should we be doing more of A and less of B? But tell us what you think about that. And we were moving some rather large issues during this period of time that had the real need to have support of our vice presidents and council directors and council leadership. And we had never lost any of these issues, which is certainly an indication that people are supportive of the directions. But Jerry, for reasons best known to himself,

just had the feeling that people were losing confidence in him, and Victor was the one who would inherit this loss of confidence in him. And I've got to say, I, along with other people, said, "That just is not the case."

PM: Now, Jerry's health was declining rapidly during this period.

WL: I think, Phil, some of this activity contributed to [00:27:00] his declining health. I mean, the ongoing stress -- I mean, he was a very intense person. And just the thought that the leadership of the union was losing confidence in his leadership was enough to distress, I think, a guy like him to no end. But his health was declining, and coming into 1981, I guess it was, his health was not good at all. But, you know, he was still trying to steer the ship.

PM: Were you aware, during your close contact with him, about these health declines, with emphysema --

WL: Well, he had had emphysema as long as I'd known him.

PM: Right.

WL: I was not aware totally of the other issues of his -- well, depending upon what time, I was aware at any time that [00:28:00] he had developed the shingle problem. But I was not clear on what kind of impact that that was having on his ability to sort of think through stuff.

PM: Right. In 1981, the fall of that year, he was hospitalized and died early in December. Go back to that period and describe what happened as a result of that.

WL: Well, if you recall, the AFL-CIO convention occurred -- it must have been September, October, just before that, and then we had the big Solidarity one demonstration in New York City. Rather, in Washington, DC. The convention was in New York City. And while he was [00:29:00] hospitalized, he was still in the process of making plans for both of those activities for the Solidarity Day one. He committed the staff in our union to a major part of that Solidarity Day rally, and in fact we were the largest affiliate participating. I believe we had something like 58, 60,000 people there. And it's really all because of his commitment to demonstrating that the American labor movement is alive and well. At the convention, AFL-CIO, that preceded that, he had been in touch with Lane and others about our union's view and role on a number of issues. I was asked to head our delegation to the AFL-CIO convention in his [00:30:00] absence, and did so and did the best we could with what we were confronted with. But he was very much a part of the planning for our activities for the latter part of 1981. And unfortunately it just sort of went downhill for him from there, and when he

passed, in spite of the fact that we knew he was ill, it just caught everybody, not only by surprise, but terribly off-guard. We'd never had a situation like this in the union before, and while the constitution had some provisions, nobody had ever had to implement them, so we weren't quite sure how to handle this transition. And at that time, under our constitution, the responsibilities for leadership of the organization fell to the secretary-treasurer, not only to carry on our policy business [00:31:00] while we arrange the transition, but to create a process by which the next president would be selected. And unlike a lot of other unions that have [a lapid?] processes, all we had was a process that spoke to the executive board's responsibility to fill this position.

PM: From a personal perspective, many felt that you should have been one of the candidates. How did you make that decision?

WL: Well, I mean, the decision was pretty much -- (laughs)

PM: Not decision. React to that.

WL: I was convinced that, one, I had to be a candidate. If you asked me in the confines of my own mind whether or not I thought I was [00:32:00] somebody who would step into Jerry Wurf's shoes, I was quite clear on that. But I didn't have a whole lot of options as to what to do about it. I was a

willing candidate in what, essentially, was a three-candidate race, initially. And I was not quite sure, although I probably should have been, as to what all of the complications would be, running for president of a major affiliate at that time, where the vote was going to take place by a board as opposed to by a convention or a delegated body. And because it was a three-way contest at the outset, you just couldn't envision certain [00:33:00] things. The initial contest involved Victor Gotbaum, who had sort of been the early-on, at least in Jerry's mind, threat for his presidency; Jerry McEntee, from Pennsylvania; and myself. And the assumption would be that Victor Gotbaum would start with at least 125,000 votes of DC 37 and its affiliates, which was an assumption. That Jerry McEntee would start with, certainly, the support of Pennsylvania. And people scrambled for the rest. As it turned out, certainty of Jerry's illness had spurred people to start organizing long before his demise. So, in that contest, [00:34:00] we were left with a decision as to how do we start to work on this? And my decision was that we talk to local leadership about them talking to their vice presidents, and as a result, we started with the smallest slice of the pie, so to speak. And some very good people stepped up to help out in this process. Father Blatz, who

was one of those, who says that, you know, as far as he thinks everybody is good people, he would cast his lot with my candidacy and we'd see what we could do. So I was very appreciative of that. And he brought others, and it was not a campaign of animosity, it was a campaign of folks saying, "Here's what I think we ought to be doing." In the end, [00:35:00] Victor got Victor, and that was about the size of that. The rest of the campaign was about between Jerry McEntee and myself, you know, for the hearts and minds of other members of the board. And I think it was a contest that involved folks putting their best ideas forward. We had just brought into membership a brand-new affiliate in upstate New York, CSEA, with 225 or 30,000 [*sic*] members. As I grew to understand, the election was decided by a very small, narrow, very small number of votes between us, but I think the fact that it was a healthy campaign was good for the institution overall. I've been asked in some past interviews, and maybe I'm getting ahead of your question, did I think I lost because I was Black? Which, the answer could be yes and [00:36:00] no. I think I got a good deal of support because of that, I probably lost some because of that, but in the end, I think those people who made the ultimate decision made so on the basis of what they thought was in their best interest. And

that's an issue you can't quarrel with, because every election has its plus and minuses. And I guess time would be the better judge. I think we've done incredibly well as a union with the leadership team we've had. I think the union has been stronger as a result of the contest itself. But it was an experience that, you know, would argue that one be very mindful of the process (laughs) as you get involved. But I don't regret it.

PM: How was the process decided? How was the election done?

WL: I think it was [00:37:00] AAA ran the election, and it was by vote of legislative district. Each member of the executive board voted their per capita within their respective districts, and in the case of the filling of an elected office, the surviving officer has an allocated number of votes to start with. I forget what the number is, but something equal to either one half or equal to the highest number within the legislative districts. And I think the difference would up being fifteen to twenty thousand vote difference between McEntee and myself in the end.

PM: He got Pennsylvania.

WL: That would be my guess.

PM: Did you get California, or --

WL: Nope.

PM: -- based upon your (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)?

WL: I did not have California, did not have Michigan, did not have New [00:38:00] York, did not have Pennsylvania, did not have Hawaii. So when I say we scrambled for the small stuff, (laughs) I think that we were able to make a case with representatives that came from moderate-sized districts and small districts. And that, combined with the original allocation as an officer, was what brought us close. We could have had any single local union go a different way than they did and we would have had a different outcome. I don't believe, because of the way that vice presidents vote, we lost New York because Victor voted for McEntee. We lost Hawaii because the fellow said, "I believe that one who has [00:39:00] council director experience would serve us better in this particular time." Which was a fair, you know, a fair assessment, notwithstanding the fact that, I mean, all of us had council director experience, [there's just a?] different time frame. But there were locals in New York, had they been able and allowed to vote their own vote, would have voted differently than Victor voted. There were locals in Michigan, had they had the ability to cast their own votes, would have voted different than Bob -- I've forgotten Bob's last name now. And certainly in California, which was home

state, had the locals been able to vote, they would have voted differently than certain vice president voted.

PM: In the election of 1964, very acrimoniously, [00:40:00] there was no coming back between those two courses. Between Zander and Wurf. But in this case, you seem to have very effectively carried on in a leadership position as secretary-treasurer. Was this a difficult challenge for you?

WL: I -- well, yes and no. I came to work for the union because of a set of issues and principles that I believed very strongly and was not for the purpose of career advancement, so I saw the loss of the election as a disappointment in the sense that you would not be carrying on that same agenda from another position. It wasn't about a bigger title and a better paycheck, I mean, it was that. So I didn't see the loss as diminishing your ability to carry on that [00:41:00] agenda. And so didn't quite see it as a rejection of anything that I stood for. I think it affected the way other people saw the election, both his staff and him. And I don't say that as a negative, but they had not been in the environment, the Washington environment, the headquarters environment, et cetera -- as long. And it was much more of an ego challenge, it was much more of a personal challenge than it was for me. And

so, from a staff point of view, it produced some difficulties. For some of them, it was an us and them mentality, [00:42:00] which is fairly typical of most president-secretary-treasurer relationships. We had never had that with Wurf. It was always a combined approach to the administration of the union.

PM: As far as the constitution, the operation of AFSCME, the roles of the two positions, president, secretary-treasurer, clearly defined. So you have the backing of the constitution behind what you were doing. Now, going to other areas -- why don't we take a break here? It's 10:30, Carolyn. And we'll get some tea and then continue in another area.

CAROLYN: Okay.

(break in audio)

PM: Let's get into one of the areas of interest that you've been concerned about [00:43:00] in the leadership end during your whole career, and that's the civil rights movement in the United States, and indeed in broad areas internationally. Let's start from your involvement with AFSCME and your role in these, your interest in these areas. [Can you give us?] a general view of some of the main areas that you have an interest in?

WL: Well, one of the things that always struck me was that, civil rights as we defined it, I always sort of merged civil rights and worker's rights as almost one and the same. And either one flowed out of the other or vice versa. So part of what certainly motivated me in my early conversation with both Al Bilik and President Wurf was, how do what we do as a union reflect and advocate on behalf of these other issues? [00:44:00] Not so much on the question of just race and discrimination, because that's certainly a part of the whole complex, but what will the union's role be as we attack these broad social policy questions? And clearly they believed then as we believe now that the union has a central role to play, not just in the workday life of our members, but in those other hours that they're exposed to society as a whole. And that it is a natural role for us to be supportive of minimum wages, supportive of fair housing, of decent education, of all of these issues. Because those people who suffer race discrimination or ethnic discrimination or gender discrimination, it is in these areas [00:45:00] that those issues have the greatest impact and that we as an institution ought to be advocates on behalf of the right policies. So I thought that was a very, I thought, enlightened view that came down certainly very close to my own, and it was for that reason that I

thought, you know, working on a national scene, whatever changes you made would have a very far-reaching impact on people who were subject to different kinds of discrimination. So I saw these as one and the same. And, as a result, I believe that the right to organize is an interesting right. If history is to be judged as accurate and workers receive better wages, better benefits, and, as a result, have a better lifestyle for themselves and their families, if the right to organize is taken away or denied, [00:46:00] then that is a violation of one's civil rights. Because if they are tied together, one worker can organize, another worker cannot, then the one who cannot, by virtue of the employer's action or the absence of public policy, his or her civil rights are being denied. So this is one large ball of yarn. And I believe that a union, if it's doing its job, will advocate for the rights of all workers to have access to the right to organize and bargain with their employers. And so it was sort of a natural fit for me, and this not only was able to be consistent in domestic terms, it was able to be consistent in international terms. A worker in Brazil who is denied the opportunity to organize and bargain collectively [00:47:00] is just as bad off as a worker anywhere else across the globe. And if you look at what it is that makes modern industrial societies

better off, by and large it's because of the existence of trade unions to work on behalf of some segment of the workforce. So, I mean, this was, for me, as I say, a natural fit. And I came aboard with those kinds of things in mind. And Jerry was, I think, clear enough in his own thinking that the kinds of issues that we approached and attacked were consistent with those kinds of principles. And, to this day, I hold the same beliefs, and I think any union that's worth its right to be called a union will advocate issues on that basis. And, you know, to varying degrees. But that was my premise. [00:48:00] So my civil rights activity was tied to what I believe is a sound program for a union, and whether it was in our county on fair housing issues, on public assistance issues and policies, it flowed from that premise. And whether it was our relating to the farmworkers and their right to organize, or for workers in the deep South to fight for the right to vote, all of these were, in my opinion, a consistent set of principles that flowed out of a sort of a trade union perception.

PM: Now, some unions, union leaders -- I can think of specifically two that I've dealt with, Walter Reuther and Leonard Woodcock -- spoke eloquently about the difficulty, sometimes, of having the leadership of the unions take

positions that weren't consistent with the broad membership. [00:49:00] Issues that went out beyond collective bargaining issues, salary, compensation, the like. Did you have to face that in AFSCME in taking some of these positions that brought social areas to your membership?

WL: Well, I've -- yes. And I think I've probably benefited from how I approached these issues. Clearly, no matter what you say, you're going to differ with some segment of your membership. But if your union is sort of worth its salt, while clearly the polls and consensus-seeking is important, you also have the obligation to lead. And if you're fundamentally right in your belief, then you ought to try and convince that segment that has apprehensions [00:50:00] that this is the right thing to do. And not just by fiat, but by engaging them in the discussion. Many of the issues that we've taken on -- gender equity -- did not meet with universal approval, but it was the right thing to do. Many of the questions that revolve around seniority and the use of it and how people who have been systematically excluded from the workforce or from promotional opportunities, how they get access is not an issue you're going to find universal approval of, whatever process you use. But I think if you're saying to people

that, here is the issue, here is the fact situation, here are the wrongs or the rights of this system. And we've got to change the system. Now, how do you think we ought to do it? If folks first believe or conclude that it *is* wrong, that it produces a wrong result, [00:51:00] then whatever answer that comes out, it cannot be, "Do nothing." It's got to be, "Do something." And I think that's the approach that we've taken. We have long supported, as I say, you know, pay equity. Or we've long supported gender equality. We've long and very vociferously been opposed to any forms of discrimination within the workforce and general society. We've long held the view that workers, no matter who, have the right to organize and bargain collectively. So we just had to face those difficulties as they've come up. And as I said at the outset, ours was a very conservative union, but they believed in the vision that Jerry Wurf laid out there many years ago that we've tried to continue to push. And [00:52:00] myself, personally, I've probably been wrong as much as (laughs) I've been right, but I've tried to be consistent. And some members of different classifications, different professions, will write to us from time to time and say, "I read this that you said, and I disagree with it for this reason." And I'll write them back and say, "Well, perhaps we ought to talk about it, and if we still

disagree, we've got an upcoming convention, and this issue ought to maybe be put into the mix for debate and discussion." We've had to debate about gun control and we've had all of that, and we have tried to be as consistent as we could, recognizing our ability to be wrong. And, at the same time, ours is a very open union. One where it's not a union, shop union, so people hold different [00:53:00] views. I think I personally, and we as an institution, have enjoyed long-running support of our membership. Our members are not afraid to turn anybody out of office (laugh) if they believe you've gone too far. But I have never put my finger in the wind and tried to figure out whether or not this is going to be an acceptable position if it's right.

PM: Of these issues that you've just mentioned, are there any more contentious than others in terms of the membership?

WL: Oh, I think the issue of guns is probably one of the more contentious issues we've got to confront or have had to confront, mainly because folks feel so strongly about it, and second, because there's just so much misinformation around any institution's position on it. I mean, we've never argued that [00:54:00] people should not have the right to bear arms, I mean, that's never been a position we've held. But when that debate starts, those who feel so

strongly about it, I mean, the environment is just poisoned, not by fact, but by fiction. And I've tried to be very clear on what I thought about it, and it's accepted by a large slice of the membership, it's disagreed by a large slice of the membership. But it's not an issue we can walk away from.

PM: Now, because of these issues and your role in them, and your position as one of the leading unionists in the country, how does your position involve you into other related movements outside of the AFSCME where there're national [00:55:00] organizations and the like that wanted your help and that you became involved with?

WL: Well, you know, our union has always held a philosophy that we are part of a global movement of workers in general, and public sector workers in particular. And we felt a kinship with those organizations who were trying to promote worldwide public sector trade unionism, and particularly through the organization called Public Service International. Jerry Wurf was a firm believer that we had to be of assistance to developing unions in other nations, and the underdeveloped nations in particular. But the ability for the underdeveloped to grow was premised on the recognition that developed countries, industrial countries, would carry out their mandate under the [00:56:00] ILO

charter and the other trade secretaries to assist those unions. I believe now, as I have for some time, that, absent a public policy process that dictates how workers share in the benefits to society, the only other process is trade unionism and the ability of the unions to deal with employers irrespective of private or public sector. And out of that will flow better benefits, better wages, et cetera. So Jerry believed very strongly in that, and going back to a year you asked about, 1967, he asked if I would take on the responsibility, along with himself, of representing our union on this global body, Public Services International. And if I could just take a moment and talk about that institution. It is the [00:57:00] public sector trade secretariat of the ICFTU under the ILO structure. And it came out of the UN process trying to find ways and means of binding nations together to prevent a World War III, and the theory being that if trade unions were a strong partner in developing nations, that there would be such interdependency that there would not need to be more world conflict. So Wurf took that theory serious, and we became an active and engaged part of PSI many, many years ago. My first engagement was in 1967, where, on his behalf, I began meeting with and representing us [00:58:00] in that environment. Again, as I said before, one of these

right time, right place situations, and we got a chance to see what other countries were doing and how it was being done through their public sector trade unions. And as such, many of the issues we were confronted with here at home existed twofold in developing nations. Whether that was Latin and Central America, whether Africa, Middle East, many of the problems existed because there was no viable trade union movement to advocate on behalf of public sector workers or workers in general. And Jerry thought that we had a role to play here, and we did. And to this day still do. So I became both allied with and knowledgeable about other [00:59:00] groups through that process, by and large. We also had access to a number of non-governmental organizations that were working on behalf of certain issues in certain countries, and I think through Jerry's leadership and certainly our advocacy on his behalf, we became recognized globally as sort of a leading advocate of what we call sound trade unionism and sound trade union policies. So I, from '67 through now, have been a participant on sort of that global stage of trade unions. In 196-- well, I guess in the early '70s, was elected to represent our union as a titular member of the executive [01:00:00] committee of Public Services International. And has remained in one role or another, and that's since the

early ’70s. And currently serve as president of PSI, which is, in terms of raw numbers, we have a membership of about 20 million folks worldwide, and I guess in 147, 150 countries of the world. Clearly the major G7, G8 countries we have active participation from, and virtually all of the developing nations, with the exception of the People’s Republic of China and places formerly under the Soviet banner, although we do have a growing membership in Central and Eastern Europe. And [01:01:00] we are trying to do now what we tried to do then, that is expand the role of trade unionism, and public sector trade unionism in particular.

PM: What does your role as president involve? A certain number of meetings a year? Do you have a staff assigned? Are you located in Washington? Tell me about that part.

WL: PSI is a global organization. We’re headquartered -- actually, we work out of Geneva, but our headquarters is just across the French border in a little town called Ferney-Voltaire. We have about, oh, 60 staff people around the world.

(break in audio) [01:02:00]

END OF AUDIO FILE

WL: (laughs)

M1: I've known her, I should say.

C: Okay. [Go ahead?]

PM: [Go ahead?]. You're talking about the Free Trade Act, and how has that had an impact upon what PSI [does?]?

WL: Well, the whole issue of global trade is so radically different than anything we've had to deal with in the past. Trading rules are part of trade agreements. Trade agreements almost universally do not recognize labor rights as a part of that process. Under the new -- I guess GATT rules, whether new or old, we've got the emergence of the World Trade Organization as a key part of this whole trade process with no role for labor or labor [00:01:00] entities in that process. And, as a result, much of the program is focused on just economic benefits for somebody. Trading partners as nations or entities within nations, the economic community in industries that rely on trade relationships and trade policies, but nowhere in those policies are there provisions that guarantee a worker voice as these arrangements are made. And, as we know, the world is sort of dividing up into trade areas. Whether it's the European Union or North America in the context of the North American Free Trade Agreement, or the Southeast trading

union under CETA, I mean, all the areas of the world are becoming trading areas. And none of them tend to recognize the rights of labor [00:02:00] and the rights of workers in that process. So our argument is that, in this reality, our state, our nation, must advocate for workers' rights as a part of these trade agreements. They must try to provide for what we call core labor standards. What agreements we sign with other nations ought to include the right to organize and the right to bargain collectively for workers, the right not to compete with child labor or prison labor, and the ability to be free from discrimination as a part of that policy, which we think are kind of fundamental. And if we are not globally consistent with that thrust, workers, as has been the case up to now, have lost out in this sort of race for profits [00:03:00] and race to the bottom. I mean, where can productive capacity go to get the cheapest labor? And we have seen country after country sort of go economically belly-up as a result of this process. The trading principles and guidelines tend to provide great protection for capital to go anywhere in the world it wants in search of free labor, but no protection for the workers in the particular country that it wants to locate in. And that is a whole new phenomenon. In addition, the international financial institutions that

underpin these efforts -- the IMF, the World Bank, the regional development banks -- they themselves have no commitment to core labor standards. So their investment activities, [00:04:00] their financing activities, are by and large focused on capital as opposed to labor. And so we see at least a part of our job is to raise the level of awareness of the institutions, but also raise the capacity of the unions in those countries to speak on behalf of themselves in this process.

PM: Now, is there unanimous support within your members of PSI for this position on [free trade unions?]?

WL: Oh, yes. Yes.

PM: This is an aside. In your responsibility as president, have you had an opportunity to visit the various areas represented, different countries represented?

WL: In the however many years it's been, I've, as a spokesperson with or on behalf of PSI, visited virtually every country in the world at one time or another. And certainly all of the major industrial countries. [00:05:00] And we've visited both with the unions and many times with the government. We've been to the People's Republic of China, the Soviet Union, all throughout Africa, throughout Asia, Southeast Asia, Latin and Central America. It's been a sort of interesting -- I think, and rewarding -

- role. And in the context of the role, my job as president is really to be one of the spokespersons for the organization and to interpret its policies and its programs to governments who are part of the ILO and ICFTU process.

PM: How often do you get to the headquarters in France?

WL: We meet -- well, we just changed the constitution. We, at one point, met quarterly in Geneva. [00:06:00] And with a series of regional meetings around the globe. One -- I should say each region will meet once per year. My role in those meetings are selective on which region, dependent upon what the issues are. In the region of the Americas, we probably meet twice a year on average and deal with issues common to the countries in this region. We have an African region, a European region, an Asian region, and there's a great deal of activity taking place.

PM: Do you have a staff in Washington?

WL: Yes, we have a regional office for the Americas located in Washington, DC, with a regional secretary and a small staff that's there. And the regional office, by and large, has a training and coordinating [00:07:00] responsibility among the affiliates in that particular region.

PM: Does that take much of your time, the responsibility of PSI?

WL: Not a whole lot. We have a full-time general secretary with about five deputies that do the global work. We have a global staff located at headquarters out of Geneva. And then the regional offices have staff size-wise based on the amount of activity in the region. Then we have subregions, where the local leadership from the various countries have a staff support system. They coordinate the work within that subregion. We'd have a subregion made up of Argentina, Brazil, Panama, Honduras, [00:08:00] Guatemala, and, I mean, it's a structure that's evolving, but one that serves, I think, our program well.

PM: Is the activities and what's going on in South Africa of particular importance here? Tell me more about your role in that area.

WL: Well, South Africa now and in the past has been critically important to us. I mean, aside from the horrors of apartheid, South Africa as a global economic entity is important. We played a role, along with many other organizations in the liberation struggle in South Africa. I personally worked with the Free South Africa movement, as it was called, to really attack the moral question of apartheid. But going along with this other definition that I gave you earlier, apartheid as a system [00:09:00] was bad, but it was a marvelous worker and labor control

system. It essentially put workers where they needed to be for the industries that needed workers, and at the same time, denied those workers any semblance of life in a civil society. So we saw this as a worker issue and attacked it on that basis. We helped those members of trade unions there who wanted to come here, or anyplace else, and learn some of the principles of trade unionism and how it could be useful in the liberation effort. Right now, the economic engine of South Africa is sort of sputtering, by and large because such an effective job was done during the [00:10:00] liberation struggle of disinvestment of corporate misbehavior, that South Africa now is not the great place for great profits that it once was. And those who were invested before have moved their money to greater profit centers where they had and have less problems with labor than they have in South Africa. South Africa has a very strong trade union movement and fights very hard on behalf of workers, so capital just took off and has not returned. As a result, the country's in a difficult transition period.

PM: Are there other areas, other than South Africa -- the Middle East, for example, or Central America -- that have taken a lot of your attention, or that PSI has given attention?

WL: We have done a good deal of work -- let me start in this hemisphere first -- in Argentina and Brazil [00:11:00] and Central America, trying to deal with governments, first of all, that had real difficulty being supportive of trade union as institutions. But trying to work with trade union leadership there to prepare them for, A, this global trade situation, but also to pursue their basic rights to organize. And we spend a good deal of time in this hemisphere. The issues of the Middle East are a little bit different than just pure right to organize, right to bargain collectively. Aside from the Arab-Israeli problem, what you've got are nations that fundamentally are opposed to worker organizations. Israel that winds up being probably the only nation in that region that [00:12:00] has a long trade union history. The rest of their neighbors, whether it's Iraq, Iran, you know, they are fundamentally opposed to trade unions. Saudi Arabia. You know, I mean, the whole thing. So our job is a little bit different there. And, you know, progress is slow and progress is difficult, but we have a lot of willing labor leaders trying to work in that situation. Whether it's Egypt, Sudan, the African countries of Uganda and what have you, these are tough places for trade unions to organize.

PM: What about Mexico? How is that?

WL: Mexico, we've had -- I mean, we've been up and down in Mexico. For a long time we had it as an affiliate, the major trade union public [00:13:00] sector in Mexico. For short it's called FSTSE, but it's the Federation of State Employees. We don't have them as an affiliate now, by and large because of the internal political situation in Mexico itself, but we have worked with them for eight, 10 years or more. And we're waiting for another opportunity to go back into Mexico because Mexico is so critically important to this hemisphere. You can't -- at least in our belief, in mine -- have a strong trade union movement here that excludes Mexico. I mean, so much of the trade relationships, certainly productive capacity, locates in Mexico because of either the friendship of the Mexican government or its willingness to look the other way as these factories and industries develop along its borders. And we won't be able to improve the quality of life for Mexican workers until we can get a [00:14:00] situation where Mexican unions are able to effectively represent themselves, and so we've got a lot of work to do.

PM: Now, there are other national labor institutions. There are things like the metal trades and others. Do you coordinate your work with them? Are you involved with them?

WL: Yes. Yeah, we meet under the umbrella of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, the ICFTU, and all of these federations are doing essentially the same kinds of things that we're doing within their respective sectors. There are coordinated activities, there are specific programs that we work jointly on. The ICFTU meets about twice a year. It's headquartered in Brussels. But we're collectively, and I think for the first time, and I think this is a tribute to the leadership of John Sweeney -- for the first time, looking at the world through one set of lens. Where in past years [00:15:00] your, maybe, focus was just on the specific problems of the public sector, the specific problem of the metal trades or what they have institutions called [theater?], which is the retail and clerical sections. We're now trying to work on the simple principle of core labor standards, which are common to all of the trade secretariats, and I think that's an important issue to focus on. And, equally important, we're taking a look at whether or not that structure is adequate for the year 2000 and beyond. The new millennium has produced a whole set of new problems that current trade unions were not structured to confront. We've never had to deal with global capitalism. We've never had to deal with capital that can move from one place with the [00:16:00] push of a

button. We've never had to deal with governments who were disrespectful of trade union rights from the industrial nations. So these are new issues that we're trying to sort out and see whether or not there's a need to restructure the global trade union mechanism to meet these new challenges.

PM: In recent months, we've seen, especially here in the Detroit area, another issue that's come up, and it's called, often, in the press, profiling. Especially among Arab Americans. Now, has that issue surfaced yet before PSI or your own activities within the union?

WL: Well, I mean, profiling has been with us for a long time. It was pretty much the exclusive preserve of African Americans until -- (laughs)

PM: That's [what I?] (inaudible).

WL: -- until here lately. We have [00:17:00] experienced a form of profiling in virtually every country where ethnicity becomes a question, and particularly where the economy takes strange turns. We see it along racial lines here in our country. From a Black perspective, it's always related to suspicions of crime and what have you, but in other countries where migration of workers is a major phenomenon -- not judging whether it's good or bad -- but when the economy turns sour, migrant workers pay a

tremendous price. And these are countries who had fairly liberal policies. In the past, you've had the issue of Spanish workers in France, you've had the issue of Middle Eastern workers in many of the countries – [West?] Germany, Great Britain which has an immigration policy that brought Caribbeans. [00:18:00] So you've had a lot of that, and each time the economy dips, you see a tax assault, isolation, et cetera. Sometimes by citizens, sometimes by government-sponsored policies focused on these individuals. We consider that a form of profiling, and not in the context of US profiling, but certainly as a unique phenomenon of those countries. And it tends to be getting worse. I mean, we saw cases in Scandinavia, Nordic countries, which had been, for years, held up as examples of diverse nations, beginning to see signs of fascist or skinhead or neo-Nazi activity. So it's an issue with us, but it's pretty much left to the individual affiliates [00:19:00] to be a voice in their own respective countries.

PM: Profiling, perhaps, wasn't the proper term that I had in mind. I meant in terms of worker rights among groups like Arab Americans, not because of the ethnic background, because of the September 11 crisis and that. Now, do you have, in AFSCME, many members from the Middle East or the Arab countries, for example?

WL: We've got a number of members, I'd hate to put a number on it, but my guess would be somewhere in the one to two percent area. And concentrated in certain areas of the country. New York, a good deal of Middle East-origin members. Here in the state of Michigan and possibly in Illinois. But we don't have a large, large number, no.

PM: [00:20:00] Going back to something I was going to cover earlier that might -- in the 1970s, when you became secretary-treasurer, did you have much to do with the United Farm Workers as a group within the labor movement?

WL: Going back to my early days in Contra Costa County, our local union, as I said earlier, I mean, the people who stayed with us were not surprised by the kinds of things that we thought were important. We had a relationship with even the origins of the farm workers' union, at the time when Cesar Chavez and Larry Itliong and Dolores Huerta came together to form the Farm Workers' Labor Organizing Committee, I think called FLOC. At that time it was a combination of the Mexican workers and Filipino workers.

PM: Filipino workers, [00:21:00] yeah.

WL: And then, as a part of our unique process, we were able to divide them up so that at least one farm worker group had to compete with the other. But we endorsed their efforts to organize early on and supported that effort to this day.

We make a monthly subsidy to the farmworkers because we think that is some of the toughest organizing that there is to do. Their leadership, Cesar, Dolores, and even Arturo Rodriguez, to this day, have been tremendous leaders of a movement, which is something that was written off by other unions. But no, we have been very supportive of them and all of their efforts, whether it's been boycotts or whatever we've been asked to do. [00:22:00]

PM: That's probably -- was more appropriate in the earlier period, too, but I didn't want to overlook that.

C: Can you stop now?

PM: So I think it's an appropriate time to take a break now, because you're going to lunch.

C: And you may want to go upstairs and make a call or something?

WL: Oh, I can use this phone right here.

(break in audio)

PM: We were talking earlier, Bill, about CBTU, and last summer we did the earlier discussion with you. Are there programs, projects for that organization, that you'd care to talk about to supplement what we reviewed last time?

WL: I think what we're doing now is continuing the approach we took from last year. I haven't seen the benefits of it. By that I mean we've started a more concentrated effort to

organize new members [00:23:00] into CBTU on the theory that it gives us more people to really engage in our community-based projects. We started, last year, a program of what we call town hall meetings, and these were issue forums, issue sessions, really designed to give people a clear understanding of their stake in the electoral process, whether it be city elections or county elections or regional or national. So they understood what the issues were and how those issues impacted on them. And the effort was to create -- or build on, I should say -- the voter participation levels in cities where we had chapters. We believe, and I think it's consistent with other folks, really the answer to a lot of our problems is increased political participation around issues [00:24:00] important to us as workers and important to us as citizens. And we tend not to engage and to debate around certain issues, we just simply, at election day, we go vote. It's much more personality-focused than it is issue-focused. So we're continuing that effort around economic questions, you know, taxes and tax rates, healthcare, social security, jobs, economic development. So that people, when they look at candidates who are standing for office, can judge those candidates in relationship to those issues. So we're going to be doing more and more of that. We're also extending

our activities to our counterparts from other countries. Trying to be of what assistance we can to trade union federations who are dealing in some of the same kind of areas that [00:25:00] we dealt with a long time ago. Whether those unions are in neighboring countries, the Caribbean or countries of Africa, even in areas of Eastern and Central Europe where they're going through this transition, and to the extent that we can be of some service, we're trying to do that.

PM: Now, are different unions -- what are the most active unions in supporting what CBTU is doing? Do they vary according to their own membership and structure and attitude toward the leadership, of the leadership?

WL: We have, as a matter of fact, I think when we talked before, we were recognizing the fact that we'd sort of turned a corner in this sense. We were not looked upon favorably by the AFL-CIO for a lot of years. But we received a tremendous amount of support from John Sweeney, and since 1995 or '96, we've grown in our support [00:26:00] from other affiliate unions. Service employees, steelworkers, I mean, across the spectrum, people are joining in on those particular programs that are of interest to them. There are some simply because of the nature of their union -- I mean, the industry. There's not

much interaction with the painters union, for example. That's just given us a tremendous amount of support under its new leadership. The postal workers. And then, because we've begun to focus on a lot of issues, issues that are important to their memberships, we're getting a good deal of support. And we're continuing to try and build on that. As you probably have noticed, our thrust has moved a little bit away from protest to policy, and we think that's where we can play the greatest role. I think the thing that we have to be is sensitive to the type of [00:27:00] changes that are taking place, both within country in terms of domestic policy and public policy questions, and figure out how we can play a more effective role in raising the level of awareness about the impact of these changes. And that's what we're trying to do. We've move from, I guess as Bayard Rustin used to say, from protest to policy. While he defined it as from protest to politics, I think there's a much greater need for our communities to be in the midst of the debates around policy questions.

PM: I was going to ask you whether CBTU has any relations to PSI. Are they working with that, or --

WL: We work around many of the same issues that show up in certain countries. We don't have a formal relationship other than through (laughs) my own role as president. But

on issues of trade, on issues of the value of [00:28:00] public service, I mean, they're issues that we naturally relate to. This question of the new provisions on the general agreement on trades and services, which are a part of the WTO process, which has a tremendous implication for local government. And by virtue of that, a potential impact for African Americans and other minority workers. If healthcare, nursing home care, road maintenance, road repair, a whole host of issues that have been done by public sector workers in past years now becomes an item or a commodity in the trade process, those jobs go to the highest bidder from some other country. The implications of that for workers in our communities or in our cities or counties are a large [00:29:00] question that has to have some answers before this whole process goes a lot farther. And we've tried to focus in on that, to try and talk to, particularly, county and state legislators, because that's where the impact winds up being. Agriculture. The implications of trade for agriculture. The implications of education being privatized and allowed to be bid for by providers of educational services. I mean, there are just a whole host of new questions that we've never had to deal with before.

PM: Well, let's turn to another area in your life activities that relates to your role in the political life in Washington, DC. Almost from the time you became, certainly, secretary-treasurer, but probably [00:30:00] before, when you came to Washington, you were involved in Washington city politics. Served, as I recall, chairman of the Democratic Party.

WL: Chairman of the Democratic Party.

PM: Seventy-two to '78, something like that.

WL: When one says "a fate worse than death," I think that pretty much describes the role (laughs) chair. I --

PM: (laughs) How did you get started in that, for example, then?

(phones ringing)

WL: I came out of this --

PM: Why don't we hold off for a second? That's going to continue ringing until -- that's probably for you, Carolyn, they were calling you here yesterday, too. (pause)

WL: I, coming out of the environment that I did in the Bay Area, and certainly out of the union [00:31:00] that had had sort of a heavy involvement in local politics, was frankly very confused when I came to Washington, DC, because there wasn't a whole lot to have political action around. I mean, we didn't have, at that time, an elected

city government. It was all appointed by the houses and committees of Congress. There were no elected positions in the school board or anything like that. The city, even as a whole, had no role in politics except for the newly received benefit of voting for the president of the United States. And I forget, but I believe the Kennedy election was the first opportunity for citizens of the District of Columbia to vote for a national -- for a president. And I just found that to be terribly strange. And a real debate opened up around [00:32:00] home rule for the district of Columbia and the role of the political parties in that whole process. And our union and myself became, you know, sort of players and participants in that. The first real election came as a result of the new home rule or limited home rule charter situation, and that was an election around the positions for members of the city council and the mayor, and the congressional delegate, as it was called then. And I forget the year, but we became engaged in that full process as a union and as a person. And at the end of that, we would up with a reorganization of the Democratic Party in the District of Columbia, and I wound up as a member of, and I [00:33:00] believe as chair of the party the first time around. I'm not altogether sure how the process worked, but I wound up as chair of a party that had

a city which was 95 percent, if not more, Democratic, but a party whose mission had not been defined by anything, by virtue of the absence of any real political offices. And we proceeded to try and build a party that had a working relationship with elected officials, but a party that reflected the diversity of the District of Columbia, both gender and ethnicity and certainly income-wise, because the District was a very stratified place. We ran from the very poor to the very wealthy. And there wasn't really a big reason for the powerful people to deal with a local Democratic [00:34:00] Party. So we had a building job to do and we set out to do it. We felt that the Party, in order to be effective and to be meaningful, ought to have a role in all of the issues that affected the city. You know, zoning issues, regulatory questions. And up until then, and for a long time after, these were decisions that were, by and large, made by the House and Senate district committees, by influential leaders of the community. And we had not had a real opportunity to test this new limited home rule thing. So we were destined to try and play a more meaningful role, and I was given the honor -- or dishonor, depending upon who you (laughs) talked to -- of being the first chair under the home rule charter. And I think we did a lot of good [00:35:00] work, and built from

a base that was left by a lot of other major influential people in the city. You know, Joe Rauh. I'm trying to think, there was a fellow who was nominated for vice president, Channing Phillips. A lot of people who had had a real role in the political life of the city, but without a city that had a way of rewarding political leadership. There were so many issues that we worked on -- education, transportation, infrastructure questions, the reorganization of city services -- I mean, just a whole host of issues that many cities have gone through in earlier times and had developed some systems for dealing with. But I think that the manner in which we went about it, [00:36:00] I think, laid the groundwork for what is a fairly effective party mechanism right now.

PM: Are you still active in the party itself?

WL: Not in the local party itself. I mean, I, like a lot of folks, you know, do participate in fundraisers and issue forums, but not a member of the party, no.

PM: Does AFSCME take an active part, also, in that, or just through you?

WL: There may be other members who have responsibilities on a local level. I sort of grew into it, along with a lot of other people. My office really didn't have any effective role in the city, it was just, I was personally involved.

PM: Let's turn now to 1981 to 2001. Twenty years. You have a new president. New administration, so to speak. New challenges. What were some of the issues [00:37:00] or initiatives that come to your mind during this 20-year period that faced AFSCME, and especially those that you had an involvement in?

WL: I think the biggest -- I'm not altogether sure we could categorize our issues as large or small. We were certainly in the midst of a change in philosophy about government at the local level. We were having to deal with just a growing assault on public sector workers in government all across the spectrum, and whether it was downsizing or whether it was just the transferring of responsibility without the money to do it, I mean, we didn't -- I mean, life was not easy for us, but we couldn't identify any particular issue. All of these, I and [00:38:00] my office had a role in, because of the way the union functioned. But our principal areas of activity wound up being legislative and political. And some on the defensive, some on the offensive, but trying to elect people to office that were sympathetic to the delivery of public services on a national and local level. Eighties, early '80s -- I'm trying to think. In '82, or rather, in the '80s, Ronald Reagan was elected, and with that came a whole new series

of economic policies that had tremendous impact on state and local government. His tax policies at the national level had serious implications for state budgets. His budget proposals tended to treat state and local government almost as enemies as opposed to allies. And so we had a rough time for those first four years. And I don't know if there was any particular issue other than our effort to continue our growth. We saw our growth dip for the first time in those years. As I indicated before, we had been organizing 50 to 55,000 net new members and we saw that lower, by and large because of the assault on state and local government. And while we still continued to grow, not nearly at the same rate. [00:40:00] And that continued through both of his terms and the subsequent Bush administration. So we had 12 pretty tough years through the '80s and the early '90s. We saw just an overt attempt to downsize government, so to load government up with responsibilities but with no money to carry out those responsibilities. I guess they called it devolution of responsibilities. We saw county governments and city governments put in charge of programs that they had no resources to carry out. But for my role and the role of our union, we were simply commenters on the passing scene. No particular issues or projects stood out, [00:41:00] and

that stands out in my mind that we had a particularly positive impact on. I mean, we were doing our survival dance through these years, the almost wholesale assault on organized labor, and unions in particular, and we were big, big targets in the public sector. And our job became survival through those years. And we did. At the end of the ’80s and early part of the ’90s, we were geared to sort of fight for change. A change from an administration that was totally insensitive to workers in general and the public sector in particular. And we signed on with, after great debate, you know, the candidacy of Bill Clinton. And fought for a sort of return to where unions and workers had a voice [00:42:00] in the policies that the national administration was going to formulate. And we had about eight good years of what we think was a sensitive administration. And major, I think major, shifts in public policy took place during those years. I mean, the basic recognition of the value of the public sector as a partner with the private sector in economic expansion. Where the value of state government was recognized in terms of the need for the federal-state partnerships just to create an environment for economic development, for industrial location in areas where they could have the greatest impact on jobs and development. So we saw the Reagan-Bush years

as [00:43:00] bad years for our union and for other unions. And we saw the beginning of the Clinton years as a real change, although it's fair to say that many of our global policies, and certainly many of our free trade policies, came about during this Clinton era. The North American Free Trade Agreement, for which, you know, was just such an -- I mean, the jury is no longer out on whether or not that's a positive program. I mean, the job loss associated with NAFTA is a reality, and we certainly have not been able to put into effect those provisions that would protect both American workers and Mexican workers, or Canadian workers, for that matter. So, in spite of all of the good that came out of it, that's a downer that we still have not figured out how to deal with.

PM: [00:44:00] AFSCME consistently opposed that.

WL: Yes. Yes. No, our view was then and is now that the loss of production capacity means a loss of jobs in areas where those good-paying jobs contribute to the tax base, which drives the services that local government provides. And an investor, why should they spend 500 million dollars for a plant in Newark when they can go to Mexico with government support? And, in effect, that's exactly what happened. We have so many industries now that will simply pull up stakes

and leave, leaving urban communities and areas just void of any financial base.

PM: You see it today in the closing of auto plants. What's (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) being closed.

WL: Oh, yes. And what's interesting is that these plants, be they auto or others, [00:45:00] have received such subsidies from local government in the sense of tax abatements and reduced assessments and et cetera, which, the taxpayers have had to pick up the cost of that. And then when they move or leave, there's no reimbursement for those subsidies left with the community. I mean, our argument, if you want to leave, that's your right to leave, but then pay back what the communities have given you in breaks.

PM: Right. The issue of privatization, as it's called, was very important to AFSCME, and especially among your workers around the country. That was one of the trends taking place in local units of government to save --

WL: Well, part of the philosophy of the Reagan economic years was that government was too large, it provided fundamentally no services, and that the smaller the government, the [00:46:00] better off we are. So many policies were designed and programs put onstream that forced state and local governments to develop austerity

programs. It denied them the monies to do things with, although they had been given the responsibility for doing them. So the end result was the reduction of the workforce, the elimination of what was then entitlement programs of a broad nature. So, for our people, we're in the public sector doing eligibility work, doing a lot of work, they simply had no budget to do it with. The movement of plants and industries caused job loss. The reduction of state budgets meant there were lower resources to work with. So, in the end, states, counties, and cities suffered [00:47:00] by virtue of this economic policy shaped in the '80s. And we certainly saw NAFTA as a continuation of that kind of policy.

PM: What other unions were part of the movement, with you, what other leaders, to fight the Free Trade Agreement?

WL: Oh, jeez. The industrial unions were, I mean, were right in the midst of the battle. I can always recall a fellow by the name of Bill -- oh, jeez, I'm blanking on his name, but the head of the IUE at that time.

PM: Bywater?

WL: Bill Bywater, who had been such an outspoken opponent --

PM: He was. (laughs) He really was.

WL: (laughs) -- of what he termed *free trade agreements*, but he meant trade agreements that had no provisions that protect

workers. But, I mean, he was one of the most [00:48:00] consistent objectors, but certainly the leadership of the UAW; the steelworkers, who had experience with just absolute devastation under these agreements; many of the utility workers, the communication workers. I mean just, firstly, all of the industrial unions were in opposition to it. I can't think of any who were outwardly supporting it.

PM: The building trades, though --

WL: I think the building trades were supporting the industrial unions, but it was tacit support, it was not aggressive opposition.

PM: I do want to recall that. Now, were there other issues that you can think of now between -- what about within the union itself? Were there any developments there?

WL: Well, I think the privatization and the downsizing was taking its toll on certain groups within our membership. It was a serious [00:49:00] drive to privatize correctional institutions. A serious effort to downsize and close many municipal healthcare facilities, municipal hospitals and -- all of which, you know, were potential loss of both service and members. And these were issues that had to be fought almost on a case-by-case basis. Some we won, some we lost.

PM: Did the decline in membership within the union have any impact upon staffing programs?

WL: We've never really experienced a decline in membership as such. I mean, on an annual basis, we've always had an increase over the prior year, and we've never experienced big membership losses. We've gone through a staff restructuring [00:50:00] and a shift in our responsibilities for certain kinds of things. We have what is called a three-level structure. We have the national union, and the mid-level, which we call district councils, which can be one state or multiple states but have a number of affiliates within that jurisdiction. That has been, for a long time, the central service system. And then we have our local unions, which has been, by and large, responsible for contract administration, the day-to-day problems. The bulk of our staff is at this subordinate body level. We have about 450 fulltime staff people for the national union. We've probably got three or four times that much staff at the subordinate body level. So we don't see a reduction in staff, we may see a restructuring to do different things. Right now, we are [00:51:00] in the process of shifting to an organizing model where the union is, on a fulltime basis, committed to organizing new members. And we're seeing the benefits of that shift now, because our subordinate bodies, like a lot of others with a full-time responsibility to service, did not have the

capacity to do the organizing that existed within its potential membership. So we've never suffered from a serious staff reduction.

PM: Did AFSCME have any problems in this period with jurisdictional disputes with other unions in terms of organizing the unorganized, or -- in some of these areas?

WL: Well, prior to 1995, I mean, we used to live in the dispute settlement mechanism. (laughs) Because in the public sector, [00:52:00] while people in other unions did not want to organize for the purpose of building a union as such, they saw these as easy units to organize. And so we were constantly having to fight wars over areas that were within our recognized jurisdiction, for which we had contractual agreements and relationships with employees. But in 1995, I think, some sanity was brought into this process by President Sweeney that set up procedures so that unions wouldn't spend lots and lots of its resources fighting each other but could find ways to cooperate to organize new members together. And I think, for the movement as a whole, that's been a plus. But we had our share of disagreements with other unions, and I'm sure other unions would say the same thing: [00:53:00] that organizing the already organized was a major (laughs) piece of business. But we have found ways and means of

cooperative ventures together now. So that's a lot different now.

PM: At the last meeting in Las Vegas, the AFL-CIO, Mr. Sweeney talked about his concerns about loss in membership overall, and I do know that when he came in, he stressed that organizing has -- these objectives met with strong support from other unions? Have they been able to --

WL: It varies. The unions that are showing growth in large numbers are, by and large, unions on the service side. And [00:54:00] on the building and construction trade side, you're seeing a little bit on the industrial sides, you're seeing a little bit, but not nearly like you're seeing in the public sector. So, on an annual basis, the need to organize in order just to stay even is an enormous number, and while you're getting good growth in some areas, you're getting limited growth in others. So the end result is that the AFL-CIO, as an institution, is losing numbers on an annual basis. But our union and several others are doing very well. I mean, in calendar year 2001, we would have closed out the year with probably about 30,000 net new members. Already, in calendar year 2002, we're able to count numbers [00:55:00] upwards of 15 to 18,000 in the early part of this year. So, for us, we're doing very

well, but that doesn't speak good of the movement as a whole.

PM: What other unions, now, organize in the same area as AFSCME?

WL: Service Employees are organizing, they're very strong in the healthcare sector. The United Auto Workers, who are moving into different areas of activity as a result of their drives. We're getting -- the United Food and Commercial Workers are very aggressive in their organizing efforts. The painters are doing new work. The American Federation of Government Employees are beginning to do more work in the federal sector. So there are a number of unions, by and large on the industrial side, that are doing fairly decent organizing.

PM: [00:56:00] Continuing on this vein, if we take the labor movement today, in the 40 years that you've been involved in it, 30 in a very important position as secretary-treasurer, how would you define the situation status of the labor movement? Positive?

WL: Oh, I think very positive. I think under President Sweeney's leadership, I think the movement has, for this new period, redefined its role and responsibility in a way that both it as an institution and unorganized workers benefit. Before -- and certainly it's not a negative in

terms of Mr. Meany's leadership, or Mr. Kirkland's following him -- there was not the commitment to organizing [00:57:00] from the AFL-CIO as an institution. And as a result, for all those tough years, individual affiliates lost members for a whole series of different reasons. But there was no concentrated program to recapture that or replace that. Only those unions who shared some sort of an organizing philosophy were either staying even or growing, and as a result, the AFL, which, at one time, probably represented 28, 30 percent of the workforce, began to drift downward to where now we represent 13, 14 percent of the workforce. Well, the impact of that loss was, by and large, in two areas: the industrial unions and in the numbers of workers represented in the building and construction trades [00:58:00] industries. I mean, companies went to double-breasting processes and the skills that went with the trades were no longer as important in the '90s, '80s and '90s, as it may have been in the '50s and '60s. So the loss was not on the service side but on the industrial and trade side. And that had to be reversed, or the recognition of the importance of it had to be reversed, and I think that's what President Sweeney is in the process of doing. But beyond that, the visibility of labor in the community, in the various states, its

visibility on issues important to workers, has recaptured the imagination of both those who are inside of labor and those who need organizing. I mean, our voice on [00:59:00] economic policy questions, our voice on trade issues, all of the sudden, now, is out there. People see it, people hear it. The restructuring of state federations under the new alliance program, the union cities program, where the effort is to integrate the union into the community and vice versa, all, I think, having a very positive impact. Labor and its issues are not just for its members. It's not just for dues-payers. I mean, our pursuit of national healthcare, our pursuit of a rational housing policy or education program, are really of a benefit to all of our society, and I think that's the role that people believe labor ought to carry out. So we're organizing new people around a new movement. [01:00:00]

PM: September 11 shattered all of our views and attitudes in America. What impact did that have upon labor, and especially your unions, who represented so much of the public sector?

WL: Well, for a lot of years, the view of most political leadership was that the public sector --

(break in audio)

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WL: The view of most political leadership was that the public sector, you know, was an area of the workforce that had dubious value. I mean, it wasn't an appreciation of the job that was done by public employees. And I think the principal impact of September 11 was to raise to everybody's view the contribution by public employees. The emergency medical technicians, the policemen, the firemen who rushed to that disaster, that was their everyday job. I mean, it wasn't, like, some special contribution that they were making in light of this disaster. And important to recognize is that [00:01:00] if you raise that question of carrying out that responsibility versus the privatization of these services, you didn't raise the question, would a private sector worker, for the profit or protection of profit, rush into a disaster like the World Trade Center? My guess is, they would not do it. But public servants or public employees, who have a sort of a special call and a commitment to that service, would go into an already burning building with no thought about the building collapsing, but their mission is to save whoever

can be saved. Now, I mean, it, in a funny way, raises the question of the value of public services as a pure public service, not as a center of profit. And I think that issue became very clear to [00:02:00] the country and the world as a whole. The other is, in the midst of this tremendous tragedy, you saw labor almost at its finest hour. You saw unions of all kinds, from building and construction trades to operating engineers to crafts to the -- all coming, lending their skills and their talents to relieving the impact of this tragedy on whoever may have been hurt. And, all of a sudden, people began to learn that labor is not some building located in Washington, DC, but a collection of people from, certainly, all around that city, who instantly knew they had to make whatever contribution they had. Labor lost probably 1000 or more [00:03:00] members in the Center itself. Virtually every union affiliated with the AFL-CIO, from the hotel and restaurant workers to Service Employees, our own union lost eight people, the painters, the pipe-fitters, the operating engineers, team-- everybody lost somebody in that building. Aside from the other three or 4,000 people who were lost itself. And I think people saw labor in a much different light. We were there contributing blood, we were there serving food, we were there doing everything that could be done. And I said

in one speech, and I'm not sure if I was drawing a good analogy, but I think I'll do it again. You really didn't see a whole lot of CEOs [00:04:00] and corporate executives running up the stairs into the towers. Those were rank-and-file firefighters and rank-and-file policemen.

PM: Exactly.

WL: And emergency medical technicians and whoever else, from the building trade or wherever, thought they could lend a hand. And it drew a very clear distinction that labor is a part of the fabric of the community. And I think, as I said, in the midst of this terrible tragedy, I think has been our best hour.

PM: And even the federal agencies, the FBI and those that were held in much high regard as a result of this, depending on it, and indeed the security forces at airports, represented this view that government, or government employees, can do the job. Now, there's a related thing about the change in our work ethic --

WL: One of the -- I might go on the record --

PM: Okay, all right.

WL: One of the interesting aspects of this thing, and I have to be partisan, [00:05:00] the Republican party and the administration who, in the early days of this, could not avoid a flag-waving or an arm around a fireman or the

recognition of the great job that they did and the contribution and the sacrifice that they've made and all that drivel. In the end, when the firefighters asked for the right to collective bargaining, the rights to organize, the about-face done by the Republican Party was the most shameful display that I have ever seen. With a letter circulated nationwide, the leadership of the Republican Party, certainly speaking with the tacit agreement of the President, said that the danger of allowing firefighters to bargain collectively is that, in the face of this kind of disaster, [00:06:00] they may go on strike. Which has got to be the ultimate --

PM: Insult.

WL: -- insult.

PM: Awful.

WL: (laughs) I mean, and I think, for anybody who was wondering how sincere some of the leadership in the Republican Party was with regard to not only the sacrifice of the firefighters but their rights as workers to this basic public policy of these United States. I mean, just shameful. I don't believe --

PM: The inconsistency (laughs) in their views. Ultimately

WL: Well, you would think that a tragedy like this would cause some rethinking, that it would cause some review of some

basic tenets. I mean, the right to bargain collectively is existing public policy, it's just that firefighters are excluded from that policy except in New York City. They were able -- [00:07:00] I mean, in New York City, they were still coming into the building and going up the building. They weren't on strike. They were not running away from the disaster. It is just this narrow-minded ideological --

PM: Exactly.

WL: -- position that they take.

PM: Right. Another point on this change in what we call the work ethic, and you see this in the last 10 years, especially. And this idea that was so paramount in our society, that, in terms of work, that if you were loyal to the institution, business firm, they would be loyal to you. There was a partnership here. Not just at the lower level of salaried workers and the like, but at the high level of management. And suddenly we see, in the last 10 years, 20 years, this has changed. Even the top executives, despite loyalty, despite years [00:08:00] of good service, they have no protection, no respect. They're fired almost at will at the middle of their careers, where there is no alternatives. Have you seen any impact in this in terms of change toward unions on this part? I noticed, for example, that in California, that many of the physicians, those in

healthcare, the professionals, are organizing. Engineers are organizing, which they never -- they thought it was below them before. In your union, has -- any evidence of this taking place?

WL: Well, you mentioned the physicians. We see a lot of classifications who, years ago, would not have seen the union as an important vehicle in their security or wage and benefit improvement process. I mean, they're all of the sudden saying now that this is almost an us and them [00:09:00] kind of situation. I mean, the '80s, if it did one thing, it made it very clear where different political leaders saw workers, and it doesn't matter whether you were a low-level worker or a high-level worker. If you were a worker, you were no longer valued by the institution. And this was sort of a byproduct of this whole arena of deregulation, where corporate America and financial America was allowed to roam around at free will. Merge, consolidate, amalgamate, whatever it'd take to enhance the bottom line, that's what they were allowed to do. And for a long period of time, and even to this day, CEOs were the big winners in the '80s and '90s. Workers were the big losers. Retirees, or those on the edge of retiring, [00:10:00] were the big losers. I mean, their pensions and investments were caught up in all these mergers and

consolidations. The disappearance of loyalty was a part of that whole process, and many professional workers just all of the sudden came to the realization that loyalty has no meaning if my plant is in Taiwan tomorrow. Or my ability to make a contribution is not valued unless I directly contribute to the bottom line. And you've seen, we've seen workers both in the professional side and at the line level all of the sudden realize that the story of the past is no longer true, and I think they are joining unions in large numbers as a result of that. I had mentioned before that, on the service side, we are directly [00:11:00] benefiting from this perception that it's us and them. Homecare workers, who have had some of the toughest jobs in the system, who have forever been providing service, not knowing who their employer was, are all of a sudden now becoming active in defining their employer and thus defining relationship. Ourselves and Service Employees have organized thousands of these kinds of workers. Screening employees or security employees in airport or other facilities are joining the respective unions. Janitors and -- I mean, the whole workforce that have gone unrecognized now are saying, for security purposes and a whole host of other issues, "I want to join a union and I want to have the right to do that." Physicians, you

mentioned early on, in our [00:12:00] jurisdiction, physicians who have, for a long time, been concerned about professional ethics and practices and what have you all of a sudden have seen that the best way to protect that and the best way to argue for good services is through a union. You know, the American Medical Association, which is probably the largest union of doctors -- you may not call it that, but that's certainly the role that it played -- all of the sudden recognized that there's a need to maybe change the nature of our policies and programs. And nurses, you know, by the thousands, are joining our union and other unions, because they simply cannot reconcile their professional concern for decent care with the systems they're called upon to work under.

PM: (inaudible). Carolyn, it's 1:30, 1:35 -- 2:35. Do you want to take a break now for a few minutes and then conclude afterwards?

(break in audio)

PM: [00:13:00] Bill --

C: Ready.

PM: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) when you put it in. Close for a period of time. That's part of it. (pause) Bill, in talking about your career, one of the very important areas that we haven't covered is your family. We

talked about your father and mother, when they started, and were there three -- two brothers and a sister?

WL: No, just two brothers.

PM: Just two brothers. But your own family, tell us about that.

WL: I, after completion of high school and working briefly for the Navy, we sort of made the decision that, the young lady who I -- we had, as we said back home, been *going together* for some time -- I was lucky enough [00:14:00] to convince her that what we ought to do is marry and begin to build a family. We had gone together almost since junior high school days, maybe a little bit after that, and so we knew each other pretty good, which surprised me that she said she wanted to think about it very seriously but said, "Okay." We had all lived in the same neighborhood for almost most of my growing-up lifetime. Our world was three streets and one block, so we knew each other pretty good. Her name was Dortheria, and she was the sister of a close friend of mine who, we sort of hung out together. And so we were married in October of 1953, I think it was, and we were married for [00:15:00] 47 years. We had three children. Our oldest, Billy, was the first. And our daughter Benita was the second, and Phyllis the third. We, like a lot of other folks in that time, had a tough time

trying to balance family and work and all of this together. We didn't really know what the future held in Richmond, California, but all we sought was a stable job that we could sort of, you know, have an income and we could build a family with. And the labor career thing did not take off until the mid-'60s, so before that, it was really us finding the ways and means to have a stable home life and enjoy the fact that we were building a family. And [00:16:00] most of whatever the family is, is actually owed to her, because she concentrated on raising the kids and I concentrated on trying to keep, you know, a house and what together. And I think we did a pretty good job, with her getting sort of the bulk of the credit. Our first youngster was born about a year or so after we were first married, and we didn't have a whole lot of experience in child raising, you know, and we read some books and took them pretty literal. I probably should have died early on from third-degree burn from testing bottle formula on your wrist and what have -- (laughs), but we managed to make out pretty good. Our second youngster came about two and a half, three years later, with the third about spaced about the same amount of time. [00:17:00] They did the early part of their growing up in Richmond, California. We moved -- I made the decision to move back East based on this new

job opportunity, and we didn't have a whole lot of understanding of what a new city meant. And Dot was not terribly willing to uproot and move to Washington, DC, without some commitment from me as to what all of this meant and when we would come back, and I didn't know either, so when she asked the question, how long would we be gone? I sort of looked her right in the eyes and lied. (laughs) I said we'd be gone for a year, maybe two years. And she was willing to give it a go for that period of time. [00:18:00] The kids, who we thought would have some trouble making the adjustment, we could have moved across the street or across the world, it wouldn't have made them any difference. They adjusted pretty well. I think, to the extent that I've had a career that had some meaning, it has been by and large because of the support that she was able and willing to give in some other areas. And sort of the areas of minding the house and raising the kids while we were off chasing all these activities, for which I was forever grateful then. Because this work was, in those days, was so uncertain. For the first, I guess, six months, I commuted between Richmond, California and Washington, DC. Leaving on [00:19:00] Sunday night, going to Washington, and leaving on Friday night, coming back to Richmond. We decided that we had to change this, so we

moved everyone from Richmond to Washington, DC, and I was promptly assigned back to California, (laughs) so I was commuting the other way, and we sort of wrestled with that. And in the midst of all of this change, in ’67, to get assigned for almost a year and a half or two years in Detroit, again, commuting back home on odds and even weekends. For the early years, I mean, life for her had to be very difficult. But, you know, it worked out fine. What all of us know is that you can’t do this, or you can’t even begin to do this, unless you have the support of someone who’s going to sort of run the household. And we did it, I think, for the [00:20:00] thought and the possible excitement of having contributed to some sort of change. We certainly didn’t do it for any money. As a matter of fact, we took a pay cut to do it, which did not go down good. But I think, on the whole, she was satisfied with, A, the change, and the new life, the lifestyle, although somewhat disappointed about the uncertainty of it all. But the kids made the adjustment that kids make. New friends, new school. We were very lucky that her guidance kept any of them out of any trouble or what have you. I think they were well aware that to transgress a law was instant death wherever you were found, so they sort of [00:21:00] guided themselves accordingly. All three --

well, two went to college and completed the -- my son passed away in ’76, so we have the two girls now, who have families of their own. So it’s a fairly close-knit group, in spite of the nature of the work that we do.

PM: What are the girls’ names now?

WL: The oldest daughter is named Benita, and she’s unmarried, but has a son, my grandson, who’s 22, 23. She worked as a statistical analyst, right now, in the Equal Opportunity Commission. My youngest daughter, Phyllis, has three children: two boys, one girl. She teaches chemistry and physics in the Atlanta Public School [00:22:00] System. Benita graduated from Mount Vernon College, which is a part, now, of American University or Georgetown, I forget which, but it was Mount Vernon when she went there. And my youngest daughter graduated from Hampton University with a major in education and I think a minor in chemistry or something like that. So they’re doing very well. And, as everyone says, you know the beauty of grandchildren is you can send them home. (laughs) And so --

PM: Or you can visit and leave.

WL: You can visit and leave, right. They’ve all been terribly supportive of, you know, even in their growing-up years, and I’m not altogether sure they knew what I was doing, but was happy that we were happy.

PM: How did your wife and family like the adjustment to Washington, DC?

WL: It was new and different. I mean, the [00:23:00] time that we were able to spend together, she enjoyed it tremendously because we were always doing something that was new and different. I think the away time, obviously, takes its toll on anyone. I'm not convinced that I would have done it, had she been gone with the same kind of dedication and commitment. But I could make a good argument either way. But she enjoyed it.

PM: Even though, when you lived in Washington, you still had a lot of traveling to do in your job.

WL: Yes. Yes. When we first moved back, we moved into Maryland, which is just outside of the District of Columbia, in a place called Silver Spring. But after a few years it became so clear that we just had so much involvement in Washington, DC, itself that, I mean, it just, as a moral issue, [00:24:00] we had to move into the city. And we did. We moved in the early part or the latter part of 1972, or the early part of '73, into Washington, DC, itself.

PM: Did your family ever go with you to conventions and things of that sort?

WL: Some. Yes. In the early days, when the kids were small, it was a little tough for Dot to make conventions and things like that, but as they grew older, in their teens, she would go to conventions and some of the international meetings that we had. I think our very first meeting, she went with me to Stuttgart, Germany with me in 1967, early ’67, to what was my first PSI congress. And then she made several after that, and then conventions, which came around every two years. She would make as many as she wanted to, and some she just didn’t have an interest in. And [00:25:00] I would just say that she was incredibly tolerant. (laughs) Because this is a business where the phone rings 24 hours a day, this is a business where there’s always somebody who’ll want you to do something, it’s not a -- there are no none-problem phone calls. Whenever it’d ring, somebody or something is going wrong. But she was able, I think, to sort of keep a straight point of view on all of these, and it was helpful.

PM: She had an opportunity to meet Jerry Wurf, then.

WL: Oh, yes, and they got along well. Oh, yeah. She liked him, she liked Mildred, they liked her, and I wondered about the two or three of them. (laughs) No, I think one of the neat things about Jerry was that he was able to develop very strong friendships [00:26:00] and

relationships. And if, as I said, if you disagreed with him and suffered in silence, he was just almost totally intolerant of that. If you didn't have the capacity to argue your point of view, I mean, you were doomed for a lot of hard times. (laughs) But no, we never had any difficulty whatsoever on interpersonal relations.

PM: As we think about the years that you had, the 40 years in AFSCME, but especially since 1972, which means 30 years, you have able to rely upon or work with a number of people in the union, but specifically in the domain of the secretary-treasurer. Are there any of those people that you recall had a very important contribution to make with you, with your career, with your activities? [00:27:00]

WL: Oh, without question. I would like to think that I and I solely did all these things and I'm entitled to all the credit, but that'd be the stupidest thing I ever said. I don't think any of the things we've been able to do could have been done without the able support of folks around, and people who may or may not have understood what this was all about but were willing to come in and do whatever they were asked to do. In '68, just after the Memphis strike, I was able to hire a young lady who didn't know a whole lot about unions but had good skills and willing to work. A lady by the name of Gwendolyn Hemphill, whose primary

mission in life became keeping me organized, (laughs) because we had -- at that time, [00:28:00] I was handling both of these new jobs, Legislation and Community Affairs and special assistant to the president. And it was a constant motion thing. And her job was to organize the office, to make sure that we could keep our schedule for congressional activities, for other meetings, and I was where I was supposed to be, knowing what I was supposed to know. And she did that for, oh, 10, 12 years, thereabouts, and was just a tremendous amount of help. And you couldn't do this without the knowledge that there was somebody very, very capable looking out after the office piece of it. And she went along with me on these promotional opportunities that we got, [00:29:00] and we were both on sort of a learning process. When I became the secretary-treasurer, she came right along with me, which made life a lot easier in this new transition thing. She was well-respected by the people who were in the office because she'd been there so long, and certainly, in terms of the outgoing secretary-treasurer, she and Joe Ames had a good working relationship, as well as Joe Ames's secretary, which made life a lot easier in terms of access to history and et cetera. She resigned in about 1976 or thereabout, and I was then lucky enough to be able to convince to come back

to work in the secretary [00:30:00] treasurer's office Ellie, Eleanor Munn, who had been Joe Ames's secretary. My theory is pretty simple, I mean, you find somebody who knows what this is all about and see if you can't hire them. And so she agreed to come back into the office and work with me, and for both of our luck, she had spent some time in the business office arena. So she not only knew from her prior role as Joe Ames's assistant, but for the time that she'd spent in the business office since I was elected secretary-treasurer, she got further exposed to a lot of the other areas. So when she came back, she brought an additional wealth of knowledge with her. Probably the person who, in terms of the technical responsibilities of the [00:31:00] office, who contributed the most to a stable relationship was a fellow by the name of James O'Malley. Jim was a business manager. Oh, he came to work just a few months after I started. He either came in the tail end of '66 or the beginning of '67, and so we both sort of grew in our roles together. Terribly able and qualified guy. Committed to the union, but not what you'd call a trade unionist. But we had a working relationship that was just excellent for the kind of things that I needed to do and was responsible for doing. And not a single day did I ever worry about whether or not my specific [00:32:00]

responsibilities were being looked at. And the job was a difficult job, because it shared the responsibility for the president's side of the union and the secretary-treasurer's side of the union. You know, constitutionally, you're responsible for budget and budget reconciliations and reporting on expenditures in line with the budget. You're responsible for auditing and the review of local subordinate body operations. You're responsible for membership and membership -- I mean, a whole host of things that are important to the board as it makes decisions. And Jim and I, who had been friends before while I was still in this other role, managed to hit off our working relationship very well. And so, for all of those years -- Jim just resigned in [00:33:00] 2001, the latter part of 2001, so I never had a concern whatsoever that our responsibilities were not being looked after, either by us jointly or him as the person responsible for overseeing these areas. And so it was tremendous. When Eleanor retired in -- I've forgotten the year now. But -- well, let me go back to one aspect of this. Leonard Ball, who came to work almost at the same time I was elected secretary-treasurer, as my principal assistant, and that was a role that would be sort of a liaison with O'Malley and all these areas. [00:34:00] Someone who would look

after all these other problems that I had stirred up in the (laughs) District of Columbia and these other assignments, which were still a part of my bailiwick. You know, from strike situations to mobilization issues to just relationships with people who you had such direct contact -- I mean, that was his area of operation. And without question, I think, one of the best staff choices I ever had to make. One who was institutionally committed to the kinds of things we were trying to do and willing to just put enormous energy into doing it. He had been a former Urban Leaguer who I had met in the midst of some conflict, and we sort of struck up a liking for each other, and so he came to work. And [00:35:00] hired a young lady by the name of [Leela McMullin?], who I think was a formal schoolteacher, middle school or something like that. But, anyhow, he hired her to work for him while Ellie was still working directly for myself. And Leonard retired, if memory serves me right, about ’86. No, maybe -- no, no, I take that back. He retired -- well, the year escapes me. But anyhow, I took the opportunity to steal his secretary away from the pool, (laughs) and asked Leela to come to work directly for myself, and we had to hire somebody else for the other job. And she did it, and I guess we’ve been working together now for, oh, 17, 18 years. I don’t know

exactly how many. But [00:36:00] we have an understanding, it's very clear, that she cannot go home on Friday unless she promises to come back on Monday. I mean, it is that kind of value that she brings to the office. And so I guess I was trying to say I've been lucky in the sense that the people who've come to work with us have sort of shared the same enthusiasm for what we do and a willingness to sacrifice, certainly, far beyond their reward to get it done. And internally -- well, let me talk externally just a little bit, because so much of what we do involves many of these movements that the union thinks are important to our overall mission. And in doing that you come into contact with [00:37:00] a lot of people who sort of share the mission, and many of those people are CBTU-ers. Others are leaders in their own union who, over time, has, not only by virtue of their display of their own personal skills and abilities, but commitment to issues, has risen to the top of their union. And so many of these folks were impacted by Leonard Ball and how he saw our role shaping our movement inside of organized labor. And bearing in mind that we sort of were born in this protest mode, but had to be constantly mindful that things were changing and that we had to be changing with it. And one of those folks is a young fellow by the name of Willie Baker, who is a

vice president of the United Food and Commercial Workers union. But stepped almost from a rank-and-file posture [00:38:00] to a role of elected leadership, and has just grown tremendously in that role and has been given greater responsibility as he grew. And so you often think of how these are good things that are happening, good things that are happening for us, but also good things that are happening for the union. And so, when we look around that room, we can think of Willie; of Clayola Brown, with what is now UNITE but formerly Amalgamated Clothing and Textile; I think of Gloria Johnson, who was with IUE, but also was the president of CLUW, but who really moved from a staff position to an elected position, became engaged in [00:39:00] a movement that we all try to contribute to support each other. As you know, the IUE has now merged with CWA, so she is now the women's director of human rights or something like that with CWA. I think of Josephine LeBeau, people who have come from rank-and-file status up to now, where they lead major institutions. And to the extent that you've contributed something to their growth, I mean, you feel proud every time you see them in action because they so much reflect so many of the concerns on the part of the issues we have. Barbara Van Blake, who's with the American Federation of Teachers, who's just

taken on so many responsibilities that we talked about. Said, "This would be a good idea to do. We ought to have a labor component of a national caucus [00:40:00] of Black state legislators. Organized labor ought to be an integral part of the work that they do." And folks say, "Yeah, that's right," and they go out and organize whatever the thing is to make it effectively a player in that arena. We've started to understand the importance of international affairs and how they affect us, and while we don't have a resource base to allow us to do great things, we can certainly be part of the debate. So a fellow by the name of Harold Rogers out of Chicago, who was mainly a protege of Charlie Hayes but has stepped up and filled a very important function of trying to build relationships for the CBTU across the globe. I mean, we've done work in [00:41:00] Haiti and the Caribbean, in Brazil, South Africa, other parts of Africa, mainly due to not only the interest, but the commitment to doing that. He takes a study tour to Africa either every year or every other year and sort of waves our flag and makes sure that the people know we're still interested. And there are many other people like this. I was talking with a [fellow?] before, Dwight Kirk, who is so enormously talented and is willing to use that to advance causes, issues, and organizations

that he believes in. And I'm sure there's lots of other people like this, and it would certainly be presumptuous to say that my contribution to their development has [00:42:00] made all this happen. I don't think it is, I think they were there looking for someplace to make their contribution, and through either our union or the CBTU, the opportunity was presented.

PM: Gave them opportunity.

WL: And so I --

PM: Good account, I think this adds a lot, too, in terms of your career, to show the people that you interacted with at that level and not just Jerry, McEntee, and the like. But let's turn to one other. Forty years in the labor movement. As you look back on 40 years, not in any way and hopefully for some time, you're not talking about leaving the labor movement. That's not the purpose of this. But as you look back on 40 years, how would you define either how you describe the major accomplishments or your legacy to the labor movement? To AFSCME and the labor movement? [00:43:00] What are you the proudest of?

WL: I think, if one thing stands out as an area of contribution, I think it's the fact that once the Memphis sanitation strike started, that you were able to convince the workers there that there was a broader set of issues

that was worth struggling about. That the strike was not about money, but was about a set of principles that were important to them as workers. During the strike, because it was not about money, (laughs) we were searching around about how to define what we were [00:44:00] doing, and I can remember one night a young minister, we were talking in the hallway because we needed some visual way to define what was taking place that was not complicated. So we were fiddling around with words and combinations of words and groupings of words. And he came up with this four-letter minimum number of letters -- four words and minimum number of letters, that described why these folks were struggling. And the simple sign read, "I am a man." And we started thinking about this. Said, "Wow. I mean, this is a powerful statement. Do you think, you know, they'll buy into this?" And when we took the slogan to the meeting the next day, [00:45:00] we could not believe the reaction that we got, because what was happening to these workers, for all of their life they had never been treated as if they were important in the scheme of anything. And there appeared to be such a yearning just to be treated as men. And, I mean, the thing just went bonkers. And I guess, as I look at it, what we had wound up being lucky enough to do was to capture what was motivating them, but with them

being unable to express it. So, I see that, and it's fairly simple, as being probably one of the high points for me. Because that struggle, for them, was like the struggle at the overpass, or the sit-in struggles for the auto workers, or the steel strikes. And [00:46:00] these were people who had never engaged in this kind of confrontation, nor did they understand or know what the outcome was going to be, but they were willing to make the sacrifice if some folks were willing to stay with them. And for all of the successes that we may have had, I think for that group of folks, what we did is helped them redefine themselves. And I think, for me, that has been probably one of the most rewarding, both experiences and to the extent it's an accomplishment, that I've had as a result of this. And hindsight argues that, if you had it to do again, would you do it the same way? I think we were wise to allow them to define themselves, and to use whatever support we had [00:47:00] to help them get to the point that they did. And for that, I think our union benefited tremendously, and I personally, you know, I mean, it was seventh heaven.

PM: Were there other events, other incidents, though, in this 40 years that stand out?

WL: Oh, I think our strike victories in New York and other places were great events. I think probably our role in the

liberation struggles of African countries in general and South Africa in particular was a great high point for us as a union. But I think the willingness of the institution and one's ability to convince people that, if you're going to struggle, here are some issues that are worth struggling about. And to the extent you bring about change, you affect so much, [00:48:00] and I think the union has given us a chance to do that.

PM: Do you have any plans for the future? Any specific goals that you have in mind in the next decade?

WL: I think, you know, each decade is different. The workforce is changing so fast, and the appreciation for the role of unions is -- I'm not confident is there for new workers. And I think we've got a responsibility to try and educate new workers as to what this is all about. And I'm not altogether sure, when you say "educate," what that all means, but I think we've got to convince them that whatever benefits they're receiving now were not out of the [00:49:00] benevolence of the employer. I mean, that there was some folks who preceded them in this struggle and helped to create this set of conditions. I think we've got to convince them of what the role of organized labor or worker organizations are or is in our kind of society. And that they have a role and a responsibility, if not as major

players, certainly as supporters, to be very clear on the role that they have to play. If you're going to maintain these benefits or if you're going to have a shot at a better life, it's going to come as a result of this process. I think we've got a responsibility to try and get into our education system's curriculum that talks about the contribution of labor and labor leaders so that people began to learn this at an earlier age [00:50:00] than what they do now. I think we've got a responsibility to try and raise the level of awareness to people of how our political system works and don't work, and what impact they can have on it by engaging with it. And hopefully, at the end of that, you'll wind up with an educated, committed, trade unionist looking for a cause to become involved with. I mean, I see the coming years as great opportunities, but we've got a lot of work to do.

PM: In terms of the young people coming into the union, into the organized labor movement, are you positive and sanguine about their role in the future?

WL: Well, if I'm to make a judgement about those who are joining us now, [00:51:00] I would say yes. Because they're joining at a period of great activism. They are, in many cases, the types of workers who have all of the sudden realized that there's not any fairness that's

inherent to the system, and that what benefits they've gotten or what benefits they will get will come as a result of their engagement as part of this movement. That group I'm okay with. Which argues that we've got to keep the same kinds of activities going that brought them in. But we have a job to do on preparing them for whatever contributions they can make as individuals in whatever setting that they're in. We've got to convince some of them that they ought to be getting engaged in public office opportunity, that they ought to be running for office if they [00:52:00] truly believe the kinds of things we're talking about, they ought to be a part of the policy-making process. And I think that's one of the things that John Sweeney has done very successfully. I mean, we got two or 3,000 trade union people elected to public office who bring the views that they've developed, that's a good sign. That's a good sign.

PM: That is a good sign. Well, Bill, I think this is a good time to stop, Carolyn, and I think the next step is to make this available for you soon in typed form for you to review. This, to me, is going to --

WL: I get wordy. (laughs)

PM: You're what?

WL: I get wordy. I –

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