William Lucy Oral History

Interviewed by Stefanie Caloia
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F1: [00:00:00] And we are ready to go.

STEFANIE CALOIA: Okay. All right. I'm Stefanie Caloia. I'm here with William Lucy. We are at the AFSCME International Headquarters in Washington, DC, and it is April 11, 2017. Mr. Lucy, thank you for being here and taking the time. Can you tell me where you were born and where you grew up?

WILLIAM LUCY: Memphis, Tennessee, 1933. Grew up partially in Memphis itself until I was about seven, eight years old. Moved to Richmond, California in, oh, about March, April of 1942, and essentially grew up in California.

SC: Were your parents involved in the labor movement or civil rights movement?

WL: No, not at all.

SC: No? Did they ever talk about those issues?

WL: No.

SC: No? Okay. And what did your parents do for a living?

WL: My father was [00:01:00] a mechanic, self-taught, but worked for a while for Memphis Light, Gas, and Water, which is a basic utility company in the city of Memphis. My mother was a seamstress, and then ran a restaurant for a while.

SC: What kind of restaurant?

WL: Regular restaurant. Soul food, Memphis, Tennessee.

SC: Were there any particular experiences or influences you had while you were growing up that led to you wanting to be involved with labor or civil rights? Or did that come later?

WL: I think that my involvement with labor came after graduation from high school, then after employment. I was with the US Navy for a while. As I said, I grew up in Memphis and Richmond, California, completed elementary school in Richmond and junior high and high school, and then went to work for the US Navy at [00:02:00] Mare Island Naval Shipyard. Moved from Mare Island Naval Shipyard to Contra Costa County and the public works department there, and I think that's where my first exposure with labor as an entity came about.

SC: And what kind of work were you doing there?

WL: I worked in the public works department in the engineering section and surveying and so on mechanics. I went to work there in 1953 and stayed until 1966.

SC: Okay. So what was the work environment? Because initially you did not have a union. Is that correct?

WL: When I went to work for the county. There was no union at Mare Island Naval Shipyard, but when I went to work for Contra Costa County, they had an employee association that had been there for some time. I came to work in 1953. I joined the employee association [00:03:00] almost automatically. At that time, it was headed up by, oh, any number of people from the various departments. As I said, I was from the public works department, and a fellow by the name of [Sal Ielo?] introduced me to it, and a fellow by the name of Ben Russell sort of spurred on my involvement with it.

SC: Do you remember something that they said to try to get you to become involved?

WL: In those days in the county employment, joining the employment association was almost automatic -- not as a condition of employment, but just part of the overall workforce. Mister [Ielo?] was probably the principal representative of the association when I became involved. Mr. Russell was a part of the civil service department, and so between [00:04:00] the two of them, it was almost a natural to get involved with the employee association. We were not a union at that time. We represented virtually every department in the county service with membership.

Some time after that -- I mean, ’54, ’55 -- a full discussion began as to whether or not as an association, we wanted to really consider the fact that we were in a very heavy labor county, and whether we wanted to become a full labor union in the true sense of the word. And this discussion began across the association membership, and what we had to think through was in Contra Costa County, a heavy private sector union county, would our situation be better as a legitimate [00:05:00] union, and if so, what kind of union did we want to be, and who did we want to be affiliated with?

SC: So were there any particular issues that really led to moving toward a union?

WL: Well, our view was that in county service, the civil service system was a good system in California. You had good wages, good benefits. But the civil service system itself in our view was operating beyond what its original mandate was. Initially, I mean, civil service systems were designed to submit a list of qualified candidates for employment with the county, and at the time we were considering this a civil service organization, sort of making decisions on disciplinary actions, wages, benefits, conditions of employment. [00:06:00] And we just viewed

this as being outside their mandate, and we thought that employees ought to have the right, like any other group of employees, to have a voice in the conditions that affected their work life.

SC: And how did you end up leaning toward AFSCME versus other unions?

WL: Well, we had a year or more discussion, and I don't recall the exact year we made the discussion. But we had discussed this across our membership, and the decision that flowed from that was we really ought to take advantage of the fact that we are in a heavily unionized county. Much of the work that's done by many of our members are duplicates of what happens in the private sectors, so why should we not have access to collective bargaining? Why should we not have a voice in the grievance procedures and processes? Why should we not have a role [00:07:00] in determining what some of the conditions of employment would be and the rules that relate to that?

SC: So you felt AFSCME was the best way to --

WL: Well, when we looked at what was available to us, we thought that AFSCME, being at the time a growing public sector union with a commitment to public sector functions remaining in the public sector and not being quasi-public

or quasi-private, and at the end of the day, we decided that AFSCME was the union we wanted to explore an affiliation with.

SC: And what was the extent of your involvement with making that happen?

WL: Well, I was an active member, like many others, in the debate about what kind of organization we wanted to be. I played the same role as many others, and key to it was the issues revolving around promotions, examination [00:08:00] procedures, and what roles civil service as a system would play in the manner of employee upward movement and mobility.

SC: So was there any challenge to get the affiliation? Were the members --

WL: Well, we had a full debate about the issue across the membership, and there were some who did not believe we ought to become a full legitimate trade union. There were others believed the other way, and ultimately it went to the plebiscite among the membership, and the decision was that we should be a legitimate trade union and work along with other unions, and the decision as to who we would affiliate with was resolved at the same time, and we made

the decision to affiliate with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

SC: [00:09:00] So then once you had that affiliation, did you notice was there a distinct change in your working conditions and how things operated?

WL: Well, there were no changes in our working conditions. Our own self-developed sense of how we would interact with county government, and particularly with the civil service system and the civil service rules and regulations. And we made every effort to be a part of the decision-making process around policies like any other union would do, public or private sector.

SC: Mm-hmm. And so then it was a few years before you became president of the local, is that right?

WL: I became president in 1964 or ’5. I don’t remember the exact year, yeah, but I had been an active member of bargaining committees or presentation committees on [00:10:00] comparable positions both in our county and other counties because California was a very strong association state. Many of the large counties -- and our counties is one of the larger ones -- were very active in making presentations to the civil service commission and the board of supervisors around comparable wages and

benefits that other counties had. So I was a part of the negotiations committee and the presentation committee, and we talked about the criteria for maintaining quality employees and the need to at least be competitive in terms of wages and benefits in order to maintain those workers.

SC: So what made you decide to run for president of the local?

WL: I think it was just sort of a natural thing. If you've been a participant [00:11:00] for a long time, others encourage you to just take a different role and play a different role. And I'm not sure whether I was drafted or what have you, but it was a natural progression.

SC: Okay. What was it like once you were able to participate in collective bargaining versus before?

WL: Well, we didn't have what you would call legitimate collective bargaining. We became a lot smarter in terms of how we presented the case for employee, benefit improvement. We made the case for wage improvements. Before we got a message from the civil service commission that, "This is what it's going to be." Our involvement created a space for a role for ourselves in making the presentation as to what we thought it should be, and it wasn't what you would call bargaining [00:12:00] as we would know it now, but it was a case that the civil service

commission had no right to be dictating what wages and benefits were going to be. That was not its mission.

SC: Were there any issues or battles that you recall either before you became president or after that you had to deal with in the local --

WL: Well, in any local or any independent association, there's always battles that you're fighting, and whether those are over policies, whether they're over decisions that the county board of supervisors -- in this case -- would make that impacted the workforce. It was staffing issues. Bearing in mind that we represented hospital employees, public works employees. We represented clericals. We represented everything, so everything that the civil service commission [00:13:00] made a decision on, if it affected the workforce adversely, then we had a responsibility to make a case -- not just being adversarial, but, "Can we do it better? Is there a better approach to resolving these issues?"

SC: So what made you decide to become a staff member for international? How did that come about?

WL: Well, let me just put this in context.

SC: Sure.

WL: Our association, when we affiliated, we had some ideas about how we could grow AFSCME in the state of California because in every county and many cities, you had independent associations that were essentially making the same case that we were. We felt that if AFSCME could approach [00:14:00] independent associations with sort of a trade union philosophy of how they can improve the wellbeing of the members that they represented, perhaps we could affiliate organizations in large numbers, and not one member at a time. So our appeal to the national union at that time was to give consideration to this issue of affiliations. The then leadership after the 1964 convention, where President Jerry Wurf became president, was open to this idea, and we saw not only ourselves, but building alliances with other independent associations of California and producing large affiliations by the thousands with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, and our organization became a participant in that approach. [00:15:00] The national union amended its constitution and gave the authority to its officers to approve those kinds of affiliation agreements, and our organization became very active in

pursuing up and down the state of California those kind of affiliation agreements.

SC: So that's the first time that that was really done within AFSCME was California?

WL: I can't say whether it was the first time or not, affiliation. But certainly it produced a major shift in focus at the national level, and a whole new approach was taken to public sector organizing in our state.

SC: So then your activities with that really caught the eye of Jerry Wurf, who approached you?

WL: Well, I don't know if it caught his eye, but, I mean, we were trying to organize public sector workers across the spectrum. [00:16:00] Well, I mean, I have no idea why the approach was made to become a part of the staff of the union. At the same time these things were happening, what we really noticed was a larger involvement of the federal government into the affairs of state and local government. When I say involved, I mean rules, regulations, procedures, etc. And California at that time was an incredibly progressive state. It had a great civil service system. A massive increase was taking place in the context of highway construction and mobilization and infrastructure development flowing from President Eisenhower's view of the

role of the federal government in assisting state and local governments. And we thought [00:17:00] that there was a real need for a presence of AFSCME in the discussion and debate that takes place at this level -- at the national level of government -- and we should have some presence as rules and regulations were being discussed. Bear in mind we represent public works. We represented hospitals. We represented social workers. We represented virtually every function in the public sector, and if we were gonna have national policy changes, legislative approaches, then we had to have a role in that process. And the president then thought about setting up what he called at that time a legislative department whose principal function would be to represent our interests in these discussions, and so I was approached from the point of view of would I be interested in participating and structuring that kind of program?

SC: What was your initial thought when he presented the [00:18:00] idea to you? Were you immediately interested?

WL: Well, I didn't really understand fully how it would look and what its role would be. I didn't know a whole lot about a national union at that point in time. But for the discussion, certainly it was reasonable to assume that if we're gonna have large allocations of resources to

hospitals, equal amounts to hospitals, and etc., that from an internal policy question, we ought to be a part of the thinking -- we as public employees generally, not we as just AFSCME Local 1675. But it was important that the national union recognize what was taking place, and on that basis, I thought it was a golden opportunity to break some new ground, so to speak.

SC: So then what did you end up doing once you took on that role? What [00:19:00] type of projects?

WL: Well, I came to work for the national union in 1966, and we didn't have a department. We had to set up a department, and our first order of business was to determine how broad an issue is this? And what do we need to do to be able to make a case for the bulk of our membership? And we were sort of a bicoastal organization, east, west with a smattering of organizations in between. So our view was, "Let's take a look at federal legislation that can impact our membership. What kinds of legislation can improve the opportunities to make the public sector more effective and efficient?" And we just followed the discussions that were taking place in Congress.

SC: So you were in contact with members of Congress and trying to influence them?

WL: Well, our role was [00:20:00] legislation and legislative activity, so we had to set up a department that could find a way to interact with the various committees of Congress and the participants of those committees who were acting on matter important to us.

SC: Okay. So that was 1966, when you started that. And then a year later or less than a year later, you were in Detroit.

WL: Well, let me just make this point.

SC: Sure.

WL: We had jurisdiction and responsibility for any number of activities across the union. We had members in Panama. We had members in large states who were doing different activities involving public sector functions. So our mission in life is try and figure [00:21:00] out how can we help make life better for our members? And so we were doing all kinds of activities, interacting with the federal government and the committees of government. Detroit was a completely different kind of issue. It was an internal activity of a particular district council that required the national union to pay some attention to, and the president asked if I would -- well, he didn't really ask. He said, "Go to Detroit and try and square this away." That was in 1967, and Detroit, the organization represented workers for

the city of Detroit in the various departments [00:22:00] of the city -- public works, clerical, court systems, housing, water, all the normal functions a city has. And the internal conflict with the organization is what we were trying to bring together so it could be much more effective, representing its members.

SC: Do you know why he took you away from the legislative department to work on a completely different situation?

WL: Because he was the president. Presidents do what they choose to do. I think the issues that he was concerned about, he thought that if we could find a way to get people to work together to understand that it's not about my individual local union, but it's about the groupings of locals affiliated with this particular [00:23:00] district council, that -- I mean, the evidence was that they were not working together. The question became, "How can we get them to work together?" And we had a process, what we called a trusteeship where the national union takes responsibility for the activities and operations of the organization. And he asked that I would take on that responsibility of being the chief operating officer of the council and do whatever needed to be done to bring those affiliated local unions together to work on behalf of the

total membership. We had a contractual relationship with the city of Detroit where we had a master agreement that covered virtually all of the city employees.

SC: And what were some of the things that you had to do in order to improve the situation there?

WL: Stop the warfare, first of all, and get people to understand that [00:24:00] this is a much larger issue than my little cubbyhole. We had to try and pull together the contracts that covered the employees in the city service. We had to prepare for negotiations. We had to talk about organizing. We had to develop an educational department, a research department for the group itself, and find the people to implement that kind of a program.

SC: Was that a very challenging situation for you?

WL: Oh yes. I mean, if you're starting from total disarray to try to put it into some order, you've got to, first of all, find the people who can fulfill the roles that you need in order to make an effective organization.

SC: Had you had experiences similar to that in California that you drew from?

WL: No.

SC: No?

WL: No. I think as [00:25:00] we got people to simply understand what the role of the union was, and how we could carry it out, and to do that, we had to have pretty much every--

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WL: [00:00:00] -- on the same team, and how you build that team would become the issue, and the issue was to reorient people.

SC: How long were you there?

WL: About two years. Maybe two and a half.

SC: So I understand you were not in the area during the civil unrest in 1967.

WL: I was not there when it started. I was there through the wrap-up portions. The national union, particularly President Wurf, really saw the union's role beyond just this city or this county, but he saw the national union's role as much larger in terms of the global effort of public sector workers to form global movements to improve not only

their own standing, but to improve [00:01:00] the quality of the life in the countries that they came from.

SC: So I want --

WL: So at the point that the uprising in Detroit started, I was involved in an international project for the president.

SC: Okay. I want to talk more about that later. But when you came back to Detroit, what did you see? What did you experience of the unrest?

WL: Well, the city obviously was in chaos -- at least the major sections of the African American community, where the activities started. The city had been burned in many places. Whole neighborhoods were burned down, burned out. A complete breakdown between the community and law enforcement [00:02:00] organizations. The distrust of the various communities of influence with the official operations of the city. And our job was to do our job as we had done before the riots. We didn't have any role in it, but certainly the need to provide basic services, whether it's water, sewer, street cleaning, sanitation, etc. All of those had to be carried on. Secondly, I think we had to have an understanding with the city services that our folks were available to work, and that there needed to

be a plan developed by the political leadership to make sure that city services were provided.

SC: Did you work with the city leadership?

WL: Of course.

SC: What was [00:03:00] the impact on the members, then? Were they eager to go back to work, to continue working at that time?

WL: I don't want to use the word eager, but, I mean, they had to earn a living. They were employees ready to go to work, and what the city had to do was bring the situation back to some normality so that they could perform their jobs. The city council, the mayor's office -- and I'm not sure whether the state governor's offices were engaged, but there had to be a program developed at that level to allow our folks to do their work.

SC: Were there any activities from the council, aside from returning to work, to provide any kind of relief to the citizens?

WL: Well, we did as best we could an analysis of who was [00:04:00] affected by the activity, and try to make some decisions as to what we as an organization could do to help out, and whether that was help work with the religious community, the educational community, whatever our people

could do to lend some assistance to moving back toward normality. We found different churches we could work with, student groups -- and when I say student, I should say educational groups that we could work with to just lend whatever assistance we could do.

SC: What type of assistance?

WL: Money, resources, people, whatever we could do to help out.

SC: Okay. So did that event have an impact on -- I know you said you had to work with [00:05:00] the city and get your members back to work. Did it have any other impact on your work as the administrator?

WL: No, not really.

SC: Okay. So from Detroit, you were called to go to Memphis --

WL: Yes.

SC: -- in 1968. Was that another situation where the president sent you there?

WL: What we had learned through some various ways, that there was a possible strike in the makings in Memphis, Tennessee, and we really didn't have a feel for what was going on, and the question was would I go to Memphis and see what's going on? And I did in February of '68, and [00:06:00] what information we had gotten -- I believe we had got this from a reporter from the *Washington Post* newspaper that he was

passing through. He saw this activity. What were we planning to do? And this was news to us. We weren't planning to do anything. So we went down, and sure enough, it was a full-fledged strike in the making.

SC: What were the major issues that led to that situation?

WL: I think that you had a workforce that, I guess, like most Southern cities was treated just a little short of contempt by the political leadership of the city. There were no real guidelines for the way that [00:07:00] certain departments were handled. There was no procedures by which the workforce could get its issues on the table, no procedures by which it could appeal decisions that were made with regard to disciplinary actions. There was no opportunities to have a voice in wages and benefits and conditions of employment, and year after year after year, I guess these things simply festered. And I guess if there was a catalyst to the strike starting, it was the fact that after substantial arguments about unsafe equipment in the sanitation department, two workers were killed with unsafe equipment, and there were no [00:08:00] programs which take care of workers who were killed in the line of duty. And this, I think, really sent a message to the workforce that these things can't be tolerated. At the same time, you had

contradictory policies. In some departments -- and this is a bad, inclement weather situation -- some workers would be allowed to continue to work. Others would be sent home. The makeup of the workforce was a low-wage workforce, so if you take a day out of their wages, this is a serious situation, particularly when someone who works side-by-side is allowed to work a full day. So these things were the catalysts of the strike of 1968.

SC: And so what was your role there?

WL: [00:09:00] My role was to try and lend whatever assistance I could to the workers, once they made a decision that they were gonna go on strike. And when I say my role, it was to try and give whatever advice or ideas that could help strengthen their role in terms of to bring about these changes that they'd absolutely needed, and not just myself, but other staff people who were assigned to the project itself.

SC: Can you tell me about the origin of the "I Am a Man" slogan? Did you have involvement with that?

WL: The strike that we're talking about really became a major, major undertaking -- not just the men themselves, but the union itself. [00:10:00] It was February of 1968 wintertime, and the last thing you wanna have in the winter

is a sanitation strike. So the question was what kind of confrontation is this? And what's it gonna be like? And how do we help the men who are involved understand what they've gotten themselves into? The community ultimately came around to lend support to the workers with an awful lot of work being done to get the community to understand what this was about. After a while, it became clear that we were gonna need something to hold all of this together, and if you understand the South, the work that was being done was jobs specifically reserved for Black men. [00:11:00] And the disrespect, the arbitrary decisions with regards to everything, was an issue that was coming into the strike. The city political leadership could care less. I mean, it was not a situation where they were sympathetic to resolving problems, and ultimately we had to figure out what was it that would give them a sense of pride in what they were doing? So a fellow by the name of James Lawson had a press conference in support of the strikers and described the situation that if a leader of a city treated a person as if they were not a person, that was an act of racism. So the "I am a man," [00:12:00] came out of that discussion. A fellow by the name of Malcolm Blackburn and myself was charged with trying to find some slogan that

would keep not only the movement going, but give folks a sense of pride in what they were doing. So the slogan "I Am a Man" was an effort to get them to understand that they were struggling for more than a nickel more an hour, but something that's much deeper in the sense of their moral right to have a voice in decisions that affect their wellbeing as workers. So that slogan was the outgrowth of the things that had happened before, and something they would instantly understand.

SC: So did people immediately respond to that, do you feel?

WL: Well, the slogan is still being used today 49 years [00:13:00] later.

SC: When you talked about getting community support, how important was that to that situation?

WL: Well, it was incredibly important in the Memphis situation because no one had ever given much thought to the role of garbage workers. Nobody had ever thought about the value that they have to a city, county, whatever. Wherever solid waste exists, somebody has to deal with it. These men had worked, many of them, for 15, 20 years. They were still earning $1.50 an hour, and they had no grievance procedure. There was no promotional procedure. There was no safety mechanism. There were none of the things you would

normally associate with work, and the fact that it was an almost 100 percent Black workforce [00:14:00] suggested that the city had less concern for the role that they played than anything else. And the issue was they were going, and made a decision to try and see if they could bring about change, and the community was a part of that. The community didn't understand what was taking place and didn't have a real idea of how they could participate, but when they discovered that the situation these men were confronted with was by and large the same situation that other workers were confronted with, and they began to understand that there's a real issue here that the community needed to join and bring support to.

SC: So when you were there, I think you, Jerry Wurf, and P. J. Ciampa were charged with contempt of court. Can you tell me [00:15:00] what led to that and what happened with that?

WL: Well, the city took the position that the workforce in not going to work was in violation of the law, and that they must go back to work, and we were responsible for sending them back to work, which reflects the mentality at that point in time. The city and the police department deputized newspaper reporters and made the reporters a part of the law enforcement process, and in our daily meetings

with the workforce, what we would say to them is that they have a right -- because the only thing they have [00:16:00] is their services, and if they can't argue for improvement in how they do their services -- okay, so with the deputizing of newspaper reporters, then bringing those deputized newspaper writers into a court of law and requiring them to testify as to what was said during the rallies of workers, the reporters said that we never told the workers to go back to work. And that became the basis for the court finding us in contempt of court by not ordering them to go back to work, and the court was right. We never ordered them to go back to work, and so we were brought up on contempt charges.

SC: If you had ordered them to go back to work, do you think they would have?

WL: [00:17:00] I have no way of knowing, but I would not have ordered them to go back to work.

SC: So did you end up going to jail?

WL: Well, it was an in and out thing.

SC: Okay.

WL: The court didn't know what to do with us, and so they -- well, as a matter of fact, in the hearing on the contempt thing, the workers stood up and said, "Well, we quit. We

resign, and therefore we didn't have anything to go back to, even if they had told us to go back." And our telling them to go back wouldn't have had any impact.

SC: So while that was happening, or some of these other events in Memphis, what were you feeling personally? Did you feel that [00:18:00] the strike was a good thing, a necessary thing? Were you nervous about any aspect of it?

WL: Well, it really wasn't for me to feel one way or the other. It was for the workers who were involved in this to make a decision as to whether or not they believed this was in their best interests and this was what they should be doing. My job was if they made that decision, how to help them carry it out. I think that the conditions under which they worked and had worked for many, many years, they were very clear that they had simply just had enough, and my feelings as a staff person, did I have doubts about decisions we could have, should have, might have? Hindsight is always 20/20. What we tried to do based on the situation we were confronted with is make the best choices [00:19:00] for how to give them the strength and the strategy and all that to carry forth the decision they had made. And I think without question, we did that, and we never withheld information that may have swayed their

judgment one way or another. But we gave them our best judgment based on what we were confronted with as to what course of action we should take, and the community mobilization approach, the resource mobilization process, all these were things that went into trying to make sure that they understood and would not be forced back to work. If they wanted to go back, that was their decision to make.

SC: So most, if not all, of the striking workers were men, is that correct?

WL: All the strikers were men.

SC: All the strikers were men. [00:20:00] So what role did women have in the strike?

WL: Oh, they played a very important role in terms of a support mechanism. There were very strong women who headed up different organizations in town. There were women who played roles in outreach to the broader communities. There were committees formed through which additional support was brought to the table. There were strong ladies in the religious community who played roles in bringing religious leadership to the table, to bring support to the strike. That very first lady who joined us was a lady by the name of Cornelia Crenshaw, who just showed up and said she had heard about what was going on and wanted to help. So a

lady by the name of [00:21:00] Alma Morris who was a community political activist who just had access to any number of people who wanted to bring help to the organizations. There was the NAACP. There was all kinds of community-based groups, once they understood what the battle was about, found ways to bring assistance to the effort.

SC: Did you have any role in bringing Martin Luther King Jr. to Memphis?

WL: I was part of the discussion, but I didn't personally play a role in going to see him to come. A minister by the name of James Lawson who had been a colleague of Dr. King's for many, many years saw the timing as one that could be advantageous [00:22:00] to the strike as well as advantageous to Dr. King himself. At the time the strike was taking place, Dr. King was involved in what was being called the Poor People's Campaign at that time where the effort was to put a real face on poverty in the country, and here was the classic example of people who worked every day, but still could not raise themselves out of poverty, and that was what we called the working poor. And so I think that Jim really convinced -- well, maybe he didn't have to convince him, but certainly raised the issue of,

"Here you have this real contradiction to our system -- people who work every single day, yet cannot raise themselves out of poverty." So the decision was made by Dr. King at the Southern Christian Leadership conference that they would come and see what they could do to aid the striking [00:23:00] workers. A fellow by the name of Jesse Epps, who used to be on our staff here at the national union, really -- but Dr. King came to Memphis twice, and Mr. Epps was instrumental in convincing him to come the second time prior to the assassination.

SC: Did you have much interaction with Dr. King?

WL: Only in the context of our -- not me, him, but our team's discussion of tactics, strategies, and approaches to how we strengthen the role that the strikers are building, and how do we bring other organizations' support to the effort?

SC: [00:24:00] And what was that experience like?

WL: Well, I think the fact that Dr. King recognized the issue that we had and was open to sharing ideas and strategies about how we build on that -- not just to highlight the problem that working poor people have, but how do we solve this strike? We exchanged ideas openly and frankly as to what we thought would work and not work. And for a staff person of a union, obviously to have the opportunity to

exchange ideas and thoughts with someone of his stature was pretty heady [00:25:00] stuff.

SC: So was it during his first visit where there was a march that turned violent?

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WL: [00:00:00] Let me see, when was the first -- yeah. Yeah, what we had was -- what we were building towards was a major, major demonstration that would bring attention to the strike. The strike was three, four, five weeks old before anybody knew about it. I mean, it was the best-kept secret since the D-Day invasion. And essentially this city and the law enforcement community controlled the communications around the strike, and so what we had decided to do was just see if we could reach out to colleagues of the union who would be willing to come to Memphis, speak to the workers, and perhaps they would bring press with them, and press would see what was taking place. So we had fellows like Bayard Rustin [00:01:00] and Roy Wilkins and others who came to Memphis at the president's

request, and Dr. King, as I said. Jim Lawson, who had been an ally, asked if he would come, and he was probably the first major, major figure who would come. And when he saw what was taking place, he made the connection between poverty and the conditions of these employees who worked every day, and so he identified with the strike and began to see how he and his organization, SCLC, could be of direct assistance. So he came and made one major speech in a rally we had at one of the big churches in town.

SC: So [00:02:00] what happened? How did the march take a turn for the worse?

WL: Well, there were a lot of forces at work once the strike became a major deal. Some accused the young people of trying to make a name for themselves by being disruptive. I'm not one of those. The disruption was a direct result of the FBI's engagement and their perception of what was taking place in the strike. There was a young group of folks in Memphis called the Invaders, many of which were -- or I should say a number of which were FBI agents who were placed into the role of being provocateurs. And [00:03:00] I don't recall the date of the march, but the march was broken up by people who had more of a commitment to diminishing the image of Dr. King than they did of anything

else. And so the march that was planned for that Saturday -- I believe it was maybe the twenty-eighth. Well, let me back up a ways. The initial march was set and we had this massive blizzard, and the march was then reset for March. I believe it was March twenty-eighth. And the disruption really came about more from provocateurs than it did from young people who were upset with the process. Lots of people got injured. The police was really just [00:04:00] totally out of control. A young fellow by the name of Larry Payne was killed. So there was lots and lots stuff done more to diminish the image of Dr. King than it was to help any other way. There was a curfew set on the city that day, I believe, and it lasted for a few days.

SC: So that really had to do with the FBI's interest --

WL: That's my belief.

SC: -- in Martin Luther King. But most people probably didn't know that, so they probably accused the workers?

WL: Well, we didn't know that until later that year. Senator Frank Church had a series of [00:05:00] Congressional hearings, and these issues came out in those hearings, the involvement. J. Edgar Hoover thought that the AFSCME Local 1733 was out to take over the world, starting in the sanitation department of Memphis, Tennessee, and so we have

to assume that that view permeated those that he assigned to work on this.

SC: So what was, I guess, the mood among the strikers after that happened?

WL: They were more determined than ever to keep going, and at that point, the staff people responsible for the thing, we had to rethink our strategy. "Is this symptomatic [00:06:00] of something? Is this what we're gonna ask these men to confront on a regular basis?" And we had to not only rethink it, but make sure they understood it.

SC: So in what ways did you change your strategy?

WL: We didn't change it.

SC: You didn't change it? Just the --

WL: We just had to understand it a little better, that there were forces at work that were beyond our control.

F1: Do you need any water?

SC: There's some water here, if you need it.

WL: I'm okay.

F1: Are you okay? Okay.

SC: So when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, what was the impact on you personally?

WL: Well, I think obviously it was just -- [00:07:00] the point that it happened, I can't say what my initial thoughts

were, but I had sense to raise the question, A, was there a decision we could have made that may not have produced the same flow of events? Were we inserting our own thoughts to the men as opposed to did we listen close enough to what they were saying that we may have selected a different set of tactics? Did we do enough outreach? And to the extent that there were discussions taking place, did we miss any opportunities for progress before this? And I think the answer to all of those came out, "No." [00:08:00] I mean, we didn't do anything that provoked this, and as we learned later on, this was something that -- I mean, Dr. King, the assassination in Memphis took place because they wanted to assassinate him in Memphis. The strike and the assassination were just tangentially connected. So, I mean, our view was that the struggle has to continue. Now the ante is a little bit higher, but we've got to figure out how to pursue this to the end. And I'm sure it affected everybody. It affected the entire country. But we still had a strike that had to be settled.

SC: How were you able to ultimately [00:09:00] be successful in that strike?

WL: Well, I think without question, the assassination created a set of dynamics. The president of the United States at

that time, Lyndon Johnson, I mean, seeing what was going on across the country obviously had the direct need to get involved. And he assigned assistant secretary of labor, a fellow by the names of James Reynolds, and instructed him to get involved, and he proceeded -- I'm assuming -- to think through, "How do we move this?" So President Johnson got the Labor Department involved. He reached out to the state governor's office [00:10:00] and the city and the business community to try to figure out, "How do we get all the sides to start thinking differently about this?" And our role was to continue to build support for the strikers and to bring in additional support to make sure that they were not forced by this event to have to go back. In the end, the various forces created a process where we could start to at least have a conversation about what settlement looked like. Now, I would say the strike was settled twice before we got to this point, but the mayor either didn't have the political will or the political ability to find a way to bring this to an end. And [00:11:00] ultimately, a process was set up where the union and the city selected people to participate in a discussion of the issues surrounding the strike, and to try and see if we could find some common ground. And after the funeral service of Dr.

King, we got into a series of discussions that lasted about 10, 12 days, but ultimately began to show some progress, and in the end, we began to see where we could settle it. And the odd thing is we wound up settling it by and large along the same lines as the other two recommendations were before that. What the men wanted out of the strike was the ability to have their union and to have a financial way of supporting its activity. [00:12:00] So the issue of recognition and the issue of a financial check-off of their dues so they could pay for the operations of the union were key elements in this, and the recognition issue was fairly easy to handle because everybody was on strike. The manner in which they financed it was a little bit different. We had offered to them before -- because the city took the position that it would not deduct dues and transmit it to the union, and if you don't have that, you don't have a way of financing the union. So our thought was -- and we suggested -- that if there was a credit union where men could join the credit union, and have the credit union deduct on a monthly basis their dues and transmit it to the union, that would be [00:13:00] a process that would be acceptable to us. I'm not sure whether it was new, but it was a wrinkle, and the city was independent of that

process. They didn't have the ability to say, "No, we won't do it." And so ultimately, we settled on it, although we had offered it way back when, and what we wound up having to do was make every striker a member of the credit union so that there would be a process by which dues could be deducted. And the other issues -- because once the assassination took place, once the riots or whatever you wanna call it in the first march took place -- the other issues became involved. This was not a wage strike, but it was obviously gonna require wage [00:14:00] improvements in order to resolve it. There was no grievance procedures, and we were demanding a grievance procedure all along so that folks would have a way of resolving issues. There was no promotion policy. There was no training policy for how a worker gets from walking behind a truck to maybe driving the truck. All of the things that would be part of a normal contract became now on the table, and the city appointed its city attorney and his assistant as negotiators, and they found -- I believe it was a hotel owner, but a member of the city council, and then Mr. Reynolds found a private sector arbitrator who had done work [00:15:00] on it before. But we at least got a team of people together who could figure out what it is

they wanna do and see if we could work towards that. And in the end, all of this came together, and the provisions of a contract -- or a memorandum of understanding, what we called it at that point in time -- was all put together. And based on those issues, we thought we had a strike resolution that we could recommend to the membership.

SC: And so then the membership approved?

WL: Unanimously approved it. The process of getting them all together was a little tricky, but we went to sort of a mass regional announcement of the possibility of a strike settlement and reached out to everyone through every process we had -- radio, television, word of mouth, churches, whatever, however we could get the word out that there was a possibility that there's been a settlement and we want the workers to come [00:16:00] to the church where we were gonna have this meeting and voice their opinions. And before we could go do that, we had to have a discussion with the community leadership because we had really brought a lot of people into this, and we did not think we could have a settlement without having them at least have a comment on the provisions of the settlement, which was for us, we thought, a fairly risky proposition because we've got provisions that affect workers' lives. You're gonna

have people passing judgment on it that's not impacted by it. And so we had to think that through. So we called a meeting with the leadership of the community support groups and I talked to them about [00:17:00] the kinds of things we had arrived at as a possible solution, and I don't think we asked them to approve or disapprove, but "Here is where we stand, and this is what it looks like." And for us, it was good because they knew what we had gone through and what the workers had gone through, and they were perfectly comfortable with the workers having the opportunity to voice their opinion on these provisions, and it was a unanimous approval.

SC: So you wanted to present that to community leaders because they had been so supportive?

WL: Well, we'd had every church on this side of town -- but you can't arrive at a decision without having them at least know what it is that's gonna be put before the workers. If we put something before the [00:18:00] workers and we've got some fellow from wherever deciding he doesn't like this provision and he either raises a stink about it or says that it's not sufficient, then in our coalition, we've got a division. So we want to make sure that they knew what

was being proposed, why, and what the meaning of it was, and trusted them to make the right judgment.

SC: Do you feel that that experience in Memphis changed you in any way? What were the big lessons that you took away from it?

WL: Well, I think the King assassination changed everybody, including myself, and I think reinforced the notion that workers ought not be forced by their circumstances [00:19:00] to work under any conditions or to accept any provisions for the service that they bring. And while it was unfortunate that Dr. King was assassinated in the process, the struggle around which he was fighting was for the ability of workers to be compensated, be treated fairly, and to have the opportunity to improve their quality of life. I mean, that was the struggle. It was not about a nickel more an hour. I mean, and that's what comes out of it. And these workers in Memphis were not unique. We've got thousands and thousands of workers just like them all over the country -- millions, I should say.

SC: [00:20:00] Okay. How are you feeling? Do you wanna keep going?

WL: I'm fine.

SC: Okay.

WL: I'm fine.

SC: I'd like to talk briefly about the Atlanta sanitation strikes. So there was a strike in 1970. Can you talk about how that compared to Memphis? Was it similar issues or different?

WL: Maybe similar issues, but completely different context. The Atlanta strike of 1970 was workers just demanding better pay, which was not the case in Memphis. And Atlanta was a very unique city. [00:21:00] Our members reacting to the power structure in Atlanta denying a member of the city council -- I think it was a member of the city council -- the opportunity to even compete for the office of mayor. There you had a fellow by the name of Sam Massell who wanted to stand for mayor, but was being frozen out by the power structure of the city of Atlanta. So our folks, thinking they might have a better chance with Massell as mayor as opposed to somebody else, came to his defense. And he ran for mayor and won, as a matter of fact. I think before the ink got dry, we began to have problems with his recognition of our desire for a [00:22:00] better situation, and that sort of played itself out. And then in the course of that struggle, the then deputy mayor -- I forget whatever title Maynard Jackson held -- he came out

in support of the strikers, which we considered to be good for us. Then later on he ran for mayor and won the election, and true to form, he performed the same way as the other guy performed. So we had the two different situations, and really the total warfare with Maynard Jackson because he obviously we thought should've been sympathetic to the struggles that workers were having because he had supported the same approach earlier. The strike was not nearly as successful because he proceeded to fire people right away, or at least threatened and maybe did. So, I mean, it was not a winning strike [00:23:00] for the union, but the union promoted the strike as always, "If the workers decide that the only thing they can do to change their situation is withhold their services, that's the decision that they make," and we would fight like all get out to protect that right to make that decision. And so we took some real heat as an organization because we were perceived as attacking newly-elected Black leadership across the South. If workers are being misused, whether the political leadership that misused them is Black or white or green, that's irrelevant. The fact is they're not given the rights to participate fully in the issues that affect them.

SC: AFSCME was supportive of [00:24:00] Mayor Jackson when he was running, right?

WL: Very supportive.

SC: Did you interact with him personally?

WL: Yeah, some. Yeah, I mean, Maynard was a politician, and we've come to learn over time that politicians by and large are cut from the same bolt of cloth. Some, you'll make out very well. Others, you won't make out at all. And so our role has to be -- there is a certain set of principles that we live by, and that is to protect the interests of workers to exert -- advocate on their own behalf through whatever processes are set up, but equally true is to try and fight for a process that gives them the opportunity to do that. And in Atlanta, that battle was about, [00:25:00] "We help you, you help us, but nothing illegal," or what have you. It's a matter of, "We are entitled to a voice at the table that deals with our wellbeing."

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A01 Archive Bill Lucy 00004

SC: [00:00:00] Do you think there's anything that could've been done differently in '77 to make that a more successful strike?

WL: I don't think so. I think the mayor made a decision that was a political decision. Where do he cast his lot? Do he stay with the business community of Atlanta and aspire for some higher political office? Or do he give into the workers, as they would perceive it to be giving in? Workers, I don't recall all the dynamics, but workers hadn't had a wage increase in Atlanta for some time, and certainly the city was able to sit with and meet with and talk with and give some sympathy to the condition that they were faced with.

SC: Okay.

WL: [00:01:00] I would add this. That's where P. J. Chiampa and myself spent about three or four days in jail.

SC: Okay.

WL: I forget. I don't even remember the circumstances, but it was interesting.

SC: How so?

WL: You ever been to jail?

SC: Nope.

WL: Well then, if you go to jail, you'll figure out (laughter) why it's interesting. No, it was just a part of the city's refusal to recognize their responsibility of solving a problem. I mean, it's one thing to say, "Okay, I cannot do this amount, but I can do this." But to refuse to do it at all and to hide behind the fact that the men are not entitled to either a wage increase or a benefit increase, [00:02:00] in a city like Atlanta, these are men who come from the urban section of Atlanta, who work every day for the city, and still the political leadership refuses to deal with their needs. And so I don't know what else you could do other than confront that issue.

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A01 Archive Bill Lucy 00006

F1: [00:00:00] I am recording.

SC: Okay. I didn't mean to ask you questions when it wasn't rolling, but could you go back to what you were just saying about the press depicting the strike as a subversive process?

WL: Well, I think in 1968, a strike of sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee put everybody out of the norm, and I think the perception was, given all the other things that was happening in 1968, was this was some sort of a subversive act, and no one wanted to treat it as, "This is a struggle of workers to improve their quality of life." And whether it was the mayor of Memphis or anywhere up the chain, including law enforcement agencies as well as the major one -- the [00:01:00] Federal Bureau of Investigation -- they really saw this as some subversive act. And here you have men who, as I said earlier, who had worked 15, 20 years, their conditions of employment have not substantially changed in all those years, and they were fighting for a better way of life. It was so easy to dismiss, simply saying, "This is some subversive thing."

SC: Well, before our break, I think we had finished talking about Atlanta. Did you have anything else to say about that?

WL: No, like I said, Atlanta was a completely different situation than Memphis, and what Atlanta raised was really irrespective of political leadership, [00:02:00] whether or not the perception is that workers should be treated fairly. And here we had a Sam Massell, and Ivan Allen

prior to him, and Maynard Jackson in a city like Atlanta -- one of the more progressive cities of the South -- at least that was their label -- still treating low-paid workers in the same manner. And I think it says something about our society.

SC: Did you have less trust in public officials after that?

WL: Well, I didn't have a lot of trust in them before that. I mean, I think a trade union organization ought not get so enamored with essentially your boss, whether they be a mayor or a chair of a county board of supervisors or a state rep. They're all employers, [00:03:00] and they tend to do what is in their best interests. The message to us is we have to build a strong enough organization to effectively represent workers in that environment.

SC: Okay. Let's transition into when you became secretary-treasurer. So how did that come about? How did you decide to run?

WL: The secretary-treasurer who preceded me was a fellow by the name of Joe Ames who had been elected secretary-treasurer I believe in '64 or '65 and by the time we approached 1971, [00:04:00] 1972, I think Secretary-Treasurer Ames wanted to do some other things. He was just absolutely committed to the constitution of the union, and he wanted it to reflect

the openness, the democracy, all the various things that would make an organization like ours a mainline organization, and certainly one that reflected its concern and commitment to its members. So I think he wanted to do the constitution fully, and he wanted to take on a different role, and I think he had a conversation with the president, then Jerry Wurf, that he was considering stepping aside at the next election, which was at that time then in 1972. And apparently they had this conversation, and at a point, the then president asked if I wanted to consider [00:05:00] running for office, and frankly, I didn't know what that meant at this level of the union, so I wasn't eager to jump into something totally new and different. And so his point was, "Think about it and let's talk about it again at some point later on." And I didn't dismiss the idea, but there were questions that were raised as a result of it, and so we talked about it. And I kind of felt that more than just an interesting idea -- I really ought to get a sense of what people across the country thought about the possibility of something like this. And so I told the president, "I'd really like to talk to some folks whose judgment we both value," and see what they thought. And in the end, enough people thought it was

[00:06:00] a good idea, and then maybe I could at least be effective in doing it, although I wasn't altogether sure what doing it meant. But I agreed, and we put together a program to try and make that happen. So in 1972 -- I think it was June, our June convention in 1972 -- Joe stood aside, and I stood for election, and I think our convention that year was in Houston, Texas, and I was fortunate the members had enough confidence, I guess, to elect me to office, and I was very, very honored to have accepted the nomination and accepted the position.

SC: So when you went around talking to people, were you talking to local leaders?

WL: [00:07:00] Yes, the local leaders. As you may know, we have a three-level structure -- local union, district councils, and the last one, the union. So I talked to people at every level and see what they thought because this was something that was very new for me, and probably it was gonna be kind of new for them. And what bit of record was out there, we tried to say, "Is this enough that would convince people in your organization and you yourself to be supportive of it?"

SC: So when you say it would be new for them, was that because you're a African American leader?

WL: Because I was a rank-and-filer who came on the national staff in ’72 -- well, long enough to at least build some record of activity, and would this be enough?

SC: Yeah, that was [00:08:00] unusual at the time because a lot of leaders came in from not having been rank-and-file, right?

WL: Yeah, they were national officers and what have you, and there were certainly other people at the national level who might run in that election. It certainly wasn’t for me to be presumptuous.

SC: And at the time, there weren’t any other high-ranking African American leaders in major unions, is that correct?

WL: I really don’t have a judgment on that.

SC: Okay. So was that ever a problem? You had a lot of support, so that wasn’t an issue at all?

WL: No, it didn’t turn out to be.

SC: Okay. So when you ran, what were some of the things going in that you wanted to work on, that you set out to accomplish?

WL: [00:09:00] Well, I really didn’t fully know and understand the constitutional role of the secretary-treasurer. Although they’re spelled out in the constitution, beyond what the written pages says, what’s the relationship

between that office, the president's office, members of the executive board, local affiliates, etc.? Of course I was aware of the fact that responsibility is the financial side of the union, but I wasn't an accountant. I mean, so I wouldn't do book keeping and stuff like that. So we talked about what's the breadth of what you can do, and what are you bringing to the goals of the union at that time? I mean, 1972, we were talking about more organizing, so what can you [00:10:00] do to aid that? What kinds of issues would both your office and you as a person bring at it, value? I mean, and so those are the kinds of things I wanted an answer to. I mean, I wasn't interested in being a book keeper.

SC: Was there anything unexpected about your new role as secretary-treasurer that you had to deal with?

WL: Well, certainly me going from a staff person to an elected officer is a major transition, and the responsibilities that went with that in many aspects were new. I mean, I had never done it before. Although I had worked very closely with both officers and had a little bit of time working as an executive [00:11:00] assistant to the president, you still don't know all the possibilities and potential things that'll crop up. So it was a big time

learning experience, and I certainly thank Joe Ames and certainly President Wurf for giving me the exposure to learn these things. And we carried a lot of things over from when I first came on the staff as the associate director of legislation and community affairs. I mean, a lot of the legislative contacts I had made over the years were relevant to what the union was trying to do, so you had that kind of thing. You had the fact that President Wurf really was a -- I guess the best way to describe it is an internationalist. I mean, he saw our union being a force globally [00:12:00] and trying to promote quality public services, and at the same time being a catalyst to workers in other countries building vehicles to help them improve their lives. So the ideas of things that the union could be doing, and maybe should be doing, were put on the table for discussions, and the question was whether or not President Wurf was willing to expand these things and make the union a larger part of what was going on globally as well as domestically. So, I mean, it meant a lot of frequent flier miles, but I thought that was a good deal.

SC: So let's talk about some of [00:13:00] your work internationally. Your involvement with international

issues really grew out of things that President Wurf had worked on?

WL: Yeah, as I said, he was an internationalist, and a lot of international work is not clearly understood, particularly as it relates to the public sector. I mean, I believe that the public sector is really an extension of democracy, and you think about countries where what people expect really is clean water, clean air, clean streets, decent transportation. I mean, these are all public functions that are really in many ways quality-of-life issues, and the public sector [00:14:00] has a responsibility of delivering these things to its citizens, in many cases in lieu of wages and benefits. So President Wurf really believed that if we can build a stronger international movement, then it could be a bulwark against violence and other kinds of problems between countries and within countries. So he was really very committed to the work of PSI and wanted our union to play a larger role in it and saw himself as being a catalyst to making that happen. So he built a relationship, and kind of a strange one, as a matter of fact, between Israel, which had an incredibly strong trade union foundation, [00:15:00] and particularly in the public sector, and Germany, which was almost the

unique opposite. And it was his view, which I shared, that if we were able to put together the extreme ends of a trade union relationship, it may well be that we could do something globally that made some sense, and so he took on the responsibility of building our relationship with Public Services International, and in so doing making it a strong force in the discussion of peace. And it was something I was interested in. It was something he was interested in the union having a larger role in. We had two allies who were interested in building the same kind of thing, and so a lot of [00:16:00] good things were done, I think.

SC: When do you first become involved with PSI?

WL: Nineteen-sixty-seven.

SC: Okay.

WL: I was assigned to Detroit. We had a major, major meeting that was taking place in Germany of which the president was interested in, and again, it made it sound like he was asking, but it wasn't an ask. It was sort of a direction to participate in this meeting and represent the union in these discussions. And that occurred the same week as the uprising in Detroit, so I was in Stuttgart when it happened, and the meeting ended. The next day, I headed for home.

SC: [00:17:00] So was that early on in that relationship that you were talking about between Germany and Israel?

WL: No, the decision had been made that we should try and build an organization, so the question was who was gonna lead it? So the meeting that took place in Germany was about that very issue: who was gonna lead it? And how would all of that be worked out? And so my role and mission was to deliver the views of our president and make sure that they were understood by all of the other participants and affiliates, that AFSCME is committed to this and we're gonna see it through. And that was 1967.

F1: Hi.

F2: I'm sorry. President Saunders wants to meet with Bill -- [00:12:00] Mr. Lucy right now.

SC: Yeah. Okay.

F1: Oh. Got it.

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A01 Archive Bill Lucy 00007

F1: [00:00:00] --start rolling. I'll give you a (inaudible) in one second. Check your focus. All right. And we are good to go.

SC: Okay. You had mentioned something we didn't cover about Memphis. Was there anything in particular --

WL: No, I just think the Memphis story is such a unique part of the union that it really ought to be reflected as fully as you can, and I'm not clear what and how you want to treat it as a part of the union's growth and history and whatever. So I was, I guess, just taking a look at some stuff that's already in the files, and if need be -- that's based on you guys' judgment -- do it over and do some more.

SC: Okay.

WL: That's my only point.

SC: Okay.

WL: Because there are personalities that were so important to the union that just really need [treated?], yep.

SC: [00:01:00] Okay. So let's go back. We kind of skipped over Vietnam War earlier. AFSCME took a position on the war, I think, that was in conflict with the AFL-CIO. Can you talk about that a little bit?

WL: Well, the war in Vietnam was a real difficult issue for the union to deal with. Our union is made up of the spectrum

of public sector and its members are moderate to conservative, probably a bigger hunk on the conservative side. So the question of taking a position on the war was more of an implication for our membership than it was for the AFL. I mean, the AFL was [00:02:00] lockstep with the administration on the war, and many of us -- certainly leadership level -- were really concerned about the implications of the escalation of a war, the cost of it, the implications on major public policy issues, the dollars that was being drained from the economy, and a lot of us didn't feel the obligation to be supportive of the AFL's position because we didn't think it came out of any depth of thought as opposed to just lockstep behind the administration. And I think the president -- President Wurf -- and many of the leadership thought it was something that ought to have been debated and discussed and ultimately wind up with a decision. And it had been broached at one point that we have a serious discussion, but it just never came about. And the day that [00:03:00] I guess Nixon escalated the bombing to Laos and Cambodia, we were in convention the morning that started, and the membership really wanted to have a debate, and it was at that point that we changed -- well, it was at that point

that we developed a position. We didn't change because we didn't have one before. And that really put us at odds with the AFL-CIO who had its position for its own individual reasons, and it created some tension not just at the national level, but at the state federation level, and some areas of our country where we were a prominent organization -- New York City, Detroit, Philadelphia, Cleveland, the West Coast. And President Wurf [00:04:00] reflected our position as it was a moral position based on what we had been told was the rationale for the war to start with. But the majority of our leadership, and I think a substantial part of our membership, saw the war as a major mistake and a piece of deception, and we sort of rationalized that every bomb you drop in the jungle is one less classroom you could build here at home or one less hospital you could build. I mean, we tried to put it in both a moral context and a pragmatic context, as the cost of the war was more than our economy at the time, we thought, could bear.

SC: Was there any fallout from that disagreement for AFSCME.

WL: Not fallout that cost us anything. I think the relationships between President [00:05:00] Wurf and maybe some parts of the AFL-CIO may have been a bit strained, but

I think we were in step with the times and there were some who valued the position we took, and there were some others who could care less. But on the whole, we felt good as an organization because we felt we were on the right side of history.

SC: And ultimately would you say the membership was behind that decision also?

WL: We never took any poll or anything. I think the membership trusted the analysis that the leadership had made in coming to that position, even though, as I said, we were in convention when the bombing was expanded, and the delegates at that convention were virtually unanimous in their view that we had taken the right position. And we never had any difficulty internally as a result of it.

SC: [00:06:00] Okay. I'd like to talk about the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. So that was founded in 1972, I believe.

WL: Right.

SC: And leading up to that, what were you seeing in the labor movement that led to wanting or needing to form such an organization?

WL: Well, I think like many other institutions at that time, the views of a substantial portion of the membership of

unions affiliated with the AFL-CIO did not reflect itself in their participation, and by that, I mean specifically in regard to AFL-CIO. We just did not see the AFL speaking for and to the interests of substantial members of minority workers -- Black, Latino, [00:07:00] even women -- and I shouldn't say even women, but I mean those kinds of items were not on the agenda of the AFL-CIO and nor were they advocated for. We got a lot of lip service, but you did not see these folks present in the decision-making process of the AFL-CIO, and we thought that if you were gonna expand the moment, if you were gonna build it out, then it had to reflect those who not only were a part of it, but those who aspired to be a part of it. If you were gonna organize in Hispanic communities, you really ought to have folks who reflect the Hispanic view -- equally true of women, equally true of African Americans. Although on the executive council of the AFL-CIO at that time, you had A. Philip Randolph and Mr. C. L. Dellums, but they were from small unions, [00:08:00] and at least in our opinion, their views were not given the due respect that they're entitled to based on what broadly they represented. And I guess the decision that was really sort of catalytic was in the elections of '68, '70, '72, whatever, Nixon and McGovern,

who ultimately wound up being the nominees, the AFL-CIO took a position of neutrality. That was their right to do, mind you, but for four years preceding that, we had been making the case that Nixon was such a bad candidate for just everyday working people that he did not reflect the kind of hopes and dreams that these kinds of workers reflected. And that neutrality of the American Federation of Labor [00:09:00] suggested that one candidate was no better or worse than the other, and we kind of thought that McGovern was somewhat better than Nixon on the broad range of social issues and just on a large number of moral issues. So we thought that to our community, we had to offer much more than a position of neutrality, and as I said, the federation may well have -- within its constitutional rights to take a neutral stand, but that gave no direction to people who had been the 99-percent supporter of the organized labor's agenda, and we thought that we needed something that we could reflect those concerns through. And we didn't know whether or not we could have a Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, but we certainly knew that there was a need to give some [00:10:00] direction to the kinds of issues that we thought were important. And so we didn't really begin our work

in ’72. The idea came about. We took another year or so just to talk about it and to see whether or not a broad range of labor people supported that view. And so our initial meeting was a convention in Chicago, and at that time, the decision was made to see whether or not this was a viable idea, so we took the next year to talk to people about it, to share our thinking, to take their thinking, and the following year, it came back that the answer was, “Yes, let’s do it.” And out of that, I think we had -- geez, I can’t think of how many unions were affiliated, but it was another thing that was well accepted. [00:11:00] But it proved to be we were right in the sense that the kinds of things that we were talking about needed to be on the agenda of the AFL-CIO are the same things now that unorganized workers are arguing for, and that is a vehicle that reflects their hopes and needs.

F1: I’m gonna adjust your mic real quick.

WL: I’ve gotta stop beating on stuff.

F1: Well, you like to hit here, which is what you should keep doing because that’s what you naturally do, so I’m just gonna move that over there. Problem solved. Okay, sorry about that. We’re ready.

SC: So that was only unions within the AFL-CIO? Or at least initially, that was where you saw --

WL: Well, there were some outside of the AFL-CIO at that time that -- in those days, I believe the UAW was [00:12:00] outside of the AFL-CIO. That may have been. I think the Teamsters Union may well have been outside the AFL-CIO, but, I mean, the criteria for participation that you be a bona fide member of a union, and we didn't confine it to being within the AFL or outside, but that you have a union basis for your representation. And we spent some time thinking about the structure, how it would look, what it would look like, how it would be financed, and what was our agenda? And at the top of the agenda was to try to convince the federation to expand their decision-making process to include women, African Americans, Hispanics, young workers, and [00:13:00] I think that the tradition of the AFL-CIO was, in those days, much more important than the reality of trying to expand the base of organized laborers, taking these other constituencies.

SC: What was the reaction from within the leadership of AFL-CIO?

WL: Well, I guess two reactions. George Meany was the president of the AFL-CIO at that time. (laughs) His point

was, "That's what you wanna do? That's your business." I mean, essentially that's what he said. For others who saw this as a dangerous precedent, they couldn't find a way to accept the fact that people wanted to be in an environment where they could speak for themselves, or at least hear their issues [00:14:00] brought to the forefront. So we managed to survive all of that. I mean, there was some damage done to some individuals, but the fact was that nobody told us we were wrong. They just disagreed with us, which was a strange position to (laughs) have.

SC: For the people who thought it would be a dangerous precedent, could you expand on that? What they might've been thinking?

WL: Well, they first of all saw in their own mind no need for an organization such as this. They thought that it was some sort of subversive organization or dual unionism. They could never buy into the notion that labor ought to be about more than just wages, hours, and [00:15:00] working conditions. I mean, because there's so many social issues that labor as an institution ought to be commenting on or using its institutional power to deal with. And I mean, the criteria for participation was, "You've gotta be a member of a bonafide union." It was not as this was some

Black sect or something. I mean, it was not anti-labor. It was pro-labor. It wasn't limited to Black participation. We named it the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists because we thought -- and this was 1972-3 -- that we ought to be able to understand that there are labor issues that affect different constituencies different, and there are labor policies that can affect different constituencies differently, and we ought to be able at that point in time to discuss these legitimately and on top of the table. And so we called it the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists because [00:16:00] it was a coalition of Black labor leadership from many different organizations.

SC: How did you come together with your cofounders on this?

WL: Well, at the AFL-CIO Convention where this position of neutrality was taken, either the AFL Convention or the Democratic Convention. Anyhow, the position of neutrality did not to us reflect the concerns that were coming out of our community, and in some cases coming out of our unions, and at this meeting where this position was taken, we made our voices heard. It was not any under the table kind of discussion. And when the meeting ended, we decided there still needs to be some more conversation about this because as Black labor leadership and [00:17:00] to some degree

people who had some influence in their community, it would be hard to defend a position of neutrality. And so we thought that some of us ought to come together and talk about this and see what, if anything, could be done or should be done, and when we met to discuss what we thought would be the implications of this position of neutrality, the decision was we really need to formalize this thing. There were about four or five people who were prominent in their own unions and had some broader role in their community and in partisan politics, in some cases. That was folks from the UAW, Nelson Jack Edwards, Horace Sheffield, two very prominent African American trade unionists, Mr. William Simons that was with the American Federation of Teachers, [00:18:00] a fellow by the name of Charles Hayes from the -- may have been with either packing house or what is now the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, and two or three others, and myself. And we took on the responsibility of at least trying to organize this discussion and make sure that the issues that concerned everyone were a part of the discussion itself. So we all met and came out of this neutrality posture concerned about the impact that that would have.

SC: So you mentioned that C. L. Dellums --

WL: C. L. Dellums.

SC: -- and A. Philip Randolph were already in leadership positions.

WL: They were already on the executive council.

SC: Did they support the organization?

WL: No. I mean, they didn't oppose it either. [00:19:00] Mr. Randolph was the head -- or not the head. Certainly the image of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, which is an organization that existed already. Mr. Dellums was just an officer of his union, but actively on the executive council of the AFL-CIO.

SC: Were they involved at all?

WL: No. No, and I say that there were some people who were satisfied with the posture that the AFL-CIO had taken, which was their right to do. But we were not simply because of the implications of a position of neutrality in a presidential election.

SC: So when you were at that meeting in Chicago, that was when you were still kind of feeling out whether [00:20:00] you would want to create the organization, right? What was the feeling there?

WL: Well, those people who came were clearly committed to doing something, and there were give or take 13-, 14-, 1,500

people showed up for the meeting. It was not a delegated meeting because we didn't have any structure to delegate people to come to. The meeting was called to discuss the implications of the position of neutrality, and how should we as trade unionists, as community activists, how should we respond to it? And the options were form an organization and push for what we thought ought to be the agenda, to do nothing, and then for some it was to follow the dictates of their organization. [00:21:00] And the decision was made that we needed to have an organization of some kind because the event we were dealing with has happened already, so the question is, "What do we do for the future? And if we're gonna do anything, what do we do it through?" So the outcome of the Chicago meeting was to decide, A, if we're gonna do this, how do we structure it? What's it look like? What's it represent? And what's the criteria for participation? And so a task force was set up, and by resolution, given a year to resolve these questions, and then at our next convention, we would take an absolute final vote on what to do. And the decision was to form an organization, to [00:22:00] structure the organization so that it had the ability to participate in broad policy questions -- city, county, state level -- what

the membership criteria would be, how it would be financed, what sort of an officer leadership structure would it have. And so at the following convention -- which was held, matter of fact, here in Washington, DC-- all of that was formalized.

SC: What was the membership criteria that you settled on?

WL: Well, you had to be a member of a bonafide trade union, and it didn't speak to the question whether you had to be affiliated with the AFL-CIO. But you had to be a card-carrying member of a trade union movement.

SC: Okay. [00:23:00] So then you were elected the first president?

WL: Yes.

SC: Mm-hmm. How did that come about?

WL: I got more votes than anybody else. (laughter) I'm being facetious, but I think during the process, all of us had a role in trying to make sure that our outreach effort went to every part of the country we could contact, and the five and six people who had been initially a part of the task force that undertook this -- I mean, we all talked about who can do what? And some had impediments that wouldn't allow them the time. Some had restrictions on resources. I mean, all kinds of stuff. So the decision was made --

[00:24:00] or at least put on the table -- that we'd have a set of officers that reflected the breadth of what we were talking about -- public sector, private sector, retail areas -- and there was a committee that came forward with a set of recommendations as to how this ought to be done. I was put forth as a possible president of the organization. Others were put forth as regional people, and some that represent certain industries. And after this long period of discussion, I think people were willing to put some trust in the ideas that were put on the table as to who should do what. And I was lucky enough to have won the support of so many of the folks who thought this made some sense, and I [00:25:00] agreed to stand for office. We didn't think this was gonna be eternal, but it turned out to be a pretty long period of time. But the others virtually all served continuously through this building process and formalizing process.

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WL: [00:00:00] Part of the criteria we talked about was national officers, regional officers, appointed staff people, rank-and-filers, and we looked at some of the history from organizations who had gone through perhaps this same process, and we tried to structure a constitution that would guarantee participation at every level for anyone who wanted to be a member and a participant. And part of the history shows that elected national people who had the ability to travel to do this and do that really dominated the activity, and they're certainly in a much better position to participate than a rank-and-filer who was working on an assembly line someplace. So we tried to set up a constitution that would give a reasonable assurance that everybody's voice would be heard and set a [00:01:00] dues rate that the better-paid members did not have a greater sense of representation than lower-paid workers, and it was designed with the intent of guaranteeing a voice for everybody who wanted to share in this new thing we were talking about doing. I mean, this was not the first time something like this had made an effort, but it was the first time that anything as formal was being proposed.

SC: And how long did you end up remaining president?

WL: Until 2014.

SC: Okay. So I know it's a lot of years --

WL: It's close to forever, yeah.

SC: (laughs) Yeah. What things in that span of time really stand out to you [00:02:00] as far as things that the organization has been able to accomplish?

WL: Well, I think the fact that we convinced the power center of the AFL-CIO that there was a real need to broaden its representations, to create space for all of these constituencies to have input into the policies that ultimately was gonna come. For years and years and years, I mean, the federation, you dealt with power centers, private sectors, public sector unions and the building trades, the service trades, etc. But it was all good if you can get a mix out of that that reflects the broad makeup of organized labor. We made the argument that the people who want to join the union, that was limited to no outreach to them. [00:03:00] But, I mean, young people, immigrants, women, African Americans, Hispanics. I mean, there's no formal organized outreach to bring them into labor. If a particular union would like to organize a unit here and now, they're gonna do it, but that wasn't gonna, in our opinion, build a movement in short order. So the

AFL-CIO, I believe, in 19-- I forget what year, ’75? No, ’95, I think -- expanded the executive council of the AFL-CIO to include access by these groups. The Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, while they may not have called the seat the a CBTU seat, but in effect, that’s what it wound up being. LCLAA, APRI, Pride at Work, other constituency groups as they called them were brought into the process, [00:04:00] and in effect, changed the structure and I think the approach to organized labor to its broad constituencies forever. And it’s not to say they were wrong before. It’s just that if you’re gonna reach out to the broad workforce, then you need to have a formal way of doing it. So that’s one of the things we did, I think, incredibly good. We really made the case for a serious discussion on national healthcare. I guess it was 1992 when President Clinton put this debate on the stage for the first time in a broad sense -- I mean, it had been discussed before. Different presidents had tried it. But it had never been [00:05:00] discussed at the level of the workforce that could possibly have some influence. It had never been discussed at ground level, let me just say that. So we took on the responsibility for ourselves, and I guess others were doing the same thing, possibly, of educating

our community as best we could as to the implications of a national healthcare program and how it would be beneficial to just working people in general without healthcare being a privilege. We tried to broaden the discussion about immigration. A number of us had the experience of differentials in workforce -- people working side by side, getting paid differently, being treated differently. We also took on the question of raising the level of awareness [00:06:00] among rank-and-file workers to the implications of international affairs and organized labor. There was no enemy in this discussion. It was just that "Here are the implications of trade and how it impacts certain communities." We took a very early position with regards to apartheid in South Africa, took a very early position on the Cuban situation, and to raise this as an issue that organized labor ought not be defending a foreign policy that has bad impact on its own workforce. And I think we were just simply trying to be of greater use to the movement as a whole by having [00:07:00] rank and file as a membership who had some understanding and knowledge of these kinds of issues.

SC: Okay. I'd like to transition and talk a little bit about issues of women in the labor movement and pay equity. So

you were involved with the Washington Council 28 pay equity battle. Well, I guess first of all, was that issue something that you were personally interested in? Or was it just kind of happened that you were assigned to this?

WL: Well, I think the union had an incredible interest in the lack of fairness in the pay process. It certainly wasn't no secret back then that women workers were [00:08:00] paid differently, I mean, than men, and the value of their work was differently. And the issue really came up -- I mean, at that time, we maybe had 45, 47 percent of our membership were women, and their work in their job was not valued for what they did. So we really had a great lawyer who was general counsel at that time, a fellow by the name of Winn Newman who became single-handedly responsible for the battle around pay equity. We weren't quite sure whether pay equity was the term that we should've had. But anyhow, he took the case up, and it came out of Washington state and had some implications in California. But Winn saw this and developed the argument [00:09:00] and ideas around making the case for pay equity.

SC: When you say you weren't sure if pay equity was the right term, can you explain?

WL: Well, we weren't sure whether that defined the problem. Pay equity and equality of pay, I mean, same idea, but different terms mean different things. I mean, and we were trying to make the case that women's work ought to be valued based upon the value that it brings to the activity, and in some cases, maybe it should've been higher. But the issue was to force the public sector and the private sector to deal with inequality in pay based on value of work, and Winn did a tremendous amount of work [00:10:00] on this. And we then had a strike in San Jose, California around this issue. Our District Council 57, and if memory serves us right, Local 101 or something like that -- but anyhow, the strike was about that issue, and they were very successful in getting it in the minds of people that the value of the work that women do should be paid for based on the value of their work.

SC: So in Washington, they had a long court case, and then that was, I believe, happening close to the same time as San Jose. What was the impact of those two events across the country? Was [00:11:00] there any --

WL: I think people, by the time we got close to a solution, everybody was aware that this was an issue that needing addressing, and that if collective bargaining was gonna be

the process, all well and good. Fine. And if you're gonna have institutional decisions made, then those who were part of the institutions ought to have some guidelines given by the courts as to what ought to be measured in making that decision. I think, and I have to say, that the work that Winn Newman did on this case not only preparing it, but advancing it is the foundation for what we're dealing with now. And while it's not solved now, at least the institutional concerns are clear, that the value of women's work [00:12:00] should be the basis for their remunerations.

SC: So going back to international issues, you mentioned when talking about Coalition of Black Trade Unionists that you took an early position on apartheid. Is that kind of where your involvement with South Africa began, the Free South Africa movement?

WL: It was the basis for it. I mean, the analysis that we took in making the case that apartheid was just morally wrong was what allowed us to [00:13:00] define it relatively easy to understand the issues involved in the apartheid struggle. I mean, some people will say, "It's just like segregation." Well, it's not just like segregation. It's substantially different. And in a country where 65, 75

percent of the people have no constitutional rights whatsoever, that's not like segregation. And while apartheid only came into being in 1948, '49, or whenever it was, what it wound up being was a very organized system of supplying cheap labor and supplying it based on the state's ability to prevent workers from doing anything that would improve their situation, and whether it was voting, [00:14:00] social justice, human rights, any of that was denied the overwhelming majority of citizens of a particular country. And so our position was that apartheid is an immoral governmental process, and that we should oppose it, and anyone who is complicit in that process, we felt we had a responsibility to cite these issues. And our government from 1948 on had been complicit in the support of apartheid as a part of our foreign policy.

SC: [00:15:00] Do you remember about what year that was, when that started being something that you took an interest in?

WL: Well, I mean, those in South Africa who were opposing it, including Mr. Mandela and colleagues of his, they had been jailed, some killed, etc., and their demand for just legitimate rights as citizens of their country. So it wasn't just something that we noticed. I mean, the country as a whole knew what was taking place, and as a part of our

agenda, we wanted to make sure that membership of CBTU understood what it was about and what the implications of it were and how people were impacted by it. If you have to have an authorization to walk around in your own neighborhood, then there's something fundamentally wrong [00:16:00] with that system. So South Africans had to have a passbook in order to travel in their country, and there were no rights that Black South Africans had that the government was bound to respect, which to a great degree was like the old South here -- employment, other kinds of things that were denied simply because of color -- and we thought that our government who by this time had better laws -- not necessarily different, but better -- should not be a participant in that kind of a program. And so we began to make the case that we should not be allied with governments [00:17:00] who practiced that kind of systems. And not to suggest that South Africa was the only place where this existed, but it was the only place where by constitution, this was a matter of policy, and we set out to try and convince our government to withdraw from that process.

SC: Did you travel to South Africa during apartheid?

WL: Yes.

SC: What was that experience like?

WL: Unpleasant. I don't think America really understands the offshoot of some of its policies, and I don't think the broad slice of America really has ever come face to face with outright hostility based on color. And [00:18:00] I can recall I was slated to go to a small country inside of South Africa -- a little country called Lesotho -- and in order to do this, I had to go through Johannesburg and either change planes or rent a car in Johannesburg and drive to Maseru in Lesotho. So (laughs) I tried for I don't know how long to get a visa -- I mean, forever, it seems like -- and the visa was finally granted, and then as I was on the way to Lesotho, the visa was cancelled en route. So I arrived at the Johannesburg airport and I was brought to some kind of a holding area, and the security people [00:19:00] would not speak directly to me because I was a non-person, so they had to find someone -- a Black South African -- to speak to me about what the new rules were gonna be for as long as I was in the country, which was turning out to be from transferring a flight. So I could not drive through South Africa. I had to stay at the airport until they had a flight that was going to Lesotho, and the humiliation that I guess I felt -- and I suspect

others. I mean, I think mine was probably the smallest of the thing that they did -- to not be viewed as a person, it is kind of mind-boggling. But that was the system. [00:20:00] And you could see in the faces of people who you dealt with, a Black South African could not look face to face with a white South African. It's almost like you had to take a different view, pretend that you don't see them and they don't see you. Well, if you're brought up in that kind of a system for a long period of time, you become even to yourself a non-person. So when the battle to change South Africa really got underway, it wasn't like there were a lot of people who didn't understand what was taking place. And so for the CBTU and then for other organizations that we tried to have influence with, the argument to not participate any longer in this was clear because people had developed their own sense of awareness of how evil [00:21:00] a system this was.

SC: Do you remember what year about that was when you had that trip?

WL: Seventy -- I don't know. I'd have to research it. I don't really know.

SC: Just curious. So you were traveling by yourself?

WL: Yes.

SC: Did you go on other trips where you were with other people?

WL: Well, I've gone in and out of South Africa 15, 20 times, and I was an escort for Vice-President Al Gore when he took his trip to South Africa to discuss how this was gonna come together. We've had delegation meetings. I belong to something called the Africa-America Institute out of New York, which we're having educational seminars in Africa in generally and South Africa sometime in particular. [00:22:00] I headed a delegation of the AFL-CIO for the first elections held, so any number of trips in and out.

SC: Were you treated any differently when you were, say, with Vice-President Gore? Or was it the same?

WL: Well, yeah, because I wasn't coming into direct contact with just everyday South Africans then. In '84 when the real drive came to change that, your participation was at a level where you were either dealing with government officials or foundation executives and something like that. And bear in mind, I was an in-and-outer. People who lived there everyday saw a different South Africa than I saw, and [00:23:00] it was clear, '86, '88, that the pressure was on the South African government to find a solution to this. I don't recall the exact year that Mr. Mandela and the others were jailed. I remember he was there for, what, 26, 27

years, so in some of the middays or the early days of the apartheid struggle, people who went to South Africa were going specifically to see foundation people or others who were involved in the effort to overturn apartheid. After that, I met with government officials and some policymakers and some major employer types who [00:24:00] had a voice in the discussions.

SC: Were you able to get to know any locals, any average people there?

WL: I'm not sure what an average person --

SC: (laughter) People not in a position of power, people who had to live through that.

WL: Well, when the change came, we were working with trade union leaders who had responsibility for different unions, but it wasn't like the man on the street. I mean, it was completely different than that. The apartheid system, when I say it was a labor control process, what you had in places like Soweto and Tembisa and Alexandra and places like it, you had just hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people living in what essentially was a large labor camp [00:25:00] with the government having no responsibility for any services to these large places. And so the access to the --

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WL: [00:00:00] -- average everyday South Africans wasn't that great. But you met with representatives of organizations that represented people out of these various communities, and they became and was a part of the trade union movement and part of the townships that really formed a broad coalition with the ANC or the other political groups and the activists.

SC: So what were some of the methods or strategies that you used to bring awareness to these issues within the states?

WL: Just town hall meetings, seminars, forums inside of our union, other unions, communities, churches, because the average -- I keep saying the average, [00:01:00] but people here was just really not fully aware of what was taking place, and our ability to sort of put a label on anyone who was pushing back against the establishment really caused any number of people who were not aware of this just to not see the issue as a human rights issue or a social justice issue. And our ability to label people as communists or

whatever just turns lots of people's minds off, and yet none of these individuals' personal behavior suggested they were anything other than people who wanted fair treatment in their own country. I can always remember Mr. Mandela was labeled as a communist, yet he was a Christian participant, (laughs) which is a contradiction of itself. [00:02:00] He never argued for anything that was out of norm that any political leader would argue for. He never argued for anything that someone else didn't have already, and he said, "One person, one vote," which was a great idea. As a matter of fact, we argued for some of that ourselves. I mean, so you had these kinds of contradictions, and his jailing for treason and our acceptance of that sort of -- when I say our, I mean our government's acceptance of that -- and yet where other folks had fought for their own independence and freedom, we had chosen sides in some struggles that were much more out of the mainstream economic and democratic struggles than it was in South Africa. You had [00:03:00] in South Africa 85 percent of the people was sandwiched on 13 or 15 percent of the land. So there's so many contradictions in the South African struggle that bore pointing out.

SC: When did you first meet Nelson Mandela?

WL: In 1987 or ’89. When the ANC was unbanned and he had his first meeting in Durban, South Africa, I was invited to meet with him there, and I went along with three other members of the CBTU.

SC: [00:04:00] And what was the purpose of that meeting?

WL: Just to discuss what would be the agenda of the ANC post-apartheid. We had been pretty actively engaged in disinvestment activities, raising resources and doing mobilization work for the Free South Africa campaign, and once, as I said, the ANC, which had been banned from meetings and participating, his first formal meeting was in Durban at the initial conference, and the discussion was, “What do we do from here? Where do we go?” And the [00:05:00] activity of that meeting was to adopt a social and economic program that would prepare them for the upcoming elections in South Africa.

SC: So you helped to bring him to the States on a tour in 1990?

WL Nineteen-ninety, yeah.

SC: Why did you feel that that was important to do?

WL: Well, here you’ve got probably one of the most famous political prisoners of all time, and while the activist community in the US was very clear on his needs, he had not been heard from for 27 years by average people. We just

really thought that he -- [00:06:00] well, there were two things. There was a real need to hear him, his thoughts and ideas and views and vision of what a South Africa would look like under a post-apartheid leadership. And no one was barred from competing for the offices in South Africa, so his coming here gives sort of the free world an opportunity to look at him. Secondly, we had really worked so hard on disinvestment, the need to give some sense of peace to the investment community, that South Africa was not gonna become some new cannibalistic society. People really were thinking through this. So we were trying [00:07:00] to get the investment crowd to give new thinking to South Africa. So his trip here was to touch some of the financial centers, some of the financial leadership to get people to understand the views of the ANC from its top leadership and give some consideration to how they can play a role in helping to begin to rebuild South Africa.

SC: Were you with him on that whole tour?

WL: Not the whole tour. The time they came to the States, AFSCME was in convention in Miami. This was in 1990, I believe. So we had set up five stops -- one stop in Canada, one stop in New York, a stop in Atlanta, Miami Beach, [00:08:00] Oakland, California, Los Angeles,

California, Detroit. Those were the stops involved in that trip, and each of them had sort of a multi-issue purpose.

SC: What do you mean? What were the --

WL: Well, some financial considerations. He wanted to talk to the academic community. He wanted to talk to the business community so that they could get a sense of who he was.

SC: So you went back to South Africa to help oversee the elections?

WL: The AFL-CIO put together a delegation that would serve as observers to the election process itself, and the CBTU as an [00:09:00] organization and some individuals had relationships with groups that were responsible for the conduct of the election. There was an international task force put together specifically to design and develop the election process, and some of the people who were responsible for that, we had some familiarity with, and we as a delegation was assigned to different areas of the country to oversee the conduct of the election on the ground.

SC: So just making sure everything went as it was supposed to?

WL: Well, we didn't have any authority to do anything, but we could certainly observe, and at the end of the day develop

a report that reflected our views on how the election was conducted.

SC: So what was that experience like [00:10:00] after you had done all this work raising awareness and fighting against apartheid? I guess what was your feeling at that time?

WL: Well, not to be bold, I think we had really participated in changing the course of history, and aside from Mr. Mandela being released from prison -- which was obviously one major piece -- but the other being to have a new and democratic South Africa as a part of sort of our global thing. Again, coming back to the public sector side of this, the -- maybe restructuring's not the right word, but the inclusion of South Africa as a major democracy in the global discussions about human rights and [00:11:00] economic justice and all those things was an important change in the global arrangement. I mean, part of our hidden thinking -- although it never came to be as quite like we wanted it -- in those days, we had the major industrialized nations, the G7 and all those kinds of stuff. Well, what if we had a G8 and South Africa was number eight? The implications that that would have for global discussions, we thought, was a pretty big deal, and I think others in the administrations thinking it could be the same thing. But we thought that

the inclusion of a South Africa as a partner in the major global discussions that took place, no matter whether it was around human rights or economic policy, [00:12:00] trade policy, or any of that. Would South Africa make a difference in the WTO? Would South Africa make a -- I mean, all of those possibilities were there, and I guess the satisfaction we got out of it was the possibility of making those realities.

SC: What was Nelson Mandela like? And what was working with him like?

WL: I think it was one of the high points in a career full of low points. (laughs) No, I haven't had many of them, right? I think it was just such a pleasure to be in the same room, to talk to someone like that who -- [00:13:00] I mean, probably one of the most famous individuals in the world. I mean, it's just really hard to describe. But to be able to talk about any number of things, any range of issues, and just enjoy the vision that he brought to that kind of a discussion, it was really, really something to think about. And inside the CBTU, we just took such pleasure -- and again, it's not about one union. Let me also add that. And the fact that we were able to play a small role in making all of that happen, and knowing

[forward?] that the most powerful government on the [00:14:00] face of the earth was opposed to the change that we were advocating, and to be able to do it and to make it happen and ultimately have him wind up as president, that's pretty heady stuff. And to be able to find ways and means of bringing the power player nations of the world together around one agenda? I mean, it was not like everybody thought he should've been free. But to create the kind of dynamics, the dominos sort of fell into place -- I mean, it was a tremendous amount of pride, I think, for our union, and the fact that the CBTU had argued for this for some time. It was not like we were telling people anything that they didn't know. And to be able to bring global heat to make folks do the right thing was… --

SC: [00:15:00] Did you stay in contact with Nelson Mandela over the years?

WL: Yes. As a matter of fact, I spoke at his memorial service at the national cathedral here, and it wasn't like we were card-playing buddies. But once or twice a year, we'd be in touch at some event, or if I was lucky enough to be in South Africa just to visit with him, but briefly. (pauses) Let me emphasize just one point. I mean, a union like ours, given its makeup -- and as I said earlier, our

members are by and large conservative, but trust the leadership [00:16:00] to do what is morally right and socially acceptable on behalf of its members. And the fact that our union, unlike a lot of others, was almost unanimous in its support for the elimination of apartheid -- I mean, I'm sure there were some folks here or there who didn't understand it and didn't know what the implications were, but you had to be at our 1990 convention when he visited with us, and he came to the convention in Miami and spoke, both him and his wife. And I think what they spoke to was essentially what our union is all about, and over time, I think the union [00:17:00] as an institution has been on the right side of history in most of these complicated things. And I guess for some of us, like the post-1964 crowd, this is what we wanted to build. It was an organization that had the strength to speak truth to power and to be prepared to fight for causes that were socially right and -- I should say morally right and socially acceptable. So I think we've done that. I think we've done that.

SC: Your involvement with South Africa, did that overlap with things you were doing for PSI?

WL: Yep, as a matter of fact, PSI came [00:18:00] into the battle very early on, and I guess that goes back to what I suggested President Wurf thought way back when, that through the public service or PSI, you can be a part or maybe a catalyst of making some of these things happen. And PSI was a major, major player both in South Africa itself, but again, through its affiliate across Africa in general, and across the world. As an example, the evening that the critical meeting took place at the South African Embassy here in town, and the following morning I and one of our other staff left for Japan [00:19:00] to meet with our PSI affiliates in Japan. And at that meeting, there were affiliates from all around the globe participating, and when we walked through the issue of South Africa and what it all meant and what steps were being taken, the regional conference of PSI took a position supporting the opposition to apartheid at that meeting. And that was a PSI activity, so the message went out through the PSI structure that we would now be supporting the anti-apartheid movement. So, I mean, I guess all these things sort of come together.

SC: When did you become president of PSI?

WL: I can't even remember the year now, but I was first vice-president for [00:20:00] a number of years, and the lady who was president was the president of the large German public sector union, OTV. And, geez, I'm blanking on that name now. But she was appointed by her country to the European Union Office in Brussels, so she had to give up the PSI presidency to take that position, and so I moved up from first vice-president to fill out the remainder of her term. Geez, I can't remember what year it was. (laughs)

SC: It's okay.

WL: I can't remember.

SC: So besides South Africa, what were some of the major issues you worked on with PSI? Or any other international [00:21:00] issues, I guess?

WL: Well, we've had the benefit of working on any number of issues, from Central and Eastern Europe to the Soviet Union to -- oh, wow, virtually all across Africa, Israel, Latin and Central America. We worked on issues in Nicaragua, Panama, Guyana. We're like a globe. I mean, we've worked on issues all over the place.

SC: Do any of them stand out in particular?

WL: Well, [00:22:00] no, not really.

SC: Okay.

WL: There's no particular issue. I mean, there're issues that PSI played a role in highlighting and finding ways to resolve some of the tricky issues.

SC: Are you still involved with them?

WL: No, no, I'm retired.

SC: Okay. So do you mind if we talk about Washington, DC, politics?

WL: This is your meeting.

SC: (laughs) So what was your initial interest in becoming involved? And what was the extent of your involvement?

WL: Well, here in Washington, DC, we represented city employees here, and this goes back a long ways prior to the AFL and CIO coming back together. [00:23:00] But we represent city employees, and until 1972, they really didn't have the ability to participate in any electoral politics. I mean, I came here in '66. We had a sense of involvement all over the place, and we were early on participants in the struggle for home rule, and as a part of that, we were fighting for elected offices, to be on the governing body of the city, city council, and mayor, and all the other offices that went with that. The very first election that was held was for what was called a non-voting delegate, which is a position that Eleanor Holmes Norton occupies

now. But at that time, this was the first election [00:24:00] that took place under a charter developed by a committee of Congress. And in that race, our union supported a fellow by the name of Walter Fauntroy, who became the first non-voting delegate to city council. Out of that also came the election for the office of mayor because prior to that, it had been appointed. And in that case, while we had all these people with titles, the city and its services was ran by the district committees of Congress. There was the Senate District Committee and the House District Committee. The House District Committee, which was the most powerful of the two, was ran by a fellow by the name of John McMillan from South Carolina, and it was like the people of the District of Columbia had no voting rights whatsoever [00:25:00] or not many rights to do anything. And so we became participants in a sort of broad coalition to see if we couldn't bring the District from under that control. So we went down to South Carolina to help --

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WL: [00:00:00] – defeat the congressperson who was chair of the House District Committee, which gave us some room to adopt this limited measure of home rule that we have. So Walter Fauntroy was the first non-voting delegate, and a fellow by the name of Walter Washington was the candidate for mayor -- the first elected mayor of the city. Prior to that, they had all been appointed, and our union was the principal union involved in the political action around that race. I chaired the mayor's campaign, and we had other staff participating in other areas, and we won the election. And as a result, I mean -- and we represented the employees at the same time. We [00:01:00] started to make the case for collective bargaining for the workers of the city of Washington and to have a contract under which they worked. Prior to that, like I said, they were governed by criteria set up by the Senate and House District Committees. Out of that grew a large role of political participation -- not so much by myself, but by folks who ran the local union here in the city.

SC: Did your involvement continue after that election?

WL: Yeah. The Home Rule Act at that time set into motion a number of, I guess, legal entities to oversee the city.

[00:02:00] There were various departments, health and human services, public works, all of the normal committees that you'll have for any major city. But they're ran by folks elected here -- appointed here -- and the one that I had some concern for, and the mayor asked if I would work on, was what we call the judicial nominations committee. And what its job was to recommend individuals to serve on the two courts that we have. We have a superior court and an appeals court, and the commission's job was to recommend three names for whatever vacancy to the White House, and the White House would make the final appointment -- one out of those three that we would submit. And on the other court -- the Court of Appeals -- [00:03:00] same process. But the unique piece was each of the two courts have a chief judge, so our committee had the responsibility of naming those two people ourselves. That came into being in 1973 and it still exists to this day. I am the senior member of the commission and we do the same thing now. We recommend names to the White House to be appointed as judges of the two courts.

SC: Did you also work with Marion Barry during his election? Or, I guess, both elections?

WL: We did not work on the first election.

SC: Okay.

WL: But he was elected three times, as I recall it. [00:04:00] Three times? And the second and third election, we worked, and Marion was also the chair of the board of education, and we had a lot of our members in the board of education, and it was not our view that he would be good for us on the city council -- well, I'm sorry. I got ahead of myself. He came to us for support to run for the city council, and we refused to do it because he was more important to us as chair of the board of education. He ran against -- we were still supporting Mayor Washington when Marion Barry ran against him, so we didn't support him in that. Then we supported him in the subsequent election. And out of that relationship with Washington and Barry came a good contractual relationship for our workers in the city. [00:05:00] So we've been very supportive of him ever since he came into the political deal in DC.

SC: So at least sometimes it works out that the politicians that you support you?

WL: Well, the thing you have to understand about Marion, Marion came out of the same arena as most of the activists. He had a good idea of the role of the government and its responsibility to the people not as fortunate as the one

percent. And so his view of the government is that it's to provide services for and support for people who need government to do what governments role is. And that doesn't mean that everything we did, we got support for. But on the big critical issues, his heart and mind started in the right place.

SC: Great. [00:06:00] I have a handful of more general questions reflecting on your whole career, I guess. Were there any people in particular that served as mentors to you?

WL: Oh yeah, I think Mr. Aiello that I mentioned way earlier in the thing, Sal Aiello, Ben Russell, and oddly enough, Ben Russell was an employee of the Civil Service Commission in Contra Costa County. I think Jerry Wurf, who gave us really the opportunity to do some of this crazy stuff, and we had [00:07:00] for a staffer and president, I think, a great relationship. I'm sure I'm leaving someone out, but I think in terms of just direct impact stuff, I think those four people had real impact.

SC: I have Sal Aiello, Ben Russell, Jerry Wurf. You said there were four?

WL: No, I miscounted.

SC: Okay. Can you expand a little bit on your relationship with Jerry Wurf?

WL: Well, I mean, Mr. Wurf saw or understood what we in California was trying to do and what we were talking about doing, and apparently it fitted in with some of the ideas that he had. So when he became president in 1964, he kept those things in mind, and as he began to sort of [00:08:00] restructure the union for what he wanted to do, he didn't forget the conversation we had collectively held, and his invitation to join the staff and play a role in it was obviously a golden opportunity for myself. And then the support that we got from him during the years of being on his staff, I think the realism that he approached building the union with -- I mean, he saw Memphis as just a moral cause, and we were not a large union at that time, and we could've spun ourselves into bankruptcy inside of two weeks. But he made [00:09:00] a decision that this was the thing that the union was about, and he made a decision that he would stay and help those workers, which was a major, major decision at that point in time. His view of what the union could be in a broad sense, both domestically and internationally, I think was a great vision for what we were trying to do.

SC: He had a reputation of being a little difficult to work with some people. Do you think that was fair? Or do you think he was misunderstood?

WL: Both.

SC: Both. (laughs)

WL: No, I think he was a hard driver, short-tempered. He was a guy who could be giving a recital at Harvard at one [00:10:00] minute and speaking to a shop steward the next, and they would both understand him. And as a trade union leader, for me, I would place him at the top of my list as leaders of workers without any hesitation at all.

SC: Can you talk a little bit about the other two gentlemen, Mr. Aiello and Russell?

WL: Well, Sal Aiello was a blacksmith, and he was the association's presence in the area where I went to work in Contra Costa County. And he was the guy who I had first early contact with in terms of "What's this organization about? What's it supposed to be doing?" [00:11:00] And he really convinced me that this is something that everybody had to have a piece of. I mean, if you were gonna be a county employee, then you were obligated to be a participant in the organization that represented the workers, and we started working maybe 100 yards apart in

the geographic area where we worked, so I'd see him every day. And he was just -- some folks say he was a guy from the old country. I mean, you knew what he was for and you knew what he was against, and you never wondered about it. And I just sort of took an awful lot of advice from him, in terms of how you deal with certain situations. And then Ben Russell, as I say, was a staff guy in the Civil Service Commission, and he took an interest and really talked about what our association first and our union could be if we were successful in [00:12:00] implementing some of the ideas we had.

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F1: [00:00:00] All right, we're back recording.

SC: So would you say -- Sal Aiello and Ben Russell, they were pretty early influencers. Did they really have an impact on your career trajectory, do you think?

WL: I don't know if it was trajectory. It was just what kinds of focus we ought to have as an organization, and what's the big picture look like? Mr. Aiello, I mean, he was

somebody you just go to and talk about the kinds of things as an organization, we should be looking at. He was an old-timer, blue collar guy. Like I said, a blacksmith. So he wasn't a complicated intellectual. He just knew right from wrong and would certainly make the argument that the organization ought to be fighting for [00:01:00] workers' rights, and making the case before whatever body of the county government we were concerned about that the fight we should be making is on behalf of workers' rights.

SC: Yeah, I think I see that as a thread throughout all these different topics that we discussed. Did you work closely with Al Bilik?

WL: Very much so. Yeah, (laughs) Al Bilik was the guy that President Wurf delegated to close this deal out, to make sure that I showed up somewhere. (laughter) So Al was the promiser, meaning whatever was necessary, he would promise it. (laughs) But he wound up being a long, long, long, long time friend. And [00:02:00] Al, well, I'll give you this great story. Al came to California to convince me that I should do this, and after a certain amount of conversations, I agreed to do it, and he himself did not show up because I thought he was going to be (laughs) here in Washington, DC. Al was the president of the Cincinnati

Labor Council, but he was a part of the leadership change in organization that won the election in 1964. But he did not come in '64. He came in about '66 when I came myself -- I had come by. He came by '67, I'm sorry. But he was always available as a good friend to share ideas and thoughts with.

SC: Are there any particular people that you yourself have mentored?

WL: Oh, we've tried to. [00:03:00] I mean, there's a long, long cadre of folks. The union at the time, when President Wurf took over the presidency, was a very small union in terms of staff, and his idea was to build staff capacity from inside the union in most cases, and since we were organizing a good deal, we were constantly running into very able and bright people, so he wanted to find as many as possible to come to work for the union. And so we developed programs to try and help do that, so if we got any long-term staff out there, they probably have been the victim of my mentoring in one way or the other. And some of our best staff people came out of the union, and in many cases occupy positions of responsibility now.

SC: Are there maybe one or two that you can name.

WL: Who are actively engaged [00:04:00] now?

SC: Mm-hmm. Or who were just engaged for a long time.

WL: Leamon Hood, Ernie Rewolinski -- why am I blanking on these? I apologize.

SC: Oh, that's okay.

WL: I'm just going blank.

SC: Can you tell me about Leamon Hood?

WL: Leamon was a regular staff person, worked for city government in the city of Atlanta, became involved with the union, became a local leader, and ultimately was hired on as staff. Ron Reliford, same bio. Ultimately became a staff person. Ernie Rewolinski, out of Wisconsin, same thing. Eliot Seide, many members who serve on the board right now, out of Minnesota -- we've got people in New York who occupy positions of [00:05:00] responsibility. Henry Garrido, retired president of Local 372. Veronica Costa. Individuals who have passed away, Charlie Hughes and James Butler and, oh – it's just too many, I can't focus on anything now.

SC: That's okay.

WL: I mean, people who really helped build this union. I mean, like I said, back in those days, we were maybe less than 300,000 members. Now we're a million, 600,000. I'd like to take credit for all those extra ones, but it was rank-

and-file people who took on roles of leadership and helped build the union.

SC: Are there any moments or memories that you can think of, [00:06:00] maybe your fondest memories of being in the labor movement or proudest moments?

WL: Oh, I think if not the proudest, one of the proudest was really reading the contract at the ratification meeting of Local 1733 at the close of the sanitation strike. One of the others may well be watching Nelson Mandela walk out of prison, for our union as an institution, perhaps.

SC: So thinking about the labor movement now, what do you think that [00:07:00] the focus should be? I guess what do you think the movement right now is doing right? And maybe things that it should focus on?

WL: Well, let me start with the second one first. I think that the labor movement -- and I'm not sure how to define that, whether it's the AFL-CIO or all of those who are trying to build worker power -- I think we've got a different kind of workforce now than these movements were built around, and I think the institution of labor has got to think through what its role is in coming years. And I'm not convinced that [00:08:00] we can organize our way into a new power

arrangement. I think the role of organized labor has to be thought through.

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WL: [00:00:00] Is it solely wages, hours, and working conditions? Or are there some other new elements that we've gotta think about how do we represent the interests of workers on those new elements? If we're now doing more with less workers, what's labor's view of how we meet the needs of all those extra workers who are out there? Are there new models that we ought to be arguing for, then figuring out how the union can not only represent the interest of workers in those new models? Because I'm convinced it's no longer a nickel more an hour, and nor in my view was it ever about that solely. [00:01:00] And then as we think about that, how do we organize ourselves to effectively represent workers in that? What do we say to young people is the reason for them joining the trade union movement? Because what we did 100 years ago is great conversation, but not terribly relevant. (laughs) And so I

think we've gotta think about how do we define the union's role and relationship to the workers? And what's the worker's responsibility and obligation to the union as an institution, given the number of new and different things we're dealing with? And, I mean, those are pretty heady questions for right now. I mean, what is our role in fighting to change the effort to really return to a low-wage society? [00:02:00] We're having this incredible discussion about 15 dollars an hour, and it's a good discussion to have. I mean, it's better than 14. But you can literally starve to death on 15 dollars an hour. It just doesn't meet the needs. And while we ought to be fighting for it, we can't take comfort if we succeed in getting 15 dollars an hour. And so what are we offering workers -- young and old alike -- as a reason for being a part of this movement? And I'm not sure we've thought that through yet. And every worker doesn't see themselves in the same situation. And I think we've gotta have those kinds of discussions, [00:03:00] and I'm not sure we've got a forum for that yet. What is the role of organized labor in a Ferguson type situation? And maybe the next question, is there a role?

SC: Do you have any opinions or ideas on what some of the answers to those issues may be?

WL: Oh yeah. I think organized labor has a social responsibility to advocate on behalf of just things that are morally right, and not take the quick fix of, "It's about this guy who picks up a hammer and uses it, and he's an electrician, so he should not pick up a hammer [00:04:00] if he's an electrician." That's silly. (laughs) I mean, I'm oversimplifying it, but I'm saying that labor has to have the universal role of representing the interests of working people, and clearly it's no longer mine workers from 100 years ago, but it's new workers that are coming onto the scene. And if we're advocating for new jobs and the environment and etc., have we thought through what will the interest of workers who do these jobs be? And how do we represent them? And is our future role an adversarial one? I mean, how do we represent the interests of workers so it best benefits them? Then yeah, I think organized labor has a role in some of these really dreadful systems that exist, whether it's police [00:05:00] shooting anybody or situations where specifically the right to shoot and kill minorities of any kind. Do we go into hiding because police have a union of their own? I mean, these

are things that've gotta be talked about, I think, and openly and honestly on top of the table, and maybe we've gotta find a better and different way to have police -- I mean, not just police -- but people who have life and death decision-making authority. How do they be represented as they should be? And what's labor's role as an institution in the kind of laws that allow that to happen? Those kinds of situations. So when I say a Ferguson type situation, you mean you have a whole city that's organized around poverty-stricken people, [00:06:00] where they support government. And yet you've got labor as an institution become a part of the opposition to them improving their own situation. So I mean, I think there's a lot of major discussions that ought to take place openly and honestly without people being afraid to really wrestle with some of these real thorny issues.

SC: So you think tackling those issues starts with talking about them?

WL: Oh, absolutely, and I think that's a leadership issue. And I think the leaders of the major institutions of labor has got to be willing to just roll up your sleeve and just talk about it because to not do it allows the divisionary ideas to become a part of your organization. [00:07:00] And I

think it gets tougher from here on in, and that's why the organizations that we're supporting has to stand up.

SC: Okay. Well, that's all the questions that I have.

WL: Well, I thank you for the opportunity to...

SC: Well, thank you for being here. We really appreciate it.

F1: I'm just gonna just stay there for one second. One thing. Can you just smile at the camera?

WL: (laughs)

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