INTERVIEW

OF

MARY ELLEN RIORDAN

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS

April 5, 1987

A STENOGRAPHIC RECORD
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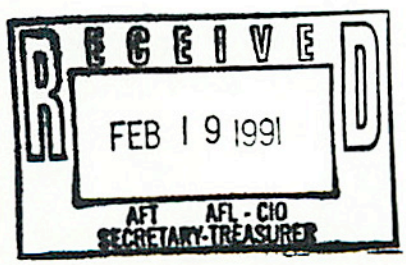
Notary Public
Stenographic Reporter



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TAPE 1

MS. RENE EPSETIN: This is Rene Epstein. My interview with Mary Ellen Riordan is taking place on April 5th, 1987, in Detroit, Michigan. This interview is part of an oral history project contracted by the American Federation of Teachers.

MS. MARY ELLEN RIORDAN: I was born in southwest Detroit and grew up in that same neighborhood, not very far from where I was born. My mother and father grew up on a farm in the thumb of Michigan near Port Hope. Their parents, both Mother's parents and Dad's parents were immigrants, Mother's people from Germany, Dad's people from Ireland.

They knew each other as youngsters, grew up together. The closest school to which they could go beyond the 8th grade was Port Hope, and at that time it did not go through high school. Dad himself never finished high school, although afterward when he came to Detroit to work, he went to engineering school at night and was a stationary engineer with first class papers.

Mother was the first one in her family to go to high school. It meant she went to Harbor Beach, which was another town south of where she was born and grew up, but she had to board there since walking back and forth nine or ten miles a day each way was a little bit more than could be handled.

When Mother had finished high school, she took the exam and became a teacher in the neighborhood school, the one to which she had attended as a youngster. She taught there until she and Dad were married, at which time they moved to Detroit.

My oldest sister, the one just older than I, was born on the farm in Huron County. I was born in Detroit where Mother and Dad were living at the time that I was born.

I went to a neighborhood school, Hunter Elementary, through the 8th grade. I skipped several grades while I was going through school. I found after I had graduated from college that the reason that so many of the youngsters were so silent in school is so few of them spoke English. It was a school that evidently was filled with

youngsters who did not speak English at all or spoke another language as their first language. In my home, English was the only language ever used.

When I graduated from -- actually I finished the 7th grade at Hunter and went to All Saints, which was a parochial school two miles from home for the 8th grade and for high school. I found when I got to All Saints that I was grossly behind in English, in grammar, in a number of other subjects. But I suspect also because I was in classes with youngsters who didn't speak very much English, and I had spent most of my grade school sitting in a corner reading one book after another without very much attention paid to me, at least as well as I can remember, by the teacher.

Eighth grade and high school meant I went to work and really worked at catching up with all the things I hadn't learned up until then.

I won a scholarship to Mary Grove College, which explains how I got to college at all. One of Dad's brothers who sailed the Great Lakes was captain of one of the Great Lakes freighters paid books and fees in addition to the scholarship, and

then after the first year I had part scholarships and partly I worked for my tuition, but Uncle Charlie continued to pay for books and fees. Books and fees were not inconsiderable, since I majored in home economics, which meant I took a great deal of science.

When I was in school, I having been born in the '20s, I lived through the Depression and was very much aware of the Depression. My father was the only one of a number of them who continued to have a job. He was laid off two weeks during the Depression. At the end of that time he went back to work, but instead of working as an engineer, he was called day labor. He did exactly the job that he had done before he was laid off, but his label was different and his pay was different. His pay actually supported our family, and I'm one of seven, as well as a number of the brothers and sisters on both sides of the family who had no source of income at all.

I had a particular advantage as a youngster. I lived in Detroit, southwest Detroit, which was a neighborhood of individual homes, single family

homes, most of whom were either first or second generation Americans. In my immediate neighborhood they all spoke English. There were not very many Catholics among the group, although my family was Catholic, very strongly so. And that explains in large part why I transferred to All Saints in the 8th grade. The older sister transferred with me, and then the younger brothers and sisters later on.

Dad did not belong to a union because there were no unions. Unions were not even thought of. Our family life was a very involved life. We were darned poor. I know that when summer came when school was out Dad took the entire family up to the farm. Part of the time we lived on my mother's people's farm, part of the time we lived on another farm nearby in the home that had been the home of whichever family ran the farm but then was vacant at the time we moved in. We'd stay there for the summer. And I learned so much about agriculture in general, about farming.

My dad's people continued to farm most of the time until I was through high school really, or into high school I guess I should say. Mother's

people left the farm when I was much younger, although I do have strong memories of both the farms. I actually helped spread manure, for instance. And when I got home that night, Mother and Dad would not let me into the House until I had gone out into the area behind the House, taken a bath in a washtub with cold water and came in smelling a little more decent.

We did not really get into politics directly, speaking in terms of Republicans or Democrats. But I can remember listening to Father Coglin on Sundays, for instance. Dad's youngest brother who lived with us a good share of the time was a staunch something or another. I know that he used to just rant and rave. It was not at all unusual for brothers or sisters of either Mother's or Dad's to be over, particularly over the weekend, and sitting in the living room and discussing. It could be politics, it could be religion. No, I'll take that back, they didn't talk religion in this same sense. It could be politics, it could be economics, it could be almost anything. But they would what we called argue. And then at some

signal that I could never pin down they would switch sides. Those who were in favor would talk against. And those who were against suddenly talked in favor. It was a fascinating thing to observe. It was fascinating too in that it gave us a rather interesting background in discussing and debating that certainly served me well.

I really don't know how Mother and Dad voted. That is, I don't know whether they were supporting FDR, whether they were Republicans, which doesn't seem possible. I don't remember ever hearing that mentioned during my growing up days. Obviously after I was an adult and was out working on my own, there were many more discussions, but I don't know how they voted. They did vote, no question about that.

They did not support Father Coglin's views, by the way, which would probably lead me to believe now that they were supporting FDR. Uncle Mike in particular was highly antagonistic over Father Coglin, although we surely did listen to him. We listened just as faithfully to Will Rogers, and I remember that old alarm clock going off, which

always intrigued me. He's been a favorite of mine for years.

When I got into high school, we did have May Day meetings at the University of Detroit where Catholic students from all over the city would collect at the stadium there in the grandstands, and there would be a religious ceremony. Usually we marched from there over to Mary Grove for benediction.

I can remember one time in particular where in the midst of our having gathered there, the ceremony going on strong, we were leafleted by the Communist party. It was certainly an outrage to all of us to be leafleted in the very midst of our Celebration of the Feast of our Blessed Mother and at the same time celebrating the Catholic way of doing things, which was not the Communist way.

When I went to college, there were at that time many courses that were required of anyone who attended Mary Grove, regardless of religion, regardless of course of study. They included philosophy, but they also included classes in which we did a great deal of reading along a research

line of some subject or another and then were expected to produce a paper and deliver the paper to a fairly good sized audience, perhaps 100 or 150 students, which was not an easy thing to do.

There were also classes during which we studied the papals and incyclicals of them all. The one that impressed me the most and had a tremendous influence on the rest of my life was the incyclical by Pope Leo XIII called Rerum Novarum. "Of new things" is the translation. It was written in 1896 I think, '97.

Pope Leo XIII was an amazing man in the breadth of his vision and in the understanding of what would be developing in the societal structure throughout the world, particularly the western world. He spoke especially about the dignity of human beings, about the equality of what individual human beings contributed, whether it was along the lines of money that they invested and for which they had a right to expect a return or whether it was their labor. And he equated the labor that could be given by one group of people with the investment of money by another group of people and

said that they were equally entitled to a return; that they were entitled to be given respect and dignity for what they could and did contribute.

He spoke of unions and of how unions were ways in which working people could combine their resources, their abilities, their thinking, their goals and actually reach a more successful conclusion.

That incycle had a tremendous effect on me, along with the training that I received at Mary Grove where we were taught just day by day by day that we were expected to take leadership roles, that we were expected to make use of the education that we were receiving that was an extraordinary opportunity for most of us who normally might not have expected to be able to have that advantage.

I know that while I was in school there, each time I'd hear the lecture about doing things, being a leader, in my own mind I was saying huh-uh, not me, no way, I will not. And one of the things that we were also taught there was that it was quite proper to disagree, to take an opposing point of view, as long as we had a foundation for it, we had

a basis for it, a reasoned out position. And it served me well I think throughout the rest of my life.

When I graduated from Mary Grove in 1941, I think I was the baby of the class, I looked for work, and work was not easy to find. Jobs were not very plentiful. I applied in Detroit, and at that time we were required to take a two-day exam that was a combination of an IQ test, a psychological exam, a health exam, I don't know what all else. I passed and could have been placed immediately. However, the practice in Detroit at that time was to place all teachers as substitutes. You were either a substitute or you didn't get a job, period, end of the subject.

Since I was dependent upon what I would earn to survive -- my family obviously was still very poor. My older sister when she graduated from Mary Grove was so young looking as well as young in age that she couldn't get a job other than one job she got working for Travelers Aid where they gave her her streetcar fare to and from work and 15 cents for lunch. But she did the job so that she would

have experience. I was running into somewhat the same problem, although always I had looked older than my age.

When I found that I could only substitute in Detroit, I promptly began to apply for work elsewhere. I thought I had a job in one of the suburbs. In fact, I had been handed the contract and was signing my name when the superintendent said to me, "By the way, where will you be teaching Sunday school?" And it startled me because it never occurred to me that teaching Sunday school was part of teaching home economics or English or some of the sciences, which is what I was expecting to do." And I paused I suppose and said, "Well, if I'm teaching, I presume it will be catechism at whatever the Catholic church is," at which point he reached across the table, took the contract back and said, "You wouldn't be happy here so I'm sure you don't want to teach here." And that was the end of that.

What was very clear to me is that in that particular town catholics were not wanted, they were not welcome and they were expected to go away.

I was not surprised too much because growing up I found that neither I nor the boy friend I had particularly in high school could get a job in Port Hope. Lutherans were hired there, not Catholics. So that in many ways I did understand discrimination in a fashion I might not have otherwise.

In my own neighborhood, my home neighborhood there were a number of nationalities. I can't even name them all. And we certainly seemed to get along with each other, although religion -- well, religion made a difference there too come to think of it. I could not be either a Girl Scout or a Campfire Girl because I didn't go to either of the neighboring protestant churches, and only the girls who were members of those churches were permitted to join those troops. So that might be one of the reasons why going up to the farm in the summer was such a special advantage to me. There would have been no other opportunity.

I finally did get a job in White Cloud, Michigan, which is north of Grand Rapids, for those who know the state, on the western side of the

lower peninsula about two-thirds of the way from the southern border. White Cloud was a town of about a thousand. There were ten churches in town. And the only warning I got there was that I should not go to the Big Chief Hotel because they served alcohol there, and teachers were not expected to imbibe. It wasn't put quite that bluntly, just that they would not expect me to go to the White Cloud Hotel period on that subject.

I taught in White Cloud two years and found that it was a fascinating experience. The town collected the youngsters from quite away around the area who came by bus to high school. They went to country schools for the most part through the 8th grade, although some of them came into the 8th grade to White Cloud. I taught home economics to both boys and girls. I also taught chemistry and English in White Cloud. I was in charge of the school lunch program. I did a lot of other odds and ends as one does in a small town.

I found it very interesting and might have stayed longer except the second world war had broken out and I found that it took me two days to

get to Detroit from White Cloud by train. There was no other way to go. And, of course, gas was rationed, cars were not available and so on. So I came back to Detroit to work.

After I came back to Detroit, I worked as a substitute and probably would have been placed, but that fall I married Dan Reardon at Camp Gruber in Oklahoma, Muskogee, Oklahoma, and stayed there for the period that he was there. He had expected to remain in the states at least two years, but was shipped out with an excess officers group and, of course, at that time I came back home.

While I was in Muskogee, I found that because I had a Bachelor's degree I was entitled to five dollars a day when I taught in high school instead of four dollars, which is what I would have gotten had I only had high school education. I substituted there as much as anything to keep myself busy, and also because money was still very scarce.

When I came back to Detroit I went back to substituting in the schools, and in the fall of 1944 was placed at the Burn School where I stayed

until I went overseas to teach in Germany.

It was while I was at Burns that I first truly became aware of teacher organizations. While I was in White Cloud I learned about teacher organizations the hard way. I had come down with infectious mononucleosis and a seriously, seriously bad strep throat and got started in White Cloud two weeks late when I got there, a month late, excuse me.

When I got there, my first pay check was so very small. When I asked the superintendent why, he said, "Well, I took out your Michigan Education Association dues of course." He didn't tell me he was going to. He didn't tell me that it was a requirement to teach there. But apparently it was, and he took the money out without saying ah, yes or no. That left me with thirteen dollars, by the way, which wasn't easy to live on.

In Detroit, however, I found that I was getting newspapers from both the Detroit Teachers Association and the Detroit Federation of Teachers. I was tremendously impressed with the difference. The Detroit Teachers Association newspaper

emphasized some far away esoteric research occasionally, it emphasized a reception or a tea for this administrator or that one or something that was going on that was particularly social and upward mobile in nature, particularly administratively.

The Detroit Federation of Teachers newspaper on the other hand was concentrating on the lack of substitutes, the problem of attempting to teach without substitutes to fill the classrooms, without enough books to go around, without what was true in my own classroom, not even enough chairs for the children I had in classes. So that the children sat in -- some of them in each class had to sit in the chairs of those who were absent or the teacher's desk or even on the floor. Things were pretty tough.

At that time I also bumped into Adelaide Hart, who's quite well known here in Michigan as a staunch Democrat, a member of the state central committee at that time, very active in the teachers union, a Mary Grove graduate, a number of things. And it was at a Mary Grove affair that Adelaide

cornered me and said, "Do you belong to the Detroit Federation of Teachers?" And I said, "No." She said, "Do you belong to anything?" And I said, "No. Why should I?"

And her response was, "If you expect anything to be done about the conditions under which you are working about which you have been complaining here this afternoon, you get yourself into a teacher organization and get busy." And she said, "By the way, didn't I hear you say something about 'Rerum Novarum' here a few years back?" And I said, "Yes." "Well," she says, "go back and read it."

Well, I went back and read it, went back to school and joined the Detroit Federation of Teachers.

I assumed by the way that if I joined the teachers union that meant I went to meetings, and I did, I attended faithfully every blessed meeting. Some of them were boring as all get out. I found the people there were interested not just in the very serious problems we had of shortages and difficulties of every kind, but they were interested, too, in the international scene, which

I thought was pretty boring. I was very much locally oriented and had always been very locally oriented.

But I got involved and I did go to membership meetings. And during that period I joined the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists, the ACTU, which was a Catholic organization for union members in which we learned parliamentary procedure, in which we learned some of the things that are necessary to run a good organization. For example, keeping very close and accurate records of income and outgo and making certain that outgo was in keeping with the motions that were formally adopted as to how money should be spent. But particularly, too, the social approach of the dignity of a human being and the work that he did and his right to own property, to have a decent living, a decent standard of living, food for himself and his family and the whole bit. And it was reminiscent of those classes that I had had at Mary Grove and of some of that reading that I had done and certainly fit in very much with what I had learned growing up about the necessity of taking care of one's own and one's

family and looking out to see that people were properly taken care of, as well as educated, as well as having a normal life to the extent possible.

In the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists, because we learned parliamentary procedure and learned it thoroughly and learned how to get up on a union floor and how to talk on a union floor, it really served me very well. I know that the people who have known me of recent years don't believe it, but I was terribly shy and have been very shy my entire life, even when I was speaking to 12,000 members at Cobo Arena following a threat to strike.

But be that as it may, back to the ACTU. Bill Ryan was president, and he was editor for a newspaper called The Wage Earner. I think The Wage Earner was published primarily in Detroit or maybe in the Detroit archdiocese. But through that newspaper, which represented ACTU, there was unionism discussed and the advantages of unions and how unions could help the ordinary working man, what they could do and how union members had an

obligation to be involved in their unions to take an active role and see to it that the union worked in the direction in which it should.

Detroit at that time was coming out of the terrible, terrible depression, and there were a lot of remants of that depression around, a lot of the hold over from the depths of poverty to which we had all been exposed.

The Communist party was attempting to gain a real foothold, and apparently had decided that unions were the best route, the most acting route, the quickest route to make any real progress. We often talked at those ACTU meetings about how the Communist group would infiltrate, how they worked, how they were able to succeed.

The Michigan Catholic, which is the archdiocesan newspaper, Catholic newspaper for the Detroit archdiocese had a column that ran pretty regularly, probably every week, it was a weekly newspaper written by Monsignor George Higgins out of Washington, D.C. Monsignor Higgins is still active, in fact I went to a lecture that he gave on the Bishop's economic paper here just a couple of

weeks back. His whole theme was much the theme that we learned about and talked about in ACTU. It was the theme of the value of a union, the way that we would use the union to advance the causes in which we believed so firmly and to prevent the takeover of our unions by the Communist party. The Communist party was very real, and we did learn to recognize it.

One of the things that I was especially aware of at union meetings was that the meeting would start out with quite a few members present, but as it got later and later the membership would dwindle until there were just a few people left, at which point -- and I could pick out the same individuals meeting after meeting -- who would get up and make a motion that clearly was supportive of one of the causes that we had learned either at ACTU or that I had been reading about somewhere else that was definitely far left, whether it was actually Communist or not is hard to say, but it was that whole direction of thought. What is amazing to me is that right now I can't remember a single one of the issues themselves. I just plain don't

remember. I joined the union in 1945 in January, and this would have been that whole '45, '46, '47, '48, '49, '50 period; that there were hangovers. And I knew and could see these folk who were particularly concerned much more about international issues, much more about something that was outside of our own school district, outside of our immediate classroom problems in which I was most concerned.

What really concerned me is that the discussion would get off on these international things and on things that were so far away from our own classrooms and our own immediate problems that I thought it was a waste of time, along with using up our good energy and our time and our money on something that really was wrong as far as being an American citizen was concerned.

That had concerned me so much in my early days in the union was because of the terrible problems we were all having in school, I thought the union should be concentrating on how to resolve those problems, not getting itself involved in all those other social issues that were beyond anything

we could do anything about anyway.

The teachers union had been founded in 1931. It was an undercover organization for quite awhile, a couple of years. The activists in the union were Socialists, outright Socialists. I won't attempt to describe which area of Socialism they were in because I've never been very clear on that myself. But I know that, for instance, Florence Sweeney and Francis Comfort, who were president interchangeably, one and then the other back and forth for years and years on end, were clearly Socialists.

Their concerns, however, were not only the Socialist general issues, the wide, broad issues which were a very real part of it, but very specifically also the issues of class size, of books, of materials, of something to eat for the children that didn't have enough to eat. All kinds of things, what teachers were paid, whether or not they were given an opportunity to go to the bathroom. With elementary teachers that was a serious problem. If you were in school in class from 8:30 until 3:30 and were not permitted to

leave the classroom, going to the bathroom was quite a problem. If you had to send to the office to get someone from the office to come and take your classroom in order that you go to the bathroom, you can imagine the embarrassment, among other things. No opportunity to eat lunch except while supervising children, things of that variety.

And it was such a distinctly different point of view from the Detroit Teachers Association, which later became the Detroit Education Association, and then died while I was president of the Detroit Federation of Teachers entirely.

The issues that were much broader were as far as I was concerned definitely secondary. They were there and they were important, but they were so very much secondary. I was teaching science, 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th grades. I had 756 children all at the same time to whom I was teaching science for whom I was expected to check papers and to grade on the basis of what they had learned. Now, mind you, not enough books, not enough chairs, not enough time, not enough anything. And, oh, the horror of it is enough to upset me even at this stage of the

game, all these years later. But perhaps it explains why I never ever could get that far away from the actual situation in a classroom. What was going on in the classroom that made it possible for the teacher to survive, along with doing what teachers are supposed to do had such a long lasting effect on me, to this day I can't really think of anything else that is quite as important for the teachers union to be involved in.

Now, certainly the broader issues became terribly important. I'll mention integration as one of them, which was a particularly overriding issue here in Detroit. Those were things that were tremendously important. I think, for instance, of Art Elder, who established the Michigan Federation of Teachers while he was very active in the Detroit Federation of Teachers, which predated the state organization. His interests I would guess were perhaps even social broad issues and local school issues were perhaps on a par with him. But for me they never were.

There were in our organization teachers who from what they said, the way they talked, their

primary interests definitely were left leaning, whether they were actually Communists or not I couldn't swear to it. I know that toward the end of '40s, I think it was in '47 when there was a threat to go on strike, the first time in Detroit that such a threat had ever been issued, and it came up, by the way, over whether or not we would be given credit for sick leave, whether or not a change in the state law that dedicated a part of the sales tax to schools and whether that income would be spent to improve the teaching situation, the learning situation, or whether the money would be stashed away for some future need. All of that is what brought on that first teacher strike threat. And that's where I actually had to face myself and argue out with my own conscience to whether I could walk out of the classroom and picket in order to do something that would improve the classroom.

I'm going to back up just a little bit here. I can remember standing on the banks of the Rouge River at the end of the block where I lived looking across the river to Miller Road where men were

collecting in huge numbers to march on the Ford Motor Company in an attempt to establish the UAW there. In my early years of teaching, my father quit work at Ford's where he had been working from the time he and Mother first came to Detroit. He went from there to the American Agricultural Chemical Company of America, and we always laugh at the long name. He was chief engineer there. But in the course of the time that he was first there, the first few years he was there -- and he was only there I suppose five, six, seven years all told -- he was chief engineer. The men who worked under him, the engineers who worked under him belonged to a union. And during the course of that time, their wages, because of the union negotiations, were actually higher than his wages. He was in charge. He was the man who was responsible 24 hours a day. But they who worked shifts and were only responsible for their own shifts were earning more money. It impressed him tremendously. And he left that company and went to work for the Detroit Board of Education as an engineer, a relief engineer, which meant he went all over the city to fix

whatever was wrong in whatever school it was, where he could be a union member.

Now, I had joined the union and was actively involved in the union. I was living at home because my husband, as I said earlier, had gone overseas. He was killed in Germany. And I continued to live at home for convenience, along with all kinds of other reasons. But Dad for that time became aware of what unions could do and was a staunch union member from then forward. Up until then, unions hadn't really meant much of anything, pro or con.

Now, there had been strikes in Detroit other than the strikes at Ford and the battle for recognition, which was -- well, it was so close to home -- Dad bought the property and he and Mother built the home I grew up in that was close enough that he could walk to work at the Ford Motor Company. And the Ford Motor Company was a part of our lives. We grew up with the stench and the smoke and the dirt from that factory making our home pretty doggone dirty day in and day out.

But all of that aside, unions were just not

very real to me. I knew there were unions, and of course through ACTU and some of the reading that I did I became more familiar with them. And when I joined the Detroit Federation of Teachers I became more aware of what unions did, how they worked, what they were trying to accomplish.

Now, I know when that first threat of the strike came up, the idea of teachers going on strike was just an appalling idea. It was something that teachers didn't do. Now, the cause was tremendous, and it was very clear that the Board of Education which was made up of businessmen whose prime concern was to maintain low property taxes, and particularly low business taxes, their concern with a sudden windfall of money was to take advantage of it. My concern was to use that money and to make a change in the classroom.

The moral problem was the problem as to whether I could as a teacher whose major job was working with children and helping in the development of the ethical philosophy, the way of living of those children, it was such a tremendously important part of what I did as a

teacher. And my own example as a teacher was so tremendously important in influencing those students that the moral question of whether or not we as teachers could go on strike was a very difficult one to be faced. And what someone did at Kresge's, for instance, or what someone did at General Motors or Turnsted's or any of those factories was quite aside from what we were doing. The people who worked there were not morally responsible in their job for the upbringing of young people and we were responsible.

From the very beginning of the time that I belonged, joined and became an active member of the Detroit Federation of Teachers, it was clear to me that a teachers union was a union in every sense of the word. But a teachers union had a responsibility over and above an ordinary union, any other union, because we were concerned so much more with our product, if you can call the education of children a product. We were concerned so much more with the product than was an ordinary union worker, that we had an extraordinary additional responsibility. And it was that that

made the possibility of a strike a serious moral challenge to be met, to be faced and to be determined finally.

At that time, it was interesting, the Federation had a number of city-wide meetings that were very crowded, a lot of people showed up, many, many more people than were members of the union showed up. Our leadership was very clear and emphatic on what they believed the issues to be and why they believed it was necessary to go on strike.

I think of Francis Comfort and Florence Sweeney in particular, of Helen Moorpalaner who became very prominent, of Mary Kay Sted who became notable at that time, of a number of other leaders who were very actively involved and who said very clearly we have presented our point of view, we have made our position very clear. The Board of Education, which has the authority to make determinations of the expenditure of these funds, has said no, absolutely no. That leaves us with nowhere to go except to find some way of dramatizing beyond any question the value and the validity of the point we are making and some way to

force the board what we know is absolutely right because we are in the position of seeing firsthand what the situation is in our classrooms, what our youngsters must have if they are to be successful citizens in this United States.

It's interesting that Detroit has such a long history of women who are president of the union and who are its major leadership. It wasn't a lack of men, although it's very true that particularly the farther back you go in history the greater the number of women who were teachers, aside from high school or aside from many, many, many years ago when men were the tutors. But in Detroit we had extraordinarily fine women who took the leadership of the union and worked with men -- no question about it, there wasn't any opposition to men -- but they were so talented and they were so able to make their points and to carry through a program that they were elected and reelected year after year.

Frances Comfort and Florence Sweeney were in effect the only presidents from the first very short period when the man was a president of the first local for a very short period and did nothing

and nothing happened until Francis took over. And then is when the union really began to move. It took many, many years, of course, all through the '30s when it was a very small organization, but very well known. And having looked at some of that old history of the schools in Detroit, I am amazed at what was accomplished by a membership of a mere handful of people.

Francis Comfort and Florence Sweeney were one of them president, the other exec sec for years and years on end. It was in the late '40s that Helen Moorpalaner was president, just a couple of years, and then Antonia Colar was president for nine years.

Then following Tony Colar, I was elected president and was president for 22 years. So for that period of time only women were president of the Detroit Federation of Teachers. We did a remarkable job, I have to say that no matter whether it sounds like I'm bragging or not. I guess I am bragging, and why not. What we accomplished in a city that had so many working people whose children learned in the public schools

enough to become leaders in finance, leaders in industry, leaders in government throughout the world, from the United States, but representing all over, as well as locally and in the state and in the country. I think we have much to be proud of.

We had especially talented women, no question about it. And we had women who were willing to devote the time to do the job. We also had the wonderfully fortunate circumstance of a combination of women who would and could work together. For example, Florence and Francis worked as a team. One supported the other, and then the other supported the one, back and forth. And it didn't matter who was taking leadership at the moment, it was the two of them working together who accomplished the goal.

When Antonia Colar was president, again Francis, Florence and Helen Bowers -- increasingly Helen Bowers -- and also Mary Kay Sted were the supporting folk for Antonia Colar. We all called her Tony.

When I was president, Helen Bowers was my right hand, and the person who became my assistant,

my secretary, Wilene Sanders was also of tremendous value. We could not have accomplished what we did without that combined force, that combined intellect, the combined supporting of one another, one strengths to fill in another's weakness, so that what came through was strong leadership.

It doesn't really sound as though there was much in the line of politics involved in the union, but the union is famous for its politics. It was just filled with politics. There was never an election until this last one in the Detroit Federation of Teachers where there was not opposition for the office of president, for example, and the battles were fought, fiercely fought.

The fact that Francis and Florence were elected year after year after year simply indicates the fact that they were very, very good and the majority of the members wanted them to continue. But there was a minority of members who had very differing points of view, particularly farther left, as distinct from Socialist in the '30s and the '40s, and I'm not quite sure how we would

distinguish the politics as we get farther into the years. But there was strong, strong caucusing, and usually two caucuses. One would elect the majority and the other would elect the minority, and sometimes they reversed positions, sometimes they didn't -- as far as majority, minority is concerned. But they continued and have continued until very, very recently in Detroit. Right now, for all practical purposes, there is only a single caucus in the Detroit Federation of Teachers.

But the history of politics is very strong. If you have any question, you might ask the president of the organization of school administrators and supervisors from Detroit or the national president of that administrators organization who opposed me for election several times. And the local leadership here will also tell you that same thing. Originally our local had both administrators and teachers, although it was always a teacher organization. But as some of those leaders became administrators, they continued their membership, although -- except for the early years did not continue their very active role in

the union as union members. But while they were still teachers, believe you me, they were strong opposition and fighting like mad to replace me, and ahead of me to replace Tony and Francis and Florence.

We formally changed our practice of having administrators in the union on an equal status with teachers when the national constitution changed. There had been a strong attempt by the administrators in our local to form a separate chapter here in Detroit, a separate AFT chapter of administrators. I was very ambivalent about the whole idea. In fact, I wasn't at all sure it was a good idea, although at that time there was an administrators local out west. When the national constitution changed, of course that settled it. And those administrators who were already continuing as union members continued from then forward unless they dropped out of their own desires, or farther along the line didn't stay with us at all. Some of the administrators I believe are still members to this day. And that change in constitution goes back to the early '60s. So this

is a long time.

The first time I went to an AFT convention was in either '48 or '49 when the convention was in Grand Rapids. I was going to visit a sister who had recently been married and was visiting her in Wisconsin. She'd moved from Detroit to Wisconsin where her husband was finishing school. I stopped at the convention, and when I got to the convention hotel, announced I was there, and I was happily added to the list of delegates. Electing delegates at that time was a very simple matter. There was an election, but then anybody who showed up at convention time who was a member of the local automatically became a delegate right on the spot with no problems at all, no question.

And I went to convention meetings. I also went to some of the caucus meetings. Of the things that stand out at that convention, there are two in particular. One, my first introduction to Herrick Roth. ~~Heric~~ Roth was a very active member of the Progressive Caucus. Most of the people from my local who were at caucus meetings were at the Progressive Caucus, and so I thought I'd go and see

what was going on. I went into the meeting, and Heric Roth was talking in his very fluent, brilliant fashion, and talked and talked and talked, and I got tired of listening and left and wandered around some other parts of the convention and came back another hour or so later, and Heric Roth was still talking and talking and talking.

He was famous for talking a long time fluently, in beautiful English, saying many interesting things one after the other and repeating some of them, but really giving a marvelous speech, and more and more and more speech, until we used to get awfully tired of hearing him.

But that was my first introduction to caucuses, and very bluntly, they didn't mean much and I didn't quite understand what was going on. I went to the Classroom Teachers Caucus, and I don't remember anything at all about that, except I know that I went. I remember specifically going to check it out. It didn't sound very interesting to me, but then neither did I want to listen to Heric Roth talk any longer.

Although I must say at the Progressive Caucus I heard Selma Borchard for the first time. And Selma Borchard fascinated me. Her appearance and her way of speaking and the points to which she spoke, I found her talking on a national level but talking from the national point of view to specific problems of a classroom, which caught my interest.

Selma was an aristocratic woman in every way. She was elegant in her bearing. We really thought much of her. She spoke slowly and dramatically and clearly was choosing words that meshed one with another so that she spoke in sentences that impressed me tremendously. Her delivery, her thought that went into it, all of those things just fascinated me because of the skill that she had in presenting a point of view and a direction of thought and a proposed direction of action.

Selma wore black I think all of the time. I don't remember ever seeing her in any other color. But there was always a white collar, probably linen with lace trim at that time or crocheting, and always as I remember the white collar looked like it should have been washed before she wore it.

She wore white gloves that also looked like they needed to be washed. And many times I wanted so desperately to say, Selma, give me your stuff and let me wash it so you'll look better. But I didn't dare. I would have been -- oh, it just would have been impossible. But she was famous. And anyone who had been to a national convention would say, oh, Selma, yes, I know, was her collar dirty then too? And it always was.

But Selma had a tremendous reputation in the Congress. I've heard so many people talk about her back then and in the years since, those who watched her in action. She would go to the office of a representative or of a senator on his birthday and carry a birthday cake that either she herself had baked or that she had youngsters from school come over and help her bake and frost and decorate with candles so she could bring it in with the candles lighted and sing happy birthday. She knew congresspersons to speak to. She was greeted by them, they recognized her, and she had a remarkable facility of reaching people at the congressional level.

She really served the AFT very well, particularly in the earlier years. In her last years, I think she was slipping in her ability to concentrate and in her ability to really make her point. Although even then she was dramatic and she was a wonderful, wonderful person.

There were a number of leaders at that convention and at the conventions thereafter that I went to that truly impressed me. Rebecca Simonson, for example, when she got up to speak clearly knew what she wanted to say and how to say it in a dramatic fashion so that every word would be heard. Joe Landis was famous in my opinion because of his tremendous understanding, knowledge, background of parliamentary procedure which he used to the nth degree to accomplish his goal. He was leader of an opposition caucus, opposition to the members of my local who were at national, but he was respected tremendously because he was honorable in his use of parliamentary procedure along with his expertise.

There were other leaders at the time, and no doubt as I talk further I'll come across some and mention them. But those were among the ones who

caught my attention the loudest, the clearest and are most memorable.

John ~~Fuchs~~ Fewtrell, of course, from Chicago. John Fuchs was one of those individuals who simply by his very presence exuded power. And that feeling of the power emanating from the individual was a very real sensation for those who were in his presence.

The second major thing at that election that really caught my eye and caught my ear and remains in my memory was the big battle over whether or not the Los Angeles local should be ousted for Communist activities. Quite bluntly, the arguments went on and on, and most of the arguments were over my head, I didn't know what they were about. I didn't understand what was going on. I remember clearly that Dr. Walter Bergman from my own Detroit local got up and asked for five minutes to talk pro and five minutes to talk con because he had such good points on both sides of the subject.

I think it was about that time that I left the hall and just caught a breath of fresh air somewhere to try and clear my head and figure out

what was really happening. Fortunately, I did learn a little more and become a little broader in my perspective as time went on so that some of these arguments in future years made better sense to me.

TAPE 2

MS. RENE EPSTEIN: This is Rene Epstein. My interview with Mary Ellen Reardon is continuing on April 5th, 1987 in Detroit, Michigan.

MS. MARY ELLEN REARDON: It was after that convention that Communism, which had become important to me right from the beginning in the Detroit Federation of Teachers, became more and more important, because it got involved with what we were doing at Central Labor Body here in Detroit. I was a delegate to Central Labor Body probably because I was one of the few people who was willing to go to those meetings that lasted forever and that for the most part seemed very, very boring to me. But while we were there, one of the other delegates of later years said, you know, when you come into a room and there are Communist leaning people -- whether they're actually

Communists or whether they're just almost there -- you can smell them because they have a way about them, they have an aura and it's there. And, you know, it's true. But say whatever you want to say about that, we were very sensitive to that whole issue.

There was an art teacher in Detroit who was accused of being a Communist, Eleanor Macky. There was a great deal of hullabaloo over it, oh, a tremendous discussion, arguments, what not, pro and con. And in the midst of the big discussion as to whether or not she would be expelled from the Detroit Federation of Teachers, I went overseas to teach. I did not know what I was going to teach. I knew I was going to teach in Germany, and my assignment gets complex and I won't go into it, but I ended up in Berlin, which was the only place that I was unwilling to go to. But lacking enough money to go home on my own, I had to go to Berlin to teach.

While I was there, I learned, oh, so much of value to the rest of my life. I found out that I was an American in a fashion that I had never truly

understood before. There were certain liberties, certain freedoms that I had assumed and that I had lived with all my life up until then without even being aware of the fact that I was exercising that kind of freedom. In Berlin, I could not leave without having orders printed in Russian and in English which stated where I was going, when I was leaving, when I would return and the purpose of my visit. I had to have those orders written up every time I left the city. And I left every weekend to go sightseeing somewhere.

I did not have to have papers to go into the eastern sector, and I didn't go there very often because, very bluntly, it did not feel safe. And the feeling of oppression was so tremendous that I was very uncomfortable. I did go to some concerts, some symphonies. I didn't go there ever to shop other than antique places because there wasn't anything to buy, and the antiques being sold were being sold because someone was so hungry that their life possessions were being sold in order that they would have food.

There was no rebuilding in East Berlin at

all. There was in the West. In the West there was much more available, and we were very aware of how much more freedom, how much more ability we had to go and come and do what we wished in the western sectors, whether it was the British, the French or the American sector.

I taught in the American school for two years. It had been the Garetrauden die schuler, but it was the Thomas A. Robert School in that old building. There was a German man who was my lab assistant while I was teaching there who told me much of the way that Berliners lived and much of the background of Germany that gave me a better understanding of why I as an American was so different from the rest of Germany. Berlin itself was more like -- the western sector of Berlin itself was more like the United States than any other part of Germany, very much more.

There was a sense of individualism and individual freedom attempting to be expressed there in Berlin that was not anywhere. But the years that I spent there teaching certainly made me aware of the role of the United States in with the rest

of the world in what was happening, how people were treated, who would starve to death and who wouldn't because of what changes in national policy, what countries would have advantages or disadvantages, and some of the reasons why there might be a war or how a war could start because of tensions on things that up until then I had been unwilling to even think about.

I found myself reading editorials and searching out editorials to find the thinking of a particular group of people or a particular person, something I had never done before I went to Germany.

When I returned to the United States, I was transferred from the Burn School to the Clarey, which was another northwest elementary school. I had the same assignment teaching general science grades 5, 6, 7 and 8, although I also did some other teaching in other fields in other areas. The return to Clarey brought with it a rather interesting side light. I, who for the first time realized how important it was to be an American citizen and to exercise my American privileges,

found myself apparently the one Communist in the Clarey school when Senator McCarthy's UnAmerican Activities Committee was coming to Detroit to find out who were Communists in Detroit.

I attached the label to myself mostly because I was the only one with any connections with overseas who was teaching in the school at the time. And of all the faculty there, I had become the most deep down patriot of the lot because I had seen what it was like to live in another country where we just didn't have the freedoms we have in the United States.

That particular UnAmerican Activities Committee made a big hullabaloo at the newspapers in the headlines, but it sort of faded away and died away, and the people who knew me there at Clarey knew very well that I was not a Communist and had no sympathy for Communists.

The DFT policy, the Detroit Federation of Teachers policy on Communism was adopted in the course of the Helen Macky case. The decision finally made after tremendous argument and debate that went on for hours and hours on end at numerous

meetings was that anyone who was accused of being a Communist would be supported by the Detroit Federation of Teachers. This is any member, of course, would be supported by the Detroit Federation of Teachers if that individual would speak directly, clearly and forthrightly to the attorney who was doing the defense of the individual before whatever court or whatever hearing was being held over it, whether it was Board of Education, whether it was the House UnAmerican Activities Committee hearing, whatever it might be. That policy with very, very minor changes was the policy adopted by the American Federation of Teachers very soon after its adoption by the Detroit Federation of Teachers. It was for all practical purposes the identical policy.

It was a policy with which I could live and with which I could be comfortable, because that policy was saying if you are a Communist and are forthrightly a Communist and say so, you will be treated in that fashion and will be treated appropriately with our governmental protections and supports which are given to anyone who appears in

court. If you are not a Communist and if you say clearly and directly to the attorney, where there is that attorney-client relationship which is held sacred in this country, then indeed we will support you. And that satisfied me completely.

What I found of tremendous interest over the years since that period is that any number of the teachers I knew long ago and have known since somehow or another were invagled into becoming a member of an organization that was in fact very far left and possibly Communist but they did not know it. They were invagled in under the cover of civil rights, under the cover of fair wages for individuals who were working in hard jobs, under the cover of integration, particularly, under the cover of getting a reasonable education for everyone, not just the children of the wealthy. But the individuals that I speak of -- and I won't even name them -- I think of Dave Morgan, our own local member who was so vehement about it -- our members were so violently angry when they realized how they had been caught up in that movement with the subterfuge of a very dear and important social

goal.

Communism was very real in Detroit, but the people in Detroit it seemed to me when they realized what they were getting into backed out of it because Detroit is a town of working people, middle class people. The picture is changing now, but for many, many years we had a larger proportion of middle class whites and blacks than did any other city in the United States. Without any question we had more homeowners living in their own homes in the city of Detroit than any other city. And with that home ownership and all of the things that it brings to mind, the way we work, the way we handle our homes, all the rest of it, it just was a different world than most other cities. We had practically no public housing, for instance. We had practically no apartments. We had no tenements. We had only the private individual home in which the person who was the wage earner was living and paying on the mortgage. It made a different world.

Capitalism in fact was clearly a part of our ordinary everyday life and we were determined that

we would remain part of capitalism, that anything else was an anathema. The whole picture of the House UnAmerican Activities Committee sort of faded away because there was another picture that was beginning to take more and more prominence in our everyday life. I think of the pamphlet that was distributed shortly after I got back home from Germany which was the tenements of the Negro race, which was a pamphlet distributed by the Detroit Federation of Teachers to every school in the city of Detroit.

The whole business of the integration of the schools, of the desegregation, which is really the proper term because it hadn't been integration in very few places in Detroit and in other cities is there real integration. The real problem of desegregation was led in discussion by the leadership of the Detroit Federation of Teachers working with other civic leaders and community leaders in Detroit, but the DFT people seemed to be reflecting much of the discussion that came from the American Federation of Teachers conventions and other discussions at the national level. There was

a very close tie-in.

Detroit was like a lot of cities in that there were black neighborhoods and then there were Caucasian neighborhoods. And the Caucasian neighborhoods were made up of various ethnic groups. There was a Polish neighborhood, a German neighborhood, a Hungarian neighborhood and so on and on. And we to this day have the largest Arabic neighborhoods of anywhere in the United States. But the black neighborhoods were self-contained, the black children went to black schools, and the boundaries not uncommonly were drawn to make certain that the black children went to one set of schools and white children to another.

The Federation was very much involved, for example, in a presentation to the Board of Education about 1950, at which time the Federation insisted that children should go to the nearest neighborhood school without regard to whether or not it was black or white. So that there would be black children and white children going to their nearest neighborhood school, not to their nearest black school or white school. It was not well

received by the Board and there wasn't any action taken on it so far as I have any knowledge.

The leadership of the Federation, though, continued to insist that black children and white children had equal rights to an education, to an equal share of books and equal share of whatever else was being distributed and that black teachers and white teachers should have the same opportunity to teach in any school in the city where they wished to teach and not in a school that was predominantly of the same racial makeup.

We had very few Orientals in the city and at that time not as many Hispanics as we have now, and there had not been real discussion of the place of the Hispanic or of the American Indian or the Oriental, and in large part because of the very few of them who were present.

The Federation was responsible for bringing black teachers into some prominence in the city schools and insisting that they be treated reasonably and fairly, as were other teachers. An interesting point is that membership in the Federation had roughly the same proportions of

black and white teachers as did the school faculty compliment. It surprised us because we had been told that the black teachers would automatically belong to the Education Association, not the Federation, when in fact they were distributed the same as were other teachers.

One of the big battles that the Federation fought continually year after year after year was to get a fair distribution of textbooks and other school materials to the schools in the neighborhoods that were predominantly black or entirely black. We worked at that. Oh, and class size, too. Class size was smaller in all white neighborhoods than it was in black neighborhoods. And it was unfair and it was unfair to the children and to the teachers who were teaching them, as well as unfair in terms of just general justice. We fought that battle and really did not ever succeed until we finally got class size in our collective bargaining agreement.

There were other battles along those lines that occurred, but particularly the idea of black teachers having an opportunity to teach in what

were considered the top schools in the city for whatever reason, either because of their newness, their furnishings, the compliment of youngsters that attended or whatever. Black teachers were not given much choice. White teachers were given preference as to placements.

We talked about it and worked toward that end for years and years on end, and of course, were deeply involved in the court case when it actually began on the desegregation of the Detroit schools. That took place, however, after our collective bargaining began, and perhaps collective bargaining is the next subject we ought to cover.

Collective bargaining was perhaps one of the farthest things from our minds, not because we were opposed or in favor of it, but rather because we just didn't even think about it in connection with teaching and working and having a union. It just wasn't part of our thinking because teachers were not involved in collective bargaining. There was a whole mind set in opposition. I think, for instance, of one of the political education meetings that I attended in Lansing that had been

called for union leaders from all over the state. And at that meeting to start one of the sessions each one of us introduced ourselves and told from what local we came. When I introduced myself as a member of the Detroit Federation of Teachers, the question was raised in all seriousness, "Do you think teachers ought to belong to a union?" And, "Why are teachers in a union? That's for working men and women, that's not for teachers.

This session occurred in the late '50s, and it's true that the individuals who were most outspoken in that direction were from out state Michigan rather than from the city of Detroit. But it was the attitude in Detroit, too. We were accepted as union members only that we were not supposed to be involved in anything like collective bargaining. Whether we were supposed to be above and beyond it or just exactly what, I'm not sure. But it was considered not proper for us.

I think it's quite interesting from present perspective to look back at that period. The only place in the country where there was anything resembling collective bargaining was out I guess in

Butte, Montana, that's one I hear about, and then Mary Wheeler in the group of cities there near Chicago where they had some version of collective bargaining. Not collective bargaining in the modern sense at all, but at least an early version of it. We just plain didn't think in terms of negotiating a contract with the kinds of provisions in it that would have to do with hours, conditions and salaries. We fought on individual issues like, for example, history textbooks for a particular grade level or perhaps some arrangement of sick leave or some other individual problem but not a contract that would cover all of those things.

This was true on a national level. There was no discussion at national conventions of collective bargaining or how it would come or how it would happen or when we would start working for it. It wasn't mentioned. It just was not part of the scene. Carl Megel in all the time he was president was really not a proponent of collective bargaining. It started the real modern day pitch kind of collective bargaining started in New York City, and I can remember how excited Helen Bowers

was about what New York City was doing. And it was Helen Bowers who forced me in a sense to sit down and think about what New York was trying to do.

I went to New York City during part of the campaign to win that first election which gave them the right to have a vote, and at that time met Dave Seldon and a number of the other people who were working so hard on that campaign in New York. The expenditure of local funds to take me that far out of the city was a rather remarkable thing for its time. I have since, of course, done many, many much more outrageous things, if we use that terminology, than I did then. But at that time, to go to New York and actually join in that campaign for two days was something quite remarkable.

I was tremendously impressed with what they were trying to do and what they expected to accomplish and became more and more intrigued with the idea. Helen was the spark plug, no question about that. And between the two of us, we began to talk about what we would do. This was not too long after I had been elected president in May of 1960. I actually became the first full-time union

president in the Detroit Federation of Teachers in February of 1961. From the time I took office and then school started the following September until I came into the office I quite literally had two days that I could call my own. Other than that, I was working either at school work or at a union meeting all day every day from Monday morning until Monday morning into all hours of the night. I don't know how I survived that semester.

I came into the union office in February of '61 then and we began to talk about the possibility of Detroit going into collective bargaining. We talked to Dave Seldon in particular who was a friend of Helen Bowers and who came originally from Dearborn, helped found the Dearborn local. Helen had known Dave quite well when he was in the local area here. We also went to the UAW and asked about some support, some financial support in order to begin a campaign of collective bargaining.

The Detroit local had come quite a long ways. We were the first AFT local, let alone the national, to own our own building. We actually purchased a building and occupied it. No other

union, and the national had no such thing. We were the only place where the Federation of Teachers had a local office that we owned and occupied.

We talked about collective bargaining and, of course, when we talked about collective bargaining we needed to know something about it and something about how it would work for a teacher union, as well as how it worked for anybody. But how it worked for anybody would certainly be changed to meet the circumstances required by a teachers union. We talked about asking for help from AFT, and that was just a lot of foolishness because AFT didn't have any money. We were much wealthier than AFT, and we were darn poor, so poor that we knew we couldn't do much of anything.

We went to the UAW rather than to the AFL-CIO, to the Labor Council or to the president there because we thought we'd get a better reception from UAW. Walter Reuther was well known for his liberal views, for his liberal attitudes on so many things and certainly for what he had done with collective bargaining, which was quite different from what had occurred in the old guild

type unions that were part of the AFL.

When we went to the UAW, the first thing they asked us was how many members did we have as compared to how many teachers there were in the system. When we gave them our membership numbers, they told us to forget it. Until we had a much, much larger proportion of membership, they wouldn't even consider talking to us. The original contact at UAW was through Walter Reuther, but he promptly turned us over to Irv Bluestone, to Doug Frazier, and working for them, Tony Cano and Pat Greathouse. There were others, but those were the ones with whom we had the greatest contact.

When our membership had increased considerably, we went back to the UAW and asked for help. This time they said they would consider it very seriously. They discussed it. It went to Washington where the actual grant I understand came through I.U.D. The money received from the I.U.D. for our collective bargaining program was in fact a total of less than $25,000 all told for the entire campaign. The rest of it came from our own volunteer help and our own concentration of work

day and night and weekends and through the night, night after night after night.

The collective bargaining campaign was of particular interest because Detroit was one of the strongholds of the Education Association. When I first came to teach in Detroit, the Detroit chapter of the Education Association was the largest one in the United States. The Education Association for all practical purposes on paper and to the public represented the teachers in Detroit. And any teacher worth her salt was a member of the Detroit Teachers Association. What was remarkable is what was accomplished by the Detroit Federation of Teachers as a minority group representing a very small minority of the teachers.

Many, many of the things that had been done over the years were done because they were spearheaded by Francis and Florence and those who followed. They were done really almost over the dead bodies of the Detroit Education Association members, perhaps more because they really didn't want to be found objecting to things that were so clearly right and proper and needed to be done.

For example, books and substitutes and decent pay and sick leave and so on. So those were accomplished by the Federation but without any real help from the Education Association, although that group always claimed full credit for everything that was accomplished.

Back to collective bargaining, though. We approached collective bargaining in the fall of 1962 with a very strong membership drive. In the spring of '63 there was a local millage campaign, tax levy that failed. And when that tax levy failed, it meant that the Detroit schools would lose one-third of their budget the following year.

We expected to kick off our collective bargaining campaign the day after that millage passed. The millage did not pass, it failed. When it failed, there was obviously going to be a tremendous cutback of all kinds of things in the city of Detroit schools. The proposals were radical and drastic. Half days for some of the grades. Oh, many other things that I won't go into. But what I do know is that the union was clearly out front supporting teachers in what

teachers had to have in order to do their job of teaching, what would make it possible for teachers to teach. And we fought day and night upside down and inside out. The Education Association somehow or another seemed to have been caught flat footed, and they didn't seem to take any kind of forward position.

It was during that period that the radio and television stations began to pay much more attention to us. The education writer for the Detroit News and the one for the Detroit Free Press and the Times began to make a point of checking with me as president of the Detroit Federation of Teachers for a reaction to whatever the latest thing was proposed by the Board or to the Board for the schools. I appeared more and more frequently on the media and in the prints.

Along about that same time too, Dave Seldon would fly in from New York City and work with us for a day or two and then fly back to New York City. Once in awhile George Adamari also came. What Dave made very clear to us when he came is that he was there to be of assistance to us in

whatever we saw as most important to win the collective bargaining campaign. He made sure that we understood that we were the experts in the local situation. We knew what would work, what would not work. We would know what teachers here would understand and accept and what they would object to. He made no bones about the fact that if he sat down and worked at writing something and when it was finished if I looked at it and said, no, that just will not do in Detroit, fine, throw it away, we'll start over, we'll do something else. It was wonderful. Dave is talented in a fashion that has no match that I've come across. He was good not only in writing but in creative thinking, in putting together a bit here and a piece there and something from somewhere else and coming up with a concept that was workable or that would lead to a workable concept from which we could take off.

We began our campaign in our own newspaper with materials that we prepared and sent out locally. Helen Bowers and I put together a pamphlet called "What Is Collective Bargaining?" In a lovely ivory tone with brown I think that I

remember because it was used throughout the United States in campaigns for Federation locals from one end of the country to the other.

New York City was the only large city with collective bargaining and the only place in the United States where there really was collective bargaining in the modern sense, where it was more than a meet and confer or a meet and advise or recommend. New York City is a place unto its own and what works there may not work anywhere else in the world. We were busy creating our own version. That pamphlet, though, that little three-fold affair did put forth the concept of collective bargaining, what it is, how it works and what you can expect from it in just plain question and answer form that made clear to teachers what we were talking about. It was the foundation of what we worked with.

Now, there was no law in the state of Michigan concerning collective bargaining, the law was silent. There was a law that had to do with labor relations and it was passed back at the time that there was a threatened strike in Detroit when

teachers, both the Federation members, a very small minority of the teaching faculty and DTA members who made up the great majority voted to go on strike if the Board of Education did not agree to do what we were asking.

For the Detroit union local in 1963, to even talk about collective bargaining was in the minds of most teachers a pretty foolish thing because we were clearly a minority organization. However, our membership really began to grow. Dave Seldon would come in with an inspiration on someway to attract more members. And he and Helen and I would sit and discuss it and rework it and come up with something that we would then propose. One of our biggest things was the march on the Board of Education that had to be called off because it was set to really get rolling on Tuesday when President Kennedy was assassinated on Friday.

We did have our march two weeks later and it was a fantastic success, and from that day forward the media never left me alone. I was likely to be on either radio or television at least five out of the seven days. The newsmen who came with the

television cameras said there was no question but that I was on television far more than the mayor of the city of Detroit, the governor of the state of Michigan and all the judges put together.

An incident occurred early on in my career with the teachers union where the media came to me and I knew I was going to be interviewed about a very distasteful situation when our own union employees went on strike against us. Before the newsman came up, Francis Comfort, God bless her, said to me, "Tell the absolute truth, you must tell the truth, but don't tell all of the truth unless you have to. And keep whatever you say as short as you can keep it so that they can't take bits and pieces of what you say."

I learned my lesson well. I also found out there was no way of avoiding the question of how old are you, because the print media in particular felt that that was the first sentence of every story was Mary Ellen Reardon, age so and so, who is -- and then finish up whatever it was.

The media literally became a part of my life. I expected to get phone calls from radio stations

starting about five-thirty in the morning at home so they would have information to put on the six o'clock news about the latest thing that the Board of Education was proposing and what the union reaction was to this latest cutback or this latest loss of opportunity for school children, this latest reduction of what teachers were able to expect to help them do their job, and so on and on and on.

I also learned to say in very concise terms whatever was my opinion or my reaction to whatever it was that was asked of me, with the end result that generally my 30 second to 40 second at the outside comment was not cut, it was used exactly as I gave it. It meant that the news people back at the station or at the newspaper were not able to pick and choose and change the direction of my thought or the intent of the organization by just using part of what was said. There was only one instance that stood out in my mind where question number two was attached to answer number five which distorted entirely what I had said. Generally the media acted with whatever I gave them they passed

it on.

For whatever reason, the media in Detroit were willing to listen to me and to talk to me, and I think possibly it was because of the way I treated them. I treated them as professional people who were there to get a story, and I did my darndest to give them the immediate succinct detail that they needed to make their story. They were actually my friends. It was not at all uncommon for one of them to call me and say such and such and such and such is going to happen, we're coming by in ten minutes, be ready to talk. And I would be ready to talk. I never refused to talk to them at any hour of day or night.

I called press conferences. I prepared my own blurb, whatever it was. Not uncommonly I would sit down at the telephone and call all the radio stations, the television stations, AP and UP and give them my news release, and it would be on the radio before I had finished going through the list.

I do not know of any other place in the country where the relationship between a teacher union president and the media could equal the

relationship that existed here.

I think perhaps one of the major reasons that that good relationship existed was that because no matter what I was asked, the response was always in terms of what we in the union believed would be the best thing for children and for the teachers who were teaching them. And what came through always was what is going to help the children of the people who live in the city of Detroit whose taxes are supporting our schools. We want to do what ought to be done both to let teachers teach and children learn, and you can't separate them.

Every time that I was on radio or television, the first question was likely to be how much money are you asking them to give you. And my response always was, we want the kind of salary that would attract a teacher who will do the job for the children in this city, the job that needs to be done if our children are to be properly educated. And then I would mention the figure. But I insisted always and in any report that I gave tied in so that it could not be separated the amount of money we were asking in salaries but its connection

with the importance of the education of the children in the city.

One of the major ways in which Detroit was different from collective bargaining situations in other parts of the country had to do in part with the fact that we were number two. New York City was the only place ahead of us. So there was really no precedent to follow. But there was another thing that was important. Members of the union in Detroit were concentrated more in the elementary schools than in the middle schools or junior high schools or high schools. In high school, teachers are primarily subject oriented. They see the youngsters in terms of what subject they're studying, what books they're using, what direction they're aiming with the information. But in the elementary, the child is the center of it all. And, of course, as an elementary teacher, even though my certificate said I was a secondary teacher, my teaching experience was primarily in the elementary. And my appeal was stronger to elementary teachers than to junior high school or high school teachers probably because I came from

the elementary. And it was that emphasis on the child as an integral part of whatever we were asking for, whether it was an improvement in salary so that we could afford to do what we needed to do to do a proper job of teaching, or whether it was textbooks or whether it was class size or whatever it was, it was immediately tied in to the youngster in school and the effect on the youngster in school.

Now, I know that that was constantly a battle to maintain that direction, and had I come from junior high or high school, it is quite possible that I might have been sidetracked so that the emphasis would have become more and more salary only or class size only in terms of it being a job or books or something. But the physical thing as distinct from the child who's learning and was being taught and the relationship between the teacher and the youngster for the success of the youngster.

Our success in collective bargaining was going to be determined as much as anything by our actual membership among the teachers, because when

it came to voting, we had to not only convince teachers that they wanted collective bargaining, but that they wanted us to represent them, so that we could not concentrate only on the child and what was good for the schools, for the children in the schools, we had to keep in mind that teachers didn't have time to go to the bathroom, that teachers couldn't have lunch except while they were supervising other students, that there were not enough books to go around so that teachers were actually spending their own money that wasn't enough to start with to buy books to give to the children who were in their classes.

We had to make clear that we were very much aware of bread and butter, but that the bread and butter was tied into the welfare of the children with whom we were working. We had to make clear the bread and butter issue to our teachers because the teachers already were tied in with children. But we had to maintain that tie-in.

We won collective bargaining in the spring of '64, and that's a whole long story that ought to be told and listened to somewhere. But having won

collective bargaining, our first proposals were only six issues, and they were put on record in the Board proceedings, not in a contract. The law in Michigan on collective bargaining was passed in the summer of 1964. The governor signed it in August. And then we proceeded to try and put our contract in writing. At this stage we had real help from the AFT and particularly from New York. Harold Ash worked with us on the actual wording, but Dave Seldon was in and out too talking about what ought to be in the contract, what had to be part of a real collective bargaining contract, aside from the six issues that we concentrated on.

Now, Philadelphia in the meantime had won collective bargaining and actually had a contract signed. Our contract was not signed until in December of 1964. And it stands still as a monument to many of the things we believed in. Parts of it remain in our contract to this day and are very, very important and they include the words that Harold Ash helped us write, that Dave Seldon helped us write, that the then president of our local board Ramos Robinson wrote in the preface to

our contract. It was a wonderful day when that contract was finally signed. We went on from there, from the time of our collective bargaining election when we won. In fact, from the time we really got deeply involved in fighting to win collective bargaining, there came a much closer tie-in with the national. Now, the tie-in came particularly through the frequent trips to Detroit and the assistance we got from Dave Seldon. From my contact with people in New York City who were reacting to what had changed there with the coming of collective bargaining in New York City. With the assistance from people like Harold Ash and others who gave us direct assistance in the actual wording of our contract. But all of that aside, there was a much closer relationship, there was a much clearer distinction in my mind in the goals of the Progressive Caucus at conventions, for example, and the goal of the Progressive Caucus was more and more concentrated on the winning of collective bargaining and the Classroom Teachers Caucus was much farther behind.

Now, it's true that the Classroom Teachers

Caucus was led and pretty much influenced in everything it did by its major locals, by Chicago, by Cleveland, by Gary and all the locals that followed that lead, and they made it the great majority of the AFT. New York City and Detroit and Philadelphia were actually a minority of the AFT. And it was this group that was really pushing for the wonders that could be wrought with collective bargaining.

It was also in that period that with the winning of collective bargaining in Detroit, in Philadelphia, in New York City, membership in these three cities grew by leaps and bounds and locals in the vicinity of these three locals became more and more AFT oriented when they hadn't been up until then. And there became more and more of a draw of the idea of collective bargaining, and collective bargaining as an ideal to be fought for and struggled for swept the country. There was a tremendous battle between the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers on whether or not there should be collective bargaining for teachers.

The battle was actually won state by state, and in some cases local by local when collective bargaining won out by teachers making up the majority of the group in whatever was elected to represent teachers and administrators increasingly separated. The AFT truly led that fight and won the fight over the opposition to the death by the National Education Association. That opposition continued for years and years after that. In fact, in some parts of the country it's not gone yet.

With the winning of collective bargaining, though, what we said would happen did happen, and that was that the local union with the support of the national and with help from the national in directing ideas on which policy could be built became more and more involved with major policy issues in local schools, for example, the idea of desegregating schools. And desegregating schools became one of the major issues in all the years then and since I have tied in as one single period the civil rights struggle in the United States, the desegregation of the schools and the advancement of collective bargaining, and along with it, the

status of women as a part of the real working world to be given equal status with working men.

The desegregation of the schools was a very, very touchy issue. And individual members of the teachers union in whatever part of the world, including on the AFT Council were widely divided as to its value and the speed with which it should be accomplished. I remember vividly the arguments at the convention at which the American Federation of Teachers went on record as supporting integration and desegregation of all locals and of all schools. What particularly impressed me was the tremendous depth of the emotion with which individuals talked for one side or the other of the issue. And of those who talked, there was no way you could turn one side into sheep and the other side goats because there were fine people of high principle and deep emotional conviction on both sides of the issue. Those who insisted that the only way to truly win desegregation was to continue with it but to continue education away from the idea of desegregation.

Others who insisted that there had to be a

cut, a sharp and clear cut beyond which no segregated local could remain in the AFT. The final vote carried with segregation opposed and a basis for ousting of any local that continued segregation. It meant a tremendous drop in national membership of the AFT, but at the same time it gave reason for hope and reason for work among those of us who were convinced that it was the only way to go, and it gave us the basis on which to work. It took a long time to win our way back into parts of the South, and we haven't made it yet, in many large portions.

It was also true in other parts of the country, although desegregation might take the form of antagonism to Orientals, to Jews or to some other ethnic group. But it was the black/white issue that was the major issue.

With collective bargaining and with a much closer contact with individual members of other locals, particularly as I met them at national convention, my own horizons broadened considerably and I was much more aware of what was going on in other parts of the United States, quite aside from

the boundaries of the state, let alone the metropolitan area. In 1964 and again in 1966 I nominated Charlie Cogan for the position of president of the American Federation of Teachers. And in 1968 I not only nominated Dave Seldon for the presidency, but I myself was a candidate and was elected as a vice president of the national organization.

After his election, Dave Seldon set up a slightly different way of operating from the national level. He set up what was in effect a steering committee from among the national vice presidents. The steering committee meet more frequently than did the Council, and the Council at that time met over the Christmas break and again sometime in the spring I think, although I'm not sure -- but then, of course, just before convention. With Dave Seldon, the Executive Council met more frequently, but so did the steering committee meet in addition to discuss what things there were going on that ought to be considered in greater detail with decisions made by the entire Council.

From the time that I attended my first convention way back at the end of the '40s when the Classroom Teachers Caucus really controlled the American Federation of Teachers, since it was the majority group and had the majority on the Council, from that period into the '60s there was a gradual -- nil at the beginning, but gradual shifting of power from the Classroom Teachers Caucus to almost a fifty-fifty kind of thing between the Classroom Teachers Caucus, which was primarily Chicago, Gary and Cleveland and their followers, as opposed to New York, Philadelphia, Detroit. Gradually the swing became almost a fifty-fifty and then switched over with the group of -- our group becoming the Progressive Caucus majority. During the time of Charlie Cogan, it was pretty much even. When Dave Seldon was elected, the switch went the other way, and before too many years, the Classroom Teachers Caucus dissolved and the members of that caucus joined the Progressive Caucus.

I spoke of the switch of power from the Classroom Teachers Caucus to the Progressive

Caucus. Now, the Classroom Teachers Caucus changed its name to National Caucus, but that's neither here nor there. But that switch over of power occurred because the leadership in the Classroom Teachers Caucus saw itself very closely aligned with the ideals and directions of the Progressive Caucus and there was no really basic reason to remain separate. Chicago, which had opposed going into collective bargaining had changed about and was fighting for collective bargaining under some of the difficulties others had faced ahead of it, that is, no state law to help them, and fighting to get a state law along with getting the other changes necessary. But the changes also in the kind of assistance from the federal government for education and how that was to be channeled, what form it was to take, the basis on which those funds were to come. For example, funds that would come to an area that was heavy in federal housing, for example, public housing for individuals. When funding came through for that particular kind of an area, a place like Chicago suddenly was tremendously interested in how that was being

handled, and the AFT was the spokesperson at the national level in Washington to get it done.

TAPE 3

MS. RENE EPSTEIN: This is Rene Epstein. My interview with Mary Ellen Riordan is continuing on April 5th, 1987, Detroit.

MS. MARY ELLEN RIORDAN: Well, while all of this was going on there was tremendous pressure building throughout the nation in the whole negotiation of school desegregation. We had gotten past the Kansas case where school desegregation was insisted on and President Eisenhower had actually gotten involved. And we'd gone from there to other school districts and other problems elsewhere in the country. Along with that move and the movement among teachers for collective bargaining there developed a very strong, strong subgroup among teachers in the Progressive Caucus who were determined to accomplish school desegregation now as of this minute. And none of this foolishness of waiting until next fall or next year or starting slowly. So, what might very well have become a one caucus organization with everyone

in the organization either belonging to that one caucus or being ousted entirely became instead again a two-caucus group. One caucus, the Progressive Caucus. The other, which was called New Directions and the New Caucus and a few other names, which was concerned with community control and with desegregation of schools immediately. It never was a very big caucus, but it was raucous and it was disruptive and it sure did cause all kinds of confusion and trouble among the members who were present at the convention.

The actual beginning of that new caucus was in 1974 in Toronto. And it is particularly vivid to me because its leadership was all from Detroit. There had been a tremendous split inside the Detroit local, a political split. And elected to that convention in Toronto were a huge majority of members of the other political party in the city of Detroit. When they got to Toronto, the major issues about which they were concerned were the issues of decentralization and of desegregation. Along with those two issues, any dissident or anyone involved with other major political groups,

the person automatically went with that caucus, which became the United Caucus. That caucus has continued in one form or another since, but it remains a small group and its makeup is primarily those who are dissidents for whatever reason. And because they are dissidents and because they are such a small group, frequently it appears that their tactics are the tactics of disruption, of noise, of any kind of thing that will cause difficulty and prevent normal business from being carried on.

One of the questions that's always raised by a convention delegate who goes for the first time is what in the world is a caucus, what's it about, why do I waste my time at those meetings when there are other things to do, and we're in a new and different city and I'd like to see some of it. The answer is that a caucus actually is a place where a member may go to get background, to get a much broader interpretation of what's happening, to find out what's behind the scenes and why a particular motion is made or what the direction will be if this resolution or that resolution is adopted. How

can this group whose goals are similar, whose direction is much the same, how can this group actually get the entire convention to move along with it to accomplish what this group believes is what should happen at the convention.

A caucus is an extraordinarily valuable means of getting a much broader understanding of what is happening and a much clearer understanding of how to accomplish it most expeditiously and most definitely.

Caucuses can be good, bad, indifferent and all the variations in-between. If there is a single party, a caucus begins to take on a different role where it's sort of a subgroup of the entire group and there are discussions inside the caucus that normally might otherwise occur on the main floor of the convention itself.

For a great many people, when the convention is made up of a single party, the caucus is a useless thing, and a larger and larger number seem to be ignoring the caucus and figuring that what goes on on the floor is all that's important.

There is also an increasing feeling among an

awful lot of the delegates that what happens is preordained and there isn't much point in going to the convention anyway, it's a free trip and a sort of benefit that's given to somebody's favorite who did a political favor back home for somebody else. That's a pity.

We actually would give a speech, somewhat like I've just finished saying to our delegates before we ever got to convention so that they would understand why we wanted them to go to a caucus meeting, why we wanted them to stay for the whole blessed thing no matter how late it lasted, and why we expected them to be active participants on the floor of the convention itself with the extra understandings that they had developed as caucus members earlier on the same subject. It was at caucus meetings like that, for example, that we debated the whole issue of community control versus community involvement and came up with a situation where parents were directly involved with the running of the schools but were not controlling the schools. That was where our final AFT position came from and it came because we debated and argued

back and forth to come to something with which we as teachers could live and survive.

During the period of David Seldon's presidency, there was also the issue of the Vietnam war and whether or not the United States and its people should have any part in it, or whether we should get out and how we should get out. There were strong, strong differences of opinion. I remember vividly the day that Dave Seldon as president had been in the chair and he was called out for a news conference for some other things. Someone else took the chair temporarily and then O'Mara, Jim O'Mara from Cleveland took the chair, and while Jim O'Mara was in the chair, the discussion of Vietnam began and Jim simply could not control the convention.

They appealed one decision after another that he made and overturned the rule of the chair time and again. I was then asked to take the chair. And while I was chairperson, we actually reached a conclusion on what the AFT position would be on the Vietnam war and the referendum that would follow. It was a fantastic situation with some 3,000 plus

people in the convention hall, extraordinarily emotional on both sides of the issue with the group divided, but clearly the majority of them on the side of the hawks who wanted to continue to support the United States in its battle in Vietnam but with a very sizable minority who were literally dead set against it.

The conclusion was reached, and to this day there are people who speak of that particular convention issue and the dynamism that existed on the floor.

Both these issues were issues that had a terrible effect on Dave Seldon and on his ability to continue to function as president of the AFT. The referendum that followed was devastating as far as obtaining support for the anti-Vietnam war was concerned. There were all kinds of reasons given, including the reason that a referendum is a poor way to actually get the opinion of large numbers of people because of the way it was handled in individual locals. But for whatever its reason, it seemed to be the basis on which Dave Seldon increasingly took outside issues. By that I mean

issues outside of the direct classroom teacher involvement in teaching and reached out more and more nationally and internationally in his activities and his direction.

He took positions that were "far out", whether others might or might not disagree with them, but he took the positions and took them on his own without consulting with anyone. On the Executive Council itself there was a division. The majority were much, much more conservative in their directions and in their opinions than was Dave himself.

It was along this same period of time that there was an increasing determination on the part of some of the leadership of the AFT that there should be someone from AFT on the national AFL-CIO Council. That AFT had grown to a size and a prominence that required representation at that level.

The question of who would represent AFT was an automatic one, and the automatic answer, the normal automatic answer would be the president or possibly the secretary-treasurer. The president,

being Dave Seldon, and Dave being in the position of taking more and more far out positions made him much less welcome to AFL-CIO ranks than he would have been anyway. And there had been from the very beginning back when the UFT was organizing and reaching the point of collective bargaining in New York City, there had developed a feeling between George Meany, president of the national AFL-CIO, and the UFT local, the feeling that Dave was the wild hair, that Al Shanker was the one who was the sensible one and the proper leader.

Al Shanker very probably was a prominent and important leader. I didn't really know him at that period. My contact was with Dave Seldon, and all I can say about what he did with us and for us was wonderful in that period. But I am well aware that George Meany credited Dave Seldon, for example, with all the bad things that had to do with that one-day strike of the New York local that brought about the election finally, and a couple of other things along that same line.

So that from George Meany was the conviction expressed to me through personal friends I had in

the AFL-CIO in Washington, from them came the strong statement that no way on God's earth would Dave Seldon ever be a member of the AFL-CIO Council. And if he was our candidate, we had no candidate, forget it. Al Shanker would be acceptable.

It appeared to most of us on the Council that there ought to be on the -- on the AFT Council -- that there ought to be an AFT presence on the AFL-CIO National Council. Increasingly that grew. And at the same time Dave Seldon was becoming more and more estranged from Al Shanker in their discussions and in their directions and in the positions that they were taking.

While all of this was going on, there was also building throughout the country a conviction on the part of many of us that a merger between the AFT and the NEA would be of tremendous value. Dave was one of those who would go forth and take chances and then work like the dickens to make certain that the chance that he took turned out the right way. Al was a little more conservative in his approach and in the moves that he was willing

to make. Both of them wanted to see a merger of the AFT and the NEA so that the energies of the two organizations could be focused more on what the real goals were as distinct from the battle between them.

In that issue also there appeared to be much greater difference between the two men than in fact existed. Both men were interested in a merger. Both men were interested in accomplishing it in the quickest possible way. However, the issue of who would represent AFT on the national AFL-CIO sort of superseded almost everything else that was going on. And Dave's actions became almost erratic at times so that the Council felt that Dave had to have a closer direction. That's an interesting thing, since when Dave became president, for the first time the Council was actually brought into the management of the AFT. It had never happened really before then. The AFT had been managed in fact by its president and by the Chicago local and those who were right there in Chicago where the headquarters was.

With headquarters moved to Washington, D.C.

and with David Seldon's presidency, there was a much wider, broader involvement of individual local leadership in taking that leadership into the national and spreading it across the country. I think it was one of the finest accomplishments of Dave's presidency. Dave was an extraordinarily creative and innovative person, extraordinary. He did an extraordinarily fine job as the person behind the person in control. For example, when he was the chief assistant to Charlie Cogan, his job was to make certain that Charlie Cogan kept moving and kept moving in a progressive fashion, and he did it beautifully. Charlie Cogan would have accomplished nothing I suspect had it not been for Dave. When Dave himself was president, he did not have that combination that would keep him going and moving in a progressive fashion, as distinct from an erratic or unpredictable one that could be of some danger to the organization because of its craziness.

On the Council itself, there appeared to be a variety of direction. Some of the Council members wanted Dave out of office and just out of the

picture entirely. They said he couldn't be trusted as president of the AFT, he was giving the AFT a bad name because of the positions he was taking, the people he was supporting, the movements that he wanted us to become involved in. Others said Al Shanker should take over. Al Shanker himself said no, absolutely, he had his hands full with UFT, he could not do both jobs, he did not feel that he could leave UFT. Others felt that Dave was just fine and he was doing what he ought to be doing. I personally was very concerned that Dave was less and less the president that I wanted to have at AFT, and it was his unpredictableness in going off on a side track for a cause or an issue that I thought was irrelevant or perhaps even at odds with what we should be doing as a teachers union. He was erratic in his presentations. He wasn't -- he didn't make a good presentation. He seemed to have lost whatever karisma he had. He appeared at times not to be in full control of what he was doing and saying in the direction he was going. And it concerned us as a council very greatly. We felt that his effect and his influence on the national

picture was a detriment rather than a help.

And so we as a council with much internal debating and discussion and disagreement did set up one after another of the kinds of supports for Dave that we felt would keep him moving in the direction that we as a council felt the AFT should be moving.

We insisted that there be more direct support for him in the national office, that he work more closely with other people in the national office. For example, Al Lowenthal who worked particularly with the American teacher publication and with other publications. That seemed to help for quite awhile.

However, as time went on, it became very clear that George Meany would be very happy to have Al Shanker named as the next vice president at the next AFL-CIO convention; however, he could not be named unless he had some kind of title that would be appropriate for him to serve on the Council, since every member of the Council was either president or secretary-treasurer of his union. So, the Council as a result named vice president Al Shanker as the first vice president with the

intention that that would in fact make it possible for him to be named to the Council.

This was absolutely in opposition to Dave's feelings about the entire matter. He said, I am president of this organization, and as president I should be the person who sits on that council or no one should sit on the Council.

I knew from my own personal checking with persons in the AFL-CIO that Dave would never be a member of the Council, but Al Shanker would. Their actual ideals and directions of what they as human beings wanted to happen with AFT were very much alike although their actions were not at that time. Dave playing the role of the far out far left person, Al Shanker playing the role of a conservative, sometimes ultraconservative person, when in fact their basic principles were the same.

At one point Dave insisted that he was resigning on the spot. I was at the Council meeting and was part of the very small group who met with Dave and with Al Shanker. John Desmond, who was then president of the Chicago local was the person who served as mediator. That meeting lasted

a long time with Dave insisting since Al wanted to be on the national council of the AFL-CIO, since Al wanted to run things, that he, Dave, was going to get out and let Al do it. Al said he couldn't do the AFT presidency, he just couldn't handle it, he had the merger in the New York state that he was working with. He was one of the top officials, he was not president, but one of the top officials of that united group, and he simply could not handle it.

The meeting went on for hours, as I said, and in the end Dave agreed to continue and Al was then considered very seriously and was the proposal by the Council for the national AFL-CIO board.

The real battle between Al Shanker and Dave Seldon over the presidency of the AFT seemed to be sparked and fed by who would actually represent AFT on the national AFL-CIO Council. The presence of AFT on that council was of great importance to AFT, both in giving it stature among other AFL-CIO unions, as well as nationally in the eyes of the public in general. An organization as large as ours and that was growing but was not part of the

national board was not to be understood. It simply defied explanation. I found it embarrassing here in my own state that I could not invite my national AFT president as also a member of the national AFL-CIO board to speak at a statewide meeting of union people. He wasn't on the Board, my AFT president wasn't.

It actually seemed to me to come down to a battle between the two men as to who would sit on that national board. And in the election in which Al Shanker and Dave Seldon ran for the presidency and Shanker was elected with a fantastic majority vote, the real issue was that presence on the AFL-CIO national board which Al could have and Dave could not.

That was the real issue between those two men. Dave was being asked up until then to be president of AFT more in name than in fact it seemed to Dave, as I saw the picture. Al, who did not think it made that big a difference was stuck with Dave's conviction that it did.

Now, I'm talking here as though Al was the good guy and Dave was the bad guy. That never,

never, never was true in my mind. I said earlier that they seemed to have as well as I could judge the same principles for which they really fought. They had a different means to reach those principles, to fight for them, to search for them. Again, Dave was innovative, creative, imaginative. He was able to come up with ideas that could be worked on and presented and made most effective.

Al was much more pragmatic in working with people with where they are right now in appealing to them in a fashion that would win their support, although as I knew Al and talked to him over the years, meeting after meeting in the few minutes before and after and around meetings when there was opportunity to talk, I knew Al to be an extraordinarily concerned individual with children in the classroom and how they learned, the relationship between the teacher and the child, what teachers were given that made it possible for them to do for children, what needed to be done, the kinds of things that made teaching very, very important to everybody.

Al is a warm, concerned human being. So is

Dave. They show it in altogether different ways. And in the UFT Al was subject to adulation in a measure that I have not known any other human being in the UFT, in New York City. And that adulation seemed to follow him wherever he went.

I was in various countries overseas when Al was present and it was not unusual to have people collect and speak to him as Al Shanker, and they would know him by name.

Dave never had that presence. Al it is true was very, very much involved from early on with international organizations. And it was that international interest with which I found it difficult to work. I was much more locally concerned, much more parochial in my attitudes, my directions, my work.

Dave and Al were at loggerheads for the last part of Dave's term. And when Al became president, Al was very willing to do many things for Dave that Dave would have no part of. He insisted that he would take care of himself, that he would get his own jobs, that he would do what he wanted to do and he would do it without anybody else's help. I have

yet to hear Al speak disparagingly of Dave Seldon in any way, and I'm glad to be able to say that. I've talked to Al on occasions when if he wanted to be disparaging he could have been very easily, and he never was. He has always admired Dave, again for that devotion to his cause and his working for it, his intelligence, his sensitivity, his creativity and his imagination.

During the period as David Seldon's term of presidency came to an end, we were working with the merger of NEA and AFT. And that whole merger fell apart suddenly and just was going nowhere. However, effecting that merger in New York state, for example, is one of the examples where Al Shanker used pragmatism to accomplish a goal that was of tremendous import for the goals that he had in mind for improving the teaching in the classroom for the ordinary teacher.

There is no question in my mind but that Dave is responsible for the merger, such as it was, that occurred in Los Angeles. However, it was Al who was responsible for the merger in New York state. And the two of them with their ideas were able to

promote merger in many places on a much smaller scale. What I am very much also convinced of is that the merger between the AFT and the NEA fell apart more than anything because the NEA top leadership was terrified of Al Shanker and the fact that should there be a merger, Al Shanker would take over the NEA and would be in control. They were literally afraid of him. And when Al and his UFT delegation showed up at that convention out on the far west coast, the people there who had never bumped into New York City folk with their particular dynamics of action saw in those New York folk danger personified, and there was not a prayer of merger going any further, just not a prayer.

What was done in Florida was done in part because of Tornelo's karisma and his ability to accomplish in that area what he did in merging the AFT and the NEA in Florida. He did a good job. Again, during the presidency of Al Shanker, the whole picture of teacher unionism was influction. Collective bargaining had been adopted by the National Education Association. In some places strange versions of it, very perverted versions in

my view. In other places, straight out collective bargaining. And the NEA was determined to retain itself as an entity very definitely separate. The NEA was very, very slow to move in the direction of desegregation. Probably in part because of the large membership in the South where desegregation had been such a way of life, as distinct from desegregation in an area where there were no black people with whom to did he segregate. Desegregation worked magnificently in those areas, they just didn't have a problem.

But under Al Shanker, during his presidency, the AFT was growing rapidly in size. Al's presidency became increasingly involved in the international scene. He met with people who were in leadership positions in teacher unions and teacher organizations, particularly from countries of the western world, but increasingly also from the far east. I never could see the importance of that relationship between the AFT and the other international locals, or international unions, rather, in the same light Al did. Although I went to a number of the meetings, found them

fascinating, found them tremendously of value for my own background and understanding, but I never did see them as important as Al did.

In the same period of time, and I was an AFT vice president from 1974 through the 1980, '82 term during Al's presidency, then I left as AFT vice president, but during that period too the influence of the AFT in Washington was growing by leaps and bounds so that if there were issues that involved education in any way, our presence in Washington, our lobbying in Washington had a fantastic effect on the final bill as it passed, or as it did not pass, that began during Dave's presidency and grew during Dave's presidency. But it has continued to grow and its importance has increased really year by year ever since.

Al's willingness to work with the Republican administration of President Reagan, for instance, has been a sore point. Many people felt that since President Reagan was so determined to give tuition tax credits that would truly -- and I believe this firmly, would truly result in the destruction of good public education as we see it. Al's

willingness to work with President Reagan's administration in educational matters has been a sore point with many of the people in the AFT.

He, on the other hand, is convinced that if you don't talk with people and work with them to try to accomplish some of your own goals, you have no hope at all. Whereas, if you get involved and work, you may accomplish some of what you are convinced is so necessary.

The AFT is truly a voice to be heard and to be listened to and of real importance in the field of education throughout the United States, even in areas where an AFT local does not exist. The influence of the AFT national on national educational policy does affect education in every state of the union, without any question. I am likewise convinced beyond any possible doubt that the AFT is responsible for education having survived at all in the big cities of a country. I do not believe that it would be possible to have a public school in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, Cleveland, Gary, Los Angeles -- I could name state after state after state -- all those big

cities. It would not be possible to have public education in those cities except for what the American Federation of Teachers has been able to do with and for teachers who are working in those schools. It has made possible the survival of public education, which otherwise would not have made it.

Without the AFT, there would not -- it would not have been possible for teachers to work in the big cities. The conditions would have been such that teaching would have been impossible and the schools would have closed without any question.

Now, during the period of David Seldon's presidency and then Al Shanker's presidency, I think of an article that Dave wrote and a comparison with a speech that I heard Al give that indicated as much as anything the difference and the times. David Seldon's article was headed "Needed, More Teachers Strikes." And at the time that head line appeared above his article, it sent shock waves throughout the country, the idea of teachers going on strike was a horrible idea.

What Al Shanker said many years later to a

group of teachers is that going on strike might very probably be totally worthless in that the strike would have to last several years to have any effect whatsoever, and it might fail entirely because the teachers who went on strike would have died and gone away with others either replacing them or private schools replacing them entirely.

In the article that Dave wrote about, "Needed, More Teachers Strikes," he made the point that a teacher going on strike was such a dramatic thing, such an out of the ordinary startling thing that it would bring attention to the desperate need of the teachers in that school district for reforms, for improvements, for changes, whatever it might be. But by the time Al spoke, times had changed to the point where Al was being very practical taking the very pragmatic direction of if going on strike is not going to accomplish the purpose of the strike, for goodness sakes, don't waste your time, your money, your effort, and above all, your good energy and your good intentions on a worthless project.

What this really shows the difference in the

article and the later speech, what this really shows is the change in times. Dave Seldon was reacting in the fashion that made it possible for AFT to accomplish wonderful things during his presidency. Al Shanker, being pragmatic, knew that what worked then wouldn't work later and was changing tactics.

It's been of particular pleasure to me that in AFT I have met some extraordinary people. I think of Mary Wheeler as an old war horse, one of the wonderful folk who are responsible for starting what later became collective bargaining. It was she who had established in her group of locals the idea that a Board of Education was not totally independent of its teachers and couldn't move without them.

Rose Claffey was another of the greats on the Council. Her memory was fabulous. She could remember who said what when and when a resolution was passed and when a particular policy was adopted and who the leaders were in pushing through the policy. Just no one like Rose Claffey.

There were numerous other people on the

Council who were extraordinary. I think of Veronica Hill who was not as great a leader but who somehow maintained a presence, a black presence on the Council. Rosa McGee, who somehow or another survived year after year, and I never could understand how or why. She was a black member on the Council but was not actually a contributing one.

It's rather amazing that now on the Council we have Nat LaCour, who is an extraordinarily fine leader and really everything that we could ask of an AFT vice president. He represents the leadership among the minority groups of our teaching faculties that we have tried desperately to get into our leadership positions but somehow we haven't made it on the national level very often and we often have difficulties on the local level. It may be that the opportunities, particularly in more recent years, have been so great for administration and for other positions that are far more rewarding personally than continuing to teach and work for a teacher organization is the explanation. But I'll let someone else think that

one through.

I would not want to leave out Robert Porter as one of the most effective and important persons in the American Federation of Teachers. I remember so well when Charlie Cogan was elected president, which meant Carl Megel was leaving office and the Classroom Teachers Caucus influence was gone, and Robert Porter was very concerned as to whether or not he would have a job. I was fortunate and consider myself blessed in being able to be the one who told him, please, Bob, stay on, we want you, we need you, we know you do the kind of job that this organization needs and that we want. He has been honest and faithful beyond any measure, but he's also been an astute businessman and has been very aware of the kind of social issues with which the AFT must be involved from his role as secretary-treasurer as well as from the area of those who are elected for policy matters. He actually represents AFT on many councils and on many groups that are made up of union people and of other people on a national level and even international level. So his representation of AFT

is of importance as well as his management of the AFT office.

There were other vice presidents who made such an important contribution. For instance, the one from Robbins Daily, Robbinsdale I blank on his name at the moment, who made clear to the Council so that we as a council actually took action to bring in more of the issues and set up more conferences, more opportunities for suburban and other out state locals to become more directly involved in working as a union and being an effective part of the AFT in determining AFT policy. There were any number of people of that variety.

Pat Daly is one of those people who have had a tremendous effect on the AFT and likewise on its individual locals throughout the country. That's because Pat on the Council now is or was, up until last June, one of the few active classroom teachers who served on the Council who had that direct daily contact with the immediate classroom situation as distinct from a union office contact with the situation. And from that immediate classroom contact brought to the education and research

department the understanding in a different way of education reform, its importance, its necessity and a way of spreading that information throughout the country. He also was able to represent the AFT on national educational councils made up of business people particularly and was able to speak fluently and directly about the situation.

I recognize that I'm actually out of AFT now as far as the direct influence on the Council or on the organization as a whole. I'm president of the local retirees group, but that's different. I have a real concern as someone who spent a lifetime of work with the AFT about where the AFT is going. I think of one of the things Dave Seldon said early on during our collective bargaining campaign when he said the major difference between the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers is that the NEA is an establishment and we are a movement. If we lose that movement orientation -- and we'll lose it sure as anything if more and more and more of the leadership are totally separated from the classroom -- if we lose that orientation as a movement, we'll lose our

major strength as an organization. It seems to me, though, that Al Shanker's direction of working with teachers in the reform movement and as part of that making teaching a true profession is this years and this periods way of keeping the AFT as a movement which involves very deeply the members of the AFT wherever they may be.

I'm adding a P.S. which is a strange thing to do to one of these things. But I couldn't possibly close without naming Mary McGuff who was one of the early leaders in the Progressive Caucus. She came out of St. Paul, Minnesota. She had very definite and very strong ideas of how to accomplish what her goal was at each convention and she set about doing it. She had a wonderful way of explaining the whys and the wherefores of her position and of keeping all of us on the right track, making certain, for instance, that a policy decision on something as important as desegregation would be the right decision. She was also the leader perhaps at the meeting when the Communists did not take over the American Federation of Teachers back at the end of the '30s or the early '40s, whichever it was. She

also is the one who at her last convention said, "I'm speaking my Swan's Song now, but don't be too sure that this swan will not come back and sing again."

One of the things that I think is interesting and ought to be told about the American Federation of Teachers is how things change over the years. And one of the ways it shows up, for example, is who is the featured speaker at one of the main events of the convention. One year we had Walter Reuther, for instance, and that was a terrific battle because he wouldn't come to speak to us when we were a small organization. Then there was another time when this person or that person came. For instance, the last convention President Reagan actually showed up and spoke. But, I'm thinking of the time in New Orleans where the convention arrived with a hurricane, and in the midst of the convention when the big banquet was on, I think it was Wednesday night, and Congressman Perkins was talking, the 14th floor of the Hotel Roosevelt caught fire, and gradually as the fire got worse and worse the banquet hall was being evacuated by

the firemen starting from the outside, working out, and they kept taking more and more people out. And the message came up to Dave Seldon who was president saying, for goodness sakes, stop the talking and get the banquet hall evacuated, the ballroom folk have got to get out, the hotel is on fire.

Well, Dave tried to stop Congressman Perkins but he was going strong and he kept talking and talking and talking, and Dave pulled on his coat tail and Perkins just glanced at him and kept on talking. And finally Dave got up and literally pushed him far enough away from the microphone to apologize to the congressman and then say to the people, I'm sorry, we've got to stop this discussion at this most interesting point to evacuate because the hotel is on fire. At which point Congressman Perkins said, "I'll come back and finish the story later."

Over the years at conventions there were so many, many things that happened. And we got to know members of other locals in other parts of the country so well. I think of one of our conventions

in Chicago, for instance, where the caucus meeting which had been going hot and heavy broke and we were all standing at the elevator to go to our various floors, and someone looked up and saw Mary McGuff and said, "Oh, Mary McGuff, I know where I heard that name, the McGuffey Readers."

And Mary McGuff at that stage was perhaps in her late '70s but still going strong and still an active vocal member at that caucus meeting.

At that same caucus meeting, in the course of which Mary and a couple of others of equally strong persuasion had gotten up to speak, someone said something about let the old pros, speak, they know which way to go. And this sotto voice said, "Old pro or old crow?" And I just wonder how many incidents of that variety happen now.

I think, for example, of one of our own local members, John Lathers, who was a parliamentarian who was determined that exact parliamentary procedure would always be followed. And he was constantly interrupting Detroit meetings. And when he got to conventions he interrupted there too. But in Detroit it was always, "Madam President, I

call on a point of order. And he got up at national convention with Al Shanker in the chair in all his height and all his size and all his everything and said, "Madam President," at which the entire convention burst into laughter.

There are just any number of incidents of people who bump into each other at conventions only and then don't see one another until the next convention comes up. Perhaps our QuEST conferences will serve somewhat the same purpose where they bring together educators from all over the United States who have an opportunity to exchange the fun things that happen in schools beside the desperate drab problem about not enough money in any school district that I know of to do the job the way it ought to be done.

Being part of the AFT was hard work, it was a pain, it was a nuisance, it kept me from sleeping, but I enjoyed it and I'm not a bit sorry I got involved.