

UNITED FEDERATION OF TEACHERS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

REBECCA SIMONSON

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INTERVIEWER: Renee Epstein

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An Interview with

REBECCA SIMONSON

Peekskill, New York

June 29, 1985

This interview by Renee Epstein is part of an oral history project contracted by the United Federation of Teachers.

Well like many people of those days, we were children of immigrants. We took on a great deal of the interests of our parents and our parents friends. At an early age we realized that we didn't match all the qualities of many of our neighbors and casual friends but we were certainly Jewish conscious but not religious. My parents were interested in unionism. They were also interested in Jewish literature their daily reading of the Forward was a very important part of their existence. From very early times, I heard them discuss every writer and columnist in that paper without half knowing what they were talking about names became familiar.

I guess at the age of about ten or eleven they saw fit to send me to the Jewish, to the Socialist Sunday School. An interesting thing that I remember was that a young man very sedate, very well dressed and a little bit above the class of young men that I saw about me would give us things to memorize. It was my first introduction to memorizing the Gettysburg Address. It was a great deal of satisfaction to me to see how well it was received, how important it seemed to be to him and how the children about me didn't quite grasp all that I was saying.

Well I think that I felt mostly it was freedom for the things that the people came here for. What did they come to America for? What did they give up? What did they expect to find? And that I heard talked about a great deal in the adult conversations around me. I equated socialism with well I would say, general concepts of unionism. The socialists were very anxious to promote it. They were very active in selling bonds for the establishment as a forward and the source of editorial discussion that went on around those editorials were of interest to all of us. It was table talk.

No, only as I heard. I knew him only as a name but he was quite real to me because you certainly heard, Kahn says. Yes, from the discussion so that their expression during that period that I could understand them I don't know about the very very early periods of my life. Where expressions of what they understood to be Socialism or Marxism and they

felt that it was part of their union activity. They had to become free and a better place in society and that you did this through the union and, of course they voted the socialist ticket. Of course when I started to teach, there was this little infant organization the union and I joined it.

I suppose one of the real motivating factors to bring me into the union movement was a fact that I had heard so much at home about unions. And even wasn't explicit in terms of hours and salary and all that. There was this aura of better times must come and it must come through the work of the union. Since my mother had been so active at the time that she had been introduced into unionism, in fact I don't know whether she brought it or she got it but she was

I was moved to attend a Delegate Assembly meeting at that time because I received such scurrilous literature from the union office. I knew from my background from the discussions I had heard of the growing strength of communism that it just couldn't be true and I was deeply distressed that my union was being so maligned.

The literature was pointing out the deviltry of Linville and Leftovers. How they cheated, how they were intolerant, how they didn't support the right resolutions in very mean, horrible language and that moved me to write to Linville. I said, "I have been getting the literature may be I ought to find out whether I can help." I assumed they were right and the others were wrong without having it handed at a meeting

without having made a personal effort to find out and promptly I got a letter from Linville to come down.

I found myself in this very exhilarating position of spending a whole hour discussing the matter with him. Never have I been through such patient, philosophic, knowledgeable discussion anywhere. He was giving me, I guess he looked upon this little girl you know who was really very fresh and experienced talking about what was happening to the union. Why these people were doing what they were doing and what can we do to maintain our integrity. There was absolutely no question at that point of arguing which faction to belong to or anything of that sort. It was a union has to work for the union and what is done should be work on issues that were of moment to the union.

At that time they had organized substitutes. It was the first time we saw these special interest groups affecting the legislation service league. The substitute groups there had been a long period of unemployment and unappointment. There were all kinds of extreme measures presented in Albany by substitutes which they wanted the union to take up. If the union was in favor of unemployment insurance they were sure to find that it was just selling itself but it wasn't really interested in unemployment insurance, and they had better measures to present and we can go on and on to that.

Depending they weren't cohesive no they belonged to a group and then they picked these issues to fight. The fights were wild they were

absolutely wild. I think it is very hard to realize the possibilities to carry on such fights among teachers but there they were and it was worth your life to go through it. Also the question of war and peace became important. You remember it was the fight against fascism and who was doing it. Resolution on resolution and the communists all voted one resolution. If you offered a resolution that was milder in tone or more enveloping a larger number of people, then you just didn't care you didn't feel for it. It is very interesting, it finally came to a point where Professor Dewey decided that the union cannot go on the way it did that it would be slashed. So the union passed a resolution to have a commission appointed of which he was the chairman.

After months of study and analysis he presented the results of the commission to the Delegate Assembly which was crowded that day. People came who never came before and, of course, the commission came to the conclusion that this factionalism has got to stop that it was going to be the death of the union. There were votes taken at the parts of the resolution that were being considered. The factions got very excited about it. It didn't like the way it was going. Began, who was in those days a famous leader of the communist group of the Stalin group in the union, who insisted he was not a communist got the floor. Shaking his finger at Professor Dewey said, "It's because you are senile and old that you have chaired this commission and come out with that report." I said that was just one of the mild things that happened at that meeting. If you rose to vote against their position, they literally took you by the

coat and pushed you down to your seat or put in an abuse against you saying, "No wonder you vote as you do, you have no husband, you have no brother, you have no children." All of which was not so and they had no idea of what was so, but you were actually pushed down in your seat. You had to fight to be counted, you had to fight to maintain a standing position and so those were just some odd bits.

Everything was turned into an issue everything. Every Albany legislation, every international conflict, everything was turned into their issue. No matter what you did, no matter how forward the legislation proposed was it never goes far enough. In legislation, you never get a perfect bill. Now it may seem strange for some people to look back on the issues that are handled by the union as being remote from the original purpose of the union. But the fact is that in the evolution of the union movement they found that there were more connections to the welfare of their members through some of these wide flying interests whether they be local or international.

They were very much moved by what was happening to the people. They said to working people that all of this awareness of having to be concerned with the welfare of the poor people as spread out to a degree which involved the union. Historically, from the very beginning we find out that affected the interests of the organization. For instance, when you had the communists fighting for the war against fascists well that was a deep involvement in our union. Not only were you concerned with

preserving your liberty and the democratic process. The democratic process was very vital to the union no matter what the issue. If you couldn't vote and you couldn't speak your mind freely, and you were abused because you differed that was a violation of a principle under which you chose to exist and which was very important to you. You found yourself deeply involved in the controls outside the four walls of the organization. That is why the whole matter of communism was a very serious matter to the union. There were many people who gave more time to these outside pressures than they did to the union issues. So anxious were they to be effective in those areas that they gave up their activity locally to the extent that they worked on these broader plains.

I was with that, I felt that to abuse the democratic process was to take the pins out of what the whole issue was. You looked on the communists development since the revolution in Russia not at the very beginning but afterwards in the spirit in which we speak. You realize that all these things that you were fighting for which reflected themselves in local issues of less dramatic import. For instance, the working hours if nothing mattered but this vision that you had establishing in the far future something that would be wonderful. Than never mind if you didn't work on this business of how long the work each day should be. That would be just an example of the mentality of those who were affected by the arguments.

My reason for working with this group started at that first meeting with Linville. When I attended the Delegate Assembly out of sheer

childish innocence, I rose to get the floor. I don't know what prompted me to do it because there was an awful fight going on and I can't even tell you what it was about but it was shattering. The air was charged and I made my maiden speech and nobody knew me there. I had never attended a meeting before. You know at the next election and it was just a couple of months, I was voted elementary school vice-president it was 1932.

Here I was not so sophisticated in detail about the issues on the floor as keenly aware of the method and spirit in which they were fought. I knew that if that prevailed then what was the use of what we were talking about.

I am so glad you asked because I have never felt that I had that struggle. I think the union is a place where you could have women. Now most of the officers were men in a number of unions especially where strength and brawn and all of that was considered. There were some bright spots even as I remember way back in the middle trades where there were a lot of women. I am not sure that a lot of women had tough jobs, I didn't know enough about it to really take note. I can't speak with authority because to mind comes the leading men who were presidents and vice-presidents and shop stewards. In the teachers union we had very little of that now we had Lefkowitz and Linville and Smallhizer. These were men who took the initiative in organizing a union. But there is something about teachers which drew women into the game on a very serious level and who had been very active as women in the teacher movement before

I ever became.

I would say that what you call attention to has validity but don't forget that it was harder for the women to assert themselves except for the men. Go back to maternity leaves, you had to leave your job because you became a mother or if you became pregnant. You had to assert it right that day that you knew otherwise they would throw you out. So that they were burdened by more things than perhaps other people were in their struggle. The issues may be touched them. Made it very difficult for the women at first when these men were fighting the battle like Linville, Lefkowitz, Smallhizer, Jagganaw. It is true it required a lot of guts to fight it and in two cases the men lost their jobs because they were fighting so hard. However, there were some women I never knew them they were before my time they were only names to me who were hell-bent for doing something about it. They were not only in New York, they were in Chicago and they were in Michigan.

Well of course there were the bread and butter issues but there also these awful impingements on their personal lives and they got up and dared to talk about it. Leaves for maternity, leaves for sabbatical, promotional opportunities, equal pay and I mean there were real professional things and those women were a wonderful brand of women. I mean as individuals that it so happened that they were remarkable. When I met them on the convention floor in 1941, I was absolutely fascinated by the quality of some of those women. I had never met such women. I don't

know they were just powerhouses who walked along beautifully good looking, very feminine, they weren't the kind that would hit you if you didn't agree very articulate. Their speeches on the floor were wonderful and I was just like a drunken sailor, I didn't know what to make of all of this. Well, I never saw so many women in one room with such - now don't forget when I met them they had been through the communist fight in the AFT. They were up to here in that battle this was in 1941, 40, 35, 36 a national thing. And imagine my joy and happiness when one of these very brilliant women came to me at the end of the convention and said that we are so happy to have you join our rank.

At that very convention in 1941, we went there feeling with mixed emotions. There was that great exhilaration of coming back into the mother organization after five years of having been out of it during the time we had left for the Guild. But there was enough of that dirt play. Before we left for the convention, we were advised by a committee from the AFT of our dearest friends whom we certainly trusted and loved how to behave at the national convention. Here we were a local from New York now you know how volatile New Yorkers are how they know every answer to every question and how they never take a question mark into consideration. It is always with finality. We were warned that might have a bad effect on the other locals that they would not like to see us grab the situation, take all the time make all the comments.

We got to the convention and there were caucuses and the AF of T political caucuses. We joined the one that was anti-communist the one that got us back into the AF of T. Early in the convention one of the men from Michigan asked could he have a talk with me as leader of our group and I said, "What about?" He hesitated to tell me and I finally gathered he was going to tell me how we ought to play and I said, "No we can't come." I felt it was impinging on my dignity to have everybody telling me how to behave. And so we went through the caucus and some issue came up, I can't tell you what it was probably as important as every other issue and up went our hands the New York hands. I took out a pencil and paper and passed it around and said put your hands down and let's wait and listen. Because as I told you, I was already impressed with the quality of the people across the nation. There were great minds and I am not exaggerating and you know it didn't make any impression on my members that I sent that paper around. The issues weren't so important that is the point I make. I can't even remember the issues but it was this desire to participate and they were on high.

Oh, yes they had put out the whole left from the national slate that is how we came back. They were very hep and very able. I can't exaggerate how able they were and knowledgeable. Well you know I could not get my group to quiet down and I walked out of that caucus almost in tears. George Counts followed me and said, "Take it easy these things happen it will pass," and made me come back but that was what had us down for awhile until we got our balance. We had to get our balance because

we were recovering from a very drunken situation.

Now you can imagine the five years and more that we had spent before and after we left the union were very trying years. It was a battle for years before we left and it was a battle for five years after we left to have two unions fighting with each other in non too happy situations. So that when we got this breadth of success it was difficult to take. Can you imagine going to a Delegate Assembly before the Guild had broken away and to find every section in the world represented on our delegates floor. There was the Stalinists who had their side, the Trotskites, the Lovestoneities, the Socialists, a few Republicans, a few Democrats. There was great danger of people of more conservative temperament, I am not talking about persuasion to live through those times. They dropped out. Why go to a meeting where everybody is tearing everybodys eyes out so that those factions on some issue would combine to beat down the union group. They were the haves and the others were the have-nots and you never liked the haves when there were so many have-nots around and that was the position we were in.

It seemed impossible to go on after the Dewey report after many very hectic sessions. At one session Dr. Linville was presiding and one of the Stalin group ran upon the dais and threatened him. Linville was a very not frail but gentle type of person had a heart attack right on the dais and had to be carried out to the ambulance. That was only one of how many things but having gone through these treacherous things and having lived

through it to be allowed to come back into the AF of T really was a heady experience and that the New York delegation was all wound up is not at all surprising taking for granted its natural vent.

Our reason really for having had a Guild organization rather than just the local as it existed was the fact that we were sure that we could not have the union functioning as a union in New York City. While we had this factional strife going on where day after day and week after week it was impossible to carry on in orderly fashion the business of the day. As a union we always had a legislative program those referred to working conditions. Those referred to hours of work to examinations, to grievances, to salaries, perhaps the most informed and vigorous fighter in New York City for teachers on the legislative front was Lefkowitz and he was that for all the teachers in New York not only for the union. He was the man that knew more about the city budget than anybody else in the legislature. He could work with Democrats as he worked with Socialists successfully too. Had severe fights up in Albany, he was a fighter he made progress. There was this whole list of activities but at that time and for years before and afterwards, we had the constant problem of proceeding in the democratic way. All that was happening in Europe on the western front wherever there was strife was part of this struggle to maintain what we in the union considered the democratic process. We knew it was futile under any other method any other government.

One's patience becomes exhausted, you can't attend month after month and year after year and exhaust all the possibilities of making compromises and straightening out affairs. It was impossible the only thing that could have happened was to have all of these factions swallow up the union which they wanted to do or to get out and work your own way. That was a terrible decision for the people to make the officers. Imagine the people who spent all their lives up to that time creating the union having to say, well that's that we will get out and do what we can until we get back. It took heroic courage to even dare it and there aren't that many kind of people with that kind of courage. It is easier to get people on to a bandwagon than it is in its livertive body and so when we made that very dreadful move to get out we were a minority group. Well, I can't remember the exact number but lets say 1,000 and lets say that the group that remained was 5,000. Those 5,000 were carrying on like crazy collecting money, getting in on the press of wonderful techniques.

We really didn't do badly considering what the situation was the one to five but when there is riot the press says so, when there is a split in leaders the press says so. So much of our time and thought came not so much before the break as after when we were two organizations. They did not do much about that we were the ones that were saying it not they really. The public was not aware of it not terribly we were a small organization you know it wasn't a vast organizaton. There were occasional editorials and columns. I remember The Times had a long column on me with my picture. My sister tells me that I don't know if

they still have it but they did have it in their bank not just that but other things about me so there was some but in your day-to-day living, it didn't make that much effect. They wouldn't antagonize the 5,000 if they are not very effective so that period was a very bad time. We really had to spend a great deal of time on just pulling things together and when we got to getting organized for the AF of T again that required terrific effort. First of all, I wasn't in the union at that time.

One of the great problems in those years with what had come up in the legislature and in other bodies close to us as public servants, I might say it is even related to McCarthyism. We were caught in a very difficult position. On the one hand academic freedom was in big letters before the union and its objectives and among teachers that sort of an issue is much greater than other professions and other people. At the same time, we were watching people elected officials and others attacking the matter of the communist power taking over and frightening themselves and others with what would be happening if communists took over. Had worked out results of their deliberation that dealt with abusing power or not avoiding the use of power in order to overcome the contradictions that existed at that time. The advantage of fighting for academic freedom the necessity for fighting for it and the need for being watchful of communists activities.

Now that presented a very serious problem to the liberals of that day there was always the problem of which side of the arguments they would

take. After years of scattered deliberations over years I dare say, they had not come to solid conclusions of how to do, how to act in that particular thing. It is really a dreadful thing to think that you are caught in that bind that what you consider so important freedom of action of association of deliberation should be endangered by fear. Fear has no place in freedom. It should be courage.

I can't remember. The problem as I stated it really. Well I would have to go into the whole matter which I think is too complicated to give him parts of the talk, I really do. Well it never was in fact you know only recently if I am not mistaken some teachers were reimbursed to the tune of thousands of dollars for having lost their jobs in that thing. No, I mean now. I don't remember whether it was Feinberg or McCarthy but it was in that area see I would have to look that up I wouldn't know. But they had just gotten back thousands of dollars damages after many years you know so it remains an unsolved problem really.

It was enough to kill you when you were talking about loyalty oaths and school. Here we were working with teachers that we knew were collecting money and clothes for Russians who were fighting only against the loyalty oath and making such a to-do. I guess it was I would have to look that up, I can't remember.

Men like Linville who fought all his life for academic freedom he gave up his teaching job to work for that in New York. To fight his way to freedom while you teach when he was called by one of the committees, I think it was the McCarthy one I am not sure. He went, he didn't refuse to go. Well you can multiply that by the hundreds really not people I know personally. You know at this moment I am not so sure that he did as he said he would. The years do blurr things you know. I would say that whole area really not been resolved. I don't know at this point. I don't know if I would have because I have never thought in terms of that and I was never threatened with loss of jobs for anything no matter what I did. The board didn't like to stir something up if it could help it and I really wasn't stirred up I wasn't called in on it.

I had private talks with FBI agents but that was during the war when some of our teachers had enlisted in the service some women and they wanted the history of it and where did they stand among communists. They knew we weren't communists oh my goodness. They were tracking them down before accepting them into the army that was their procedure. Those that had, a woman whose parents were I think what was the connection anyhow they wondered if she were a radical left and I knew very well she wasn't. And he didn't argue with me at all, I gave him, I said, "I know her I know all about her, I know her mother and so on," and so he said, "Good enough," and that was it. She went and she served for years. What bothered me was that I had to be in it at all and was I doing the right thing? Was I giving the right information? As long as I was sure I was

giving the right information it didn't worry me. I would not be in consideration when talking to the agent. You talk about what you know. I am not sure, I mean who would do the questioning?

Would you take any communists into the second world war? In the beginning they weren't your allies. I wonder, as you say I am not flat on my feet with it. If I had the absolute answers, I would give them. If I don't have the absolute answers, I wouldn't give them. I wouldn't go beyond what I know. I taught with a bunch of communist teachers and I knew they were communist teachers. I never told on them but if they had gotten into a situation and I was asked, I would say what I knew if it were done by a responsible person or agency. I think that is it. It is tricky. It was galling to work with these people and not throw them to the dogs. I remember the day that Hitler walked into Paris. That was a dark day if ever there was one and I went to the playground where we met the children and one of the leading commies of the group was there and I said, "Well let me congratulate you Hitler has done very well." She had an excuse for him right away, she did. All I could do was look at her in disgust.

Now if someone had come to me at that point and said, What do you know about her? I don't know we have arguments and we are never on the same side but I couldn't say she is a communist. And I was afraid of being asked about them because I didn't want to get into it because I think it is an unsolved problem. As a citizen you do have certain responsibilities

even though you are not a legislator or a member of Congress.

We did not take a position on it. We had a general discussion, general attitudes we didn't like unsolved situations treated as though they were problems which had been solved or were being solved. But I remember that we had taken a firm universal position on it. In a resolution we said that but we didn't have an answer that would satisfy. You are in an acting position you are not in a dining room or living room. That is what I mean when I say the problem isn't solved you recognize it but you don't know what to do about it.

I had one of our teachers and her husband up for dinner one night and she taught with me and we were very good friends. My husband and I and that girl and her husband, a dentist after dinner she was putting on her coat and she said to me, "I would like you to subscribe to the New Masses." And I said, "No." She said if you are afraid I would give it to you under another name. Do you know, I never spoke to her again. I wouldn't report her but I would never speak to her. Whether I am right or wrong, I don't know who is going to judge but the absolute three are hard to arrive by.

The grievance that was a great step forward. The committee for staff relations was really called together by Marshall, who was on the Board of Education and he called in representatives of each organization. There were seventy organizations, every little interest had an organization.

As I remember, the staff relations committee and I would have to look it up and really refresh my memory, one of the things that we complained about when it was finally accepted was the fact that it had left out so many areas where you could fight the grievance. Now, at this point sitting here I find it difficult to place these areas. I would have to look it up really because in the years that followed there were changes made and they seemed little changes of less consequence. They went through our executive board and then they went through the staff relations but I am not carrying the sequence in my head. As I say, I would have to look through the minutes of the thing.

The very dramatic thing about the staff relations committee was that it was the first time that there was acknowledgment of the fact that there are grievances. Now when you talk about taking on elaborate grievances with all, you realize that it takes time to arrive at a point where you will deal with something like academic freedom. When you have all of these immediate grievances that people have and you have never dealt with them before and you have to work it out, it is a process again. It isn't an achievement of a Bill or it is not a decision handed down by the Court of Appeals that comes later. We had a big fight in our own Executive Board about whether to accept that first draft of the staff relations report because to their mind it was terribly watered down. It was the first thing that ever was made that tangibly accepted the idea of grievance.

The first thing and as I say I would not take an oath on the process of time. But the first thing was when is a grievance a grievance? How do you establish that it is a grievance? How much time will you give between this step and that step? Who will you give the first report to? That was all very consuming but it was the first time that there was acknowledgment over grievances and we met every week for a day. In my opinion, and I was president at that time was we have never had the teachers vote on anything as a system. They voted in unions but they never had a teachers vote and one of the things we got in this was the teachers would vote on whether to accept that staff relations report.

They didn't like it, I was just going to tell you that the supervisors fought against it. We were the minority organization among teachers, we were the Guild and we really were hell-bent. I was hell-bent for putting that through. I had worked on it for two years, I knew all of the ins and outs had some wonderful experiences in the making of it for instance nobody knew how a union would work out of grievance machinery. The board never did it. The board never was in the union. Marshall was never in it what do you think happened? He called in for advisors, heads of unions and they sat at the table with us. He called them in, they told us what they did, how they did it. We argued whether it was feasible for us. I was so tickled to be sitting at that table the one union person out of fourteen. Who should come to advise us but so and so, head of the TVIA or big shots.

Isn't that funny when I became active in the union I should say Dr. Linville was president. He decided that it was time that someone else took the presidency, he would take the directorship. And so we had an election for president but he was there to hold my hand and that was a great comfort because after all that was a place of great responsibility. While people were very kind and indulgent and assured me I would be all right, I knew deep in my heart that next to Linville I was just a child and I really hesitated, I felt terrible. But we had the election and I won and every election I won that same way. I never went electioneering and I didn't have any opposition and I never could figure that out. And you know when I said after all I never had the trouble of being a woman in politics that is what I had in mind. My being a woman didn't seem to make any difference.

I think so, I never thought about it even. I was just plain like everybody else. Now I became vice-president of the AF of T maybe a year they offered it to me, the first year we came back from that very exciting meeting. I said, "No, I can't take it I don't know anything about the AFT, I won't take it," but by the next meeting I was ready. In 1941 when we went back into the AF of T when the Guild went back into the AF of T and, of course, I won, the vice-president one of the board of the AF of T. I was president, vice-president for sixteen years.

I guess that if you are just going to blueprint a thing like that it would be easier. But my experience has been that you don't look for these other connections or leaderships or participation, you have got it if you are in a high position. Not power, I don't believe its power, I don't believe with me it was power. I didn't want anything special out of it but you are known for what your job is. If people are organizing some activity in whatever field to their mind comes a person that will draw attention by virtue of the fact that he is that leader. It is astonishing how you find yourself in many activities that you never even thought about. You are waggled into doing it, and sometimes you have to fight not to do it.

I think there are people that may want to do that there is no doubt about this the ambitious person. But actually, if we were to take by accident or by any kind of you become a leader of an organization, you would find there would be people that would clamor to have you with them. From that point on you would be guided by your desire may be for power and may be out of sheer interest. As far as the local for presidency and vice-presidency goes, I don't think there is a conflict. I think that the two are very closely related. They would be closely related in principal. I am sure that you would rather have your local behind you on a certain issue at the national level than try to go it alone with somebody who hasn't been in the midst of everything. So it is not a one-sided thing unless the power seeking becomes so obnoxious that is something else again but it is very hard to say.

I found myself in a lot of things that I never considered for a minute, may be they would ask you to just serve for one issue on one subject or some celebration where they would want you to be there. They wouldn't want someone else they want you because you have a name that has already been shown. It is very funny how that happens. I have had people talk to me about this I said, I got on radio, I got on television, I never had the slightest idea of doing it. I had nobody promoting it and I didn't promote it myself these public appearances. I think I considered it fun to be out making a speech sometime. After all if you have a certain talent, you would be stupid not to know it and it is a one-shot thing but that one-shot goes an awfully long distance. It is an awfully good shot.

When John Dewey had his 90th birthday anybody who was anybody was there and I represented the teachers of this nation. Well, I wouldn't have said no to that for anything. I love John Dewey. I loved what he stood for, we had numerous meetings together. He gave us beautiful contributions when we needed money and we were hard up and why wouldn't I want to talk at his birthday? Wouldn't it be silly? Well, I didn't deserve to talk at that birthday because the high echelon people that were there really narrows then need I say anymore? Yes. So those things happen can't help it.

The Liberal Party of which I was a member had a radio program and they wanted me to talk in New York City, after all you belong to politics too

right, and so I spoke on the radio. My kids in school all knew I was on radio. They would bring in the paper and I can't resist telling you a very funny incident. I was out in Arizona visiting a friend for a few days and there was a Jewish Fair in some building crowded up to the doors. You had to fight your way through the halls. Someone said we ought to go so we went and somebody tapped me on the shoulder and I looked up and saw a big fellow standing over me. He said, "Are you Mrs. Simonson?" I said, "Yes." He said, "You are one of the two teachers I never forgot." And I said, "What are you?" And he told me his name, he had gotten three degrees, he was a medical doctor, he decided after the third degree he was going to be a doctor. His mother and father were there and they knew me because I had very good relations with the parents and he said, "You were an activist in my day." So that was nice wasn't it? I didn't force my way on to the radio sheet.

We talked about social issues, education. I did not have a regular spot what the Liberal Party needed to have done within education. Dr. Charles was on it and Counts, and Dubinski and those were all things that helped whatever I had to do for my union and they did for their union. Well the Staff Relations Committee had a lot of tight people on, they were officers of their union very not so conservative as rigid everything surprised them. You know it was hard to take two steps, you had to work at it. I must say that Marshall was wonderful as chairman. He gave me all the rope I wanted, I had a wonderful time with him. The others were kind of taken over by my brashness that I dared to think in such big

terms. Well when I stood up to the teacher that had a grievance and how easy it was to surpress her because she was in a tight spot and the place where she needed support and didn't get it unless she was lucky. And there was Marshall and there was a representative from the Board of Examiners and there was somebody else from another division everybody was wonderful, I had no trouble at all.

You know when I was through with my presidency after twelve years, they gave me a party at the Grosville. Marshall came and the head of the Examiners came and they didn't even make, yes they did Marshall made a speech. I had no difficulty, I didn't fight. Fighting isn't always the answer. I would say that the people who came to the Staff Relations Committee as consultants were people who would really get one's respect more than some you have mentioned. You would not think of them as the brawny guys. In the second place, they were absolutely strange to that table. At that table there were no union people except yours truly, they represented other groups of teachers who were not organized due to unions. Very polite, these rigid people that I am talking about.

Of the fourteen at the table mostly teachers but some departments of the Board like the Board of Examiners and so on. They were invited to speak as consultants so there wasn't that hazard. As for me, I had a ball because I was the one teacher. I wouldn't care whom they brought in, I knew there were things that they would say that would suit me, not

everything didn't matter but they came with certain prestige or they would not have been called and I was thrilled that I was on their side. To me it was just great. These were my buddies, I belonged with these people who were being used as source material. What could be nicer? See that is the advantage of being in on it. There is so much we don't grasp if we are outside of the situation. We tend to get far afield with our thinking. There is a place for that it simmers down, but I think in the activity, you have to find the vulnerable windows and go through them. There are spots that you can go through they match even if some don't. In any argument I agree to this point, will you take that and you let the other rest the next time may be I have better luck. But it isn't like writing a thesis on the subject where you have to really go off and do your own thinking. I don't denigrate that it is just that difference in negotiations in unions you can't be simon-pure you do the best you can.

Interesting in viewing the development of an organization or the turns that it takes through the years and hopefully nothing stands still. We had the Guild established well structured had gone through on the basis of no communists we were against communism. It was written into what amounted to an oath of membership when you made out your membership and we had no factions. We had excellent rapport. We could work through a subject have a real lucrative evening. For instance we had a committee on Democracy in Education which included democracy in the schools for teachers too. Through that committee we worked out a program where we invited the president of the board at that time a woman, Miss Dillon to

to come up and sit with us at one of our Executive Board meetings and see how meetings are conducted because we took issue with the way principals are conducting meetings. She turned around and she said to bring your whole Executive Board down here and I will have some superintendents in the audience.

We didn't plan a special process. We were going ahead with our agenda but we wanted her to see there had been so much dictation right through you know so much holding tight to everything. We all went down there she was there, the superintendents were there and well sneakily we took Constant Charles with us. Now they held Ph.D. things at Columbia and a lot of these people either got their Ph.D.'s from them or were going to get them and it was a wonderful night. Well we did things like that is how we worked as a Guild.

Now came the time when AF of T threw out the communist regime and put in an anti-communist head, Counts. And Counts was determined that this whole group that helped him catch the presidency, there were these factions that were not communist in Local 5. They were socialists, dissolutioned Stalinists, Lovestonites, Trotskites, non-Stalinists, you get an education. He was determined to bring them into the Guild because we had the problem of growing and taking over.

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REBECCA SIMONSON INTERVIEW

June 29, 1985

Tape 2

You know there is a real problem which we solved only in part because it is a problem that goes on forever in and out of the Guild wherever the democratic process is at work. That problem is how do you protect your democratic process at the same time avoiding the pitfalls of falling into the dictatorial methods? So we have the problem of taking people who have lived for many years under factionalism and rigid factionalism and bringing them into the Guild, where we protected ourselves for the same length of time from falling into that pitfall.

We did what at that time seemed the only way to us to handle the thing. I suppose if one were from this vantage point philosophically to discuss what should have been done, we would find there is a criticism, there is no doubt about it. But in the context on which we worked and in the atmosphere in which we lived, there were certain things that propelled us to do things in self-defense. For instance, we determined that these groups which were asking to come in would not come in as groups. We would not accept their applications except as individuals. Well there was quite a problem there. These groups felt a great self-satisfaction in how

things had gone. They had saved the situation, they wanted to come back to the Guild. They were recognized as not being dangerous communists and they had their leaders. Well they were I don't know, see I didn't work in the union at that time, I was in the Guild and I didn't get these intimate nuances of leadership. I only knew them from what got outside but how they worked it, I wasn't party to and I would rather not speculate.

We had decided that all applications would be signed by individuals and there are some people who never quite got over that. They felt that in spite of the fact that they were very loyal Guild members and I would have trusted them with anything, I had their confidence and they had mine. They still felt that there wasn't recognition enough for what they had done to bring the teachers together. It remained a problem not so much overtly as almost in the subconscious, working itself toward the top not arriving at this and I think that is a very good lesson for us wherever we are working to maintain the democratic process. You do things that are not absolutely the blueprint of democratic process but they are forced upon you in order to protect what you have.

There was one very striking incident that I shall never forget. As these applications came in one came in from a man who subsequently was a very fine leader in our group, Dave Whittes. He was giving the application not to the committee but to me, saying only if I recommend him will he leave his application, that is how deep the suspicion still ranged. You know well he did come in I did not abuse any of the

prerogatives of leadership he turned out to be one of the most faithful, marvelous leaders in the organization. We achieved things by not moving all the way, and I think that is something to remember. We have to grasp at these opportunities with the discretion necessary, and the awareness of what we are doing. Not doing it for the moment, but fitting it with deliberation and resolve to our idea of our ultimate goals. When I am writing I always have a lot of fun crossing out and thinking of better figure of speech or something and this is taskmaster.

I think that is a very good example. It always recognized the importance of a strike, the workers relation to heads of labor, to the boss, to the corporation and it always had in its sympathies and awareness of what the strike meant. There you have a perfect example you can't avoid the thought that we were seriously a minority organization. Now nobody in his right senses would call a strike without having a good majority of the membership so that our interest in the strike was in the periphery way. We could do it by giving funds, by giving support, by showing up at a picket line you know, but we were a small group and that was no secret. The size of the membership is known to everybody. It would be futile for that size group besides which during that whole period when the union had superior numbers were we to call a strike. They would eat it up and become the leaders of that strike. It was no way of carrying on a strike, we weren't playing the game, we were living actors in a very serious drama.

You know it is a perfect illustration of the need for such radical movement as strike to be an action that would yield definite results. It is a fantastic idea except for those who like that kind of action for their own purposes which may be very good. I mean there may be a very honorable and honest desire to dramatize the teachers problem through a strike, but there is a lack of sensitivity to the results of ill considered action. The action of itself is not a virtue but it has to be planned to yield good results otherwise it is devastating.

Now the first attempt at striking was made after there had been the union of this new group with the Guild. The organization had spent most of its effort organizing in that period and the membership was growing. There were certain things that happened and I am really not ready to give an actual date to when this particular thing happened. For years the teachers were working together throughout the city. No matter what the organizations under the legislative guidance of Lefkowitz came a day when we felt it was time to break that relationship. We had grown strong enough with this emphasis for a couple of years on organizing. That was the great thing because none of these objectives, goals, wishes, hopes could be realized until we had become a bigger organization and that was the great concentration.

Of course, other things went on at the same time, we were able to do real union activities. Entrance exams, examination procedures all kinds of things that had been neglected by other organizations that were our

babies. We had a standing organization on democracy to spread the democratic process not only outside but within our own structure. We had gone through a fight for democracy and the battle was not yet won. And it was ongoing, we had a wonderful committee that did that work.

By the time the UFT which was the result of the merger of the groups that came in from the union to the Guild, we took the name UFT. There was a great deal of enthusiasm especially among those who came from the union. I dare say there were Guild people who resented that change of name very much. Well, they had a vested interest in the Guild just as the others had a vested interest in what they had done in the union. It is an emotional reaction, it certainly doesn't have any definite physical attributes and the union was still in existence not to be forgotten. It was a lively enemy and what we were doing always had to be in the light, that we have an enemy and that has a great deal to do with how you plan to do.

Now the people who came from the union rightly were very much concerned with organization. We had been before that too but we had this double problem having this new group gave us more strength to tackle what we knew had to be done but we never had the chance to do it being a minority group. We got an organizer Dave Selden and he was there full-time. He had been I think as I remember with the AF of T on the organizing staff.

I guess my term, I retired in 1951 I would say, I am really not terribly sure. You know I always took these things about being in office as such a natural flow of events that I find there are a great many dates that I can't set in my mind at all. There I was and there was a job to be done and I continue doing it and it was until I felt enough was enough. Shortly after the Guild had come back to the AF of T, I was elected vice-president of this area. Now that didn't mean just of New York, it meant of a group of states around New York too, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Jersey. Whatever happened with their problems they were free to call on me to help resolve them, to hold their membership together, to increase their membership, to fight out a court case whatever was tops in their agenda at anytime day or night and I am not exaggerating.

I stayed in New York City and they were in touch with me. I still have the writing paper and the cards that I used as vice-president. I was vice-president throughout the merger, I think I was vice-president until 1965, I think it amounted to sixteen years. I have tried to get from the main office just what the dates were because I am frank to say, I had never even seriously worried about that sort of thing. Their records were slow in coming through, I never got a straight answer and finally gave it up. What difference did it make?

I served on the executive board for a long time afterwards and again I don't know how long. On the executive board of the UFT and also I was on the administration board that met just officers, I had that position too

with them every meeting.

We took a lot of advice from Dave, who had his coterie of people around him interested but more than that we were very fortunate to have a fellow by the name of Trachtenberg, I don't know whether you came across that name. You know there are awards given every year by the UFT in the name of Trachtenberg. He was so important in working this structure out and he took as a pattern what was done to hold groups in a union in the established big unions. So each school became a chapter and elected chairmen and in a way they were like shop stewards. You couldn't use quite the same patterns because the institutions were different but to the extent that you could that's how he bought the membership together. It was a gigantic job and a beautiful job and he was a person of personal charm and ability. Yes, I think junior high school, I am not sure. I would say that he was more important than the organizer to what happened although I am sure the organizer was in full sympathy with what was going on.

We had a lot of volunteer work among the membership. An interesting thing was in a funny way the members that came in later to the union to the Guild were mostly high school people. They had a different salary schedule, they had different relationships at school but the vast number of teachers in the city are elementary school teachers and the last to be organized. All through the history of the union from the day it was founded it had more high school people than elementary school people so in

a sense it was a minority group although never designated as such but you deal with a different kind of group.

You see the elementary school grew like topsy. They started way back in the 19th century and they started with very low standards of teaching. You got a job because you knew the district political leader there was no board of examiners. Well with such little demand on the equipment of the teachers the salaries were also of a different standard and it took many years to raise the standards of elementary school teachers to approximate the standards of high school teachers. Parallel running with that was the very equipment of the high school people who were teaching in specialized skills. It carried a special prestige parallel to the elementary school teacher which was a jack-of-all-trades who didn't have the equipment or the credentials that the high school people had.

The elementary people mostly women hardly any men. Why should there be? The men had to earn the living for the family and they went into high school teaching. The elementary school teachers represented in our social picture the first step of coming out of the ordinary working-class which society looked down upon. It was the first chance that these women and it was mostly women accepted the administrative field they came down from the high schools. It was their first chance to step out of one social group which had been working and living under very trying conditions into a prestige group.

Their position therefore was a more precarious one. They were not organized in the same way. They took a lot of guff at the schools from their administrators. They were afraid of any recourse. They hardly understood the need for they were growing up out of an oppressed group into another group and to organize them was a terrific job. I must say that I had something to do with that not as an organizer or anything in that role. I tramped through those schools lunch hours, after school, at night talking to just those elementary school teachers that I couldn't waggle into a meeting. They didn't trust it, they were afraid of it. None of these things happened because it was I and none of them happened because some few of them came along. They were moving with the times and that's a very slow movement.

It was a period when the head of education in New York in the city was still Hanna Lindberg, who had been a kindergarten teacher and who was of Swedish background and was nicknamed the Swedish nightingale. She did a great deal in the Kindergarten Association, she was a member of the Guild. She worked with the kindergarten teachers who would trust a "professional organization" more than a union which never meant much to these people not at home, not in the press, not in society at large and so they were the last people to be organized. Out of that group many issues suddenly, they became important. They were the big group and mind you these things are just like the opening of the flower one petal at a time, one leaf at a time. To talk of one is to talk of many and it is hard to keep your lines straight they began to feel their strength. They were

practically shamed into the position. You know it took so much to move them so that when I went up at lunchtime to talk to the teachers, I would look at them and show them the shame of eating in this little lunch space out of a paper bag with the toilet facilities opening right into that lunchroom. That was the way we worked and it was that more than any philosophy that drove them into self-respect.

When we got the elementary school teachers in that was a big test in the first stoppage. We had already achieved a cohesion of groups that had never thought in term of union before. The whole concept of a union had grown through these developments which were yes we had promoted it. We had worked very hard and we tried very hard and spent all our money that way. One has to recognize it grew out of the kind of world we were living in. Now out of these movements, these changes within the union grew issues that had to hold together our lines. The influential high school division within our union and the newly formed elementary school division within our union and they were issues that were rising of a purely union nature that had to be passed on by the whole union.

The matter of salaries was not the least of our problems. There was a great differential between the high school salary and the elementary. It was finding an answer to legitimatizing raising the elementary school salary to the high school teachers salary without losing the high schools but at the same time bolstering the self-respect of the elementary school so that it began to grow at a phenomenal rate. Well, it was a serious

threat to the Board of Education. We began talking about what the morale of the teachers on strike and the budget and what not. I took the position that we must have a serious single salary which was very much discouraged by the high school people. They did not like it. Now that doesn't mean that everybody there didn't like it but as a group it is safe to say they didn't like it.

The Board of Education appointed a commission to hear the arguments on both sides. I wrote the paper on a single salary and we went down there after we had a very serious threatening kind of fight in our legislative committee, in our executive board. And rightly so they were afraid that if we took that position they would lose their high school people. They had to hold their group together it wasn't as though they had purely selfish motives. It was a union matter and they were afraid if I took this really outlandish idea of a single salary that all these organizing attempts would come to nothing. We would lose but we won on the vote in the executive board and I went down to present the paper a very long paper which was an analysis of the whole social and educational situation.

Well I said, "We would never improve our schools, we would never really have education." At the same time, the psychological development at the teachers colleges was really the kind of thing that supported the single salary. For instance, there was suddenly a realization that not everybody could teach elementary school that it required great skill and very great know-how. Now mind you, we did not write these psychological

treaties but there they were they were growing with society that was coming our way and I used it.

We had problems in the elementary school we had better know how to handle them and that is how it happened. All these forces were playing into my hands really, I did not make them up they were obviously things that had to be dealt with and why were people surprised that the elementary school teachers felt it should be shown in terms of money? It was one thing to speak about these things in the academic circles but did you ever know of teachers or any other workers getting together wherein the final analysis what they wanted wasn't reflected in money that is what my paper was about. I can't repeat it now I don't remember it but those were the broad issues.

The people on that commission were people out of business and out of labor. I have some letters really that I got from them afterwards on that paper just commendation letters not discussing the issues at all and that was the way it went. The UFT just got together and wrestled with the problem of keeping the status of the high school people. Encouraging the elementary school people to approach it with special courses, with examinations, with credits that could be accumulated little by little no matter how long it took until they had the same kind of credits that the high school people had. Now we never get an elementary school teacher

that doesn't have a Masters Degree, so you see how it works. From individuals to the masses and back to the individuals and finally society. I don't know how clear this is there is so much jammed into so little but the reason I was so concerned with the whole thing this is personal for me. The realization that all of this was not just for teachers that we were working for a different world and different structures. Meaning that people were going to get paid better, they would work not twenty hours outside that was the picture you know for so many years. The defense of the teachers school days, of vacations, of sabbatical leaves all of those were a way of life, it was living as life should be lived and not just holding a job and barely existing. I felt that my work was not just a professional work although I don't think that I ever shunned that responsibility but that I was a citizen working for the good of society to me I put all my effort into that bumpkin.

I was very fortunate, I had wonderful support my husband was thrilled with what I was doing. When we were married I never had that kind of public life, it was all very personal and very intimate and as he watched what was happening, he would go round boasting that was his attitude. You never heard anything the way she spoke you know. As for my son as he was growing up the union was part of his life. He would go down there, he would draw pictures on the walls, he went to meetings, it was wonderful support. I need not say the rest of the members of my family worked for unions always. They always lived for unions although they were no longer workers in unions so that was a plus and not a problem.

I always had plenty of good help at home. I made it my business to and when my son was first growing up, I took a double maternity leave which was available for no reason but to be home when he was home even though I had full help. Help was so cheap in those days you know, I wondered how some of the teachers had the nerve to pay their help what they should have paid full-time help sleep in girls. Well, I didn't follow that course, I was willing to pay for it. And then I noticed when he was past three a certain resentment my leaving the house, I hadn't noticed it before. So I got a sabbatical I was in line and I thought well I would be home and see what happens. The first day that I was home and he was going out to play got his bicycle and all, I said, "Wait a minute I will get my things on," and he said, "Don't do that, I know how to get on myself. If I want you, I will call through the window." And he never called me but he knew I was there and by the time that year was up he was ready for school.

One of the issues which remained unresolved, a problem that comes up in all its strength and more today than ever before was giving federal aid to public education which meant not to parochial schools to keep the issue of religion and education separate and apart. You have no idea how hard the church worked against this resolution. At our convention of the AF of T if you walked through the halls at four in the morning you would find "father" who had been working our convention all week with a bevy of lovely looking young girls working on a resolution to include in some form aid to religious schools. And the passion ran very high, we had been

through it at the New York convention, the state convention. I don't remember the exact date, I would have to have my papers to know. But we won it on a state level the resolution now it was up before the AF of T. The AF of T had a commission appointed to study the problem and brought in a very scholarly complete study of what all this meant and why we should support the resolution. And that was given to the convention as a finding of the organization.

In the first place we felt that once that started it would be taking away from the support which was badly needed by the public schools. You know there was this whole section of the country as unfortunately there still is through the south and the west where the public schools are really in a frightful condition financially and always have been. They never could really support a good educational system. Why and here we have society again as part of our problem. When I say I worked on behalf of the people, I mean just that. They had no taxes and the government had no money and what was the use of well when they got into a tight spot they tried to get money elsewhere but you can imagine the lengths to which they had to go and you can imagine the amount was not very big. So here we were asking for federal help for public schools which was a crying need.

Now also it seemed to us that if we started on a program of giving certain aid to parochial schools that aid logically would have to be extended to any kind of aid. And I remember saying on the convention floor that we might give the aid for books and end up by buying a new roof

of the building. I mean that was really what was in our minds. We were a public school group that wanted to support public schools. There was no question in our mind. The discussion was very hot and we did not take the vote that day and John Childs, do you know his name? He was Counts partner in the courses that they gave on Foundation at Teachers College. A wonderful man and loyal to us, he was the darling of our hearts wanted to do things democratically. I must say that both Counts and Childs were my great experience in learning the problems of democracy. They were the most democratic people I ever knew. They took risks but always knew that they were taking a risk that couldn't possibly work or it wouldn't work but that was the moment to show it. In their personal relationships, they were the most democratic people I ever knew. They came from the college they had a lot of prestige. They were writers, we all worshipped them but you would never know it when they moved among us.

Childs was on our Executive Board when we had this meeting at the Board of Education he came along, Counts came along and did everything he could to help us. Childs decided to have an off-the-record meeting at night and not take action but let people say what they wanted to say because here we had been shouting all over the place. We were brought up to shout for what we wanted and I was as much at fault as anybody. He felt this was a time for deliberation, I could have killed him I didn't agree but he went ahead. I was afraid of more ruffling, I felt we had it politically, I was not above being political. We could pass a vote and this would only create more and more trouble however, who was I to change

Charles mind. He said, "No, let's try it," so we tried it. Oh, big meetings almost like the convention floor and he gave the story of the commission with all the arguments, set the stage and he said now say what you want.

Up in the balcony was sitting Father, the Father, this Priest that was working. He was head of education for the Catholic Church in Washington and for the life of me I can't remember whether it was O'Connell or something like it, I don't remember his name. I imagine there is something in our papers about it but it would take a lot of digging. Charles said, "Father, do you want to say anything?" I could have murdered him. So Father got up of course very genial, grateful, gracious and began to talk and his final sentence was, "We don't care how little you give us we just want our toe we want a foothold." Well that was a bad slip that was what worried everybody and that settled it but that was a classic remark all we want is a toehold which meant this isn't going to settle anything you are going to hear from us again. So when we went back on the convention floor, we passed a resolution. Oh, we felt very good that that was settled.

Don't forget the Southern locals come from a Baptist background and what the Catholic Church was doing they didn't like at all. They were afraid that the Catholic Church with its large population and power would be detrimental to them. They hated Catholics as much as they hated Jews as a group. The teachers were the most liberal authority of that

population not to be confused. But the South, you went through and you heard us always it was the Catholics and the Jews that was the attack and the Baptists knew it. They didn't like the Catholics at all. Well while I was celebrating our success of the resolution someone came running up to me and said, Go down to the pressroom, they want you in the pressroom. So I went down and the press was covering that session The Times was there everybody was there because this was an issue that was really important. And it was the first time that it had been voiced now people talk about these things quite freely, but in those days they didn't they were afraid to tread on peoples toes.

I got down there and The Times reporter said, "I just got this from Father and it is supposed to go in tomorrow morning." And I felt if I was giving him this, I wanted to do a response. Well he knew me, he was really on my side I think. He never said that but he didn't like what was going on I guess. I read the column and I turned purple because the whole thing was an attack on our local that we hated the Catholics so that we were influencing the whole delegation to oppose the Catholics.

I must make it clear that when you talk of teachers and the American Federation of Teachers, you are talking of the cream of the population that they represent not the character of that whole population. They are an extremely intelligent liberal group and what was not liberal on the floor of the conventions, year after year what we call conservative would have been absolute radicalism in the communities from which they came.

They were absolutely free of any prejudice. They were wonderful people. But we the local in New York were predominantly Jewish. Somehow I don't know how to account for it I don't know why that is but the liberal population in New York was predominantly Jewish and our local was and this man really thought that you know, it was a matter of religious prejudice. Well I wasn't going to let that go through. In the meantime, the messenger who brought me the call to the pressroom went up and scattered the news that I was called to the pressroom something is happening.

Now this pressroom was a big glass enclosed room with reporters and typewriters scattered throughout and the doors were closed but you looked in. While I was talking to the Priest, the faces were coming in and crowding the glass and in a very short time all the glass was covered with people. I went up to the Priest, he was there he didn't leave the premises after giving the thing and he had a number of girls with him. I say girls, they were the young teachers. I am sure these young Catholic teachers and their community were unusual to be in the union I am not calling them down I am talking about the society as it existed. And he was talking to them, they were having a very pleasant time tall, thin girls.

You know what size I am and I crowded my weight toward him and stood there waiting for recognition. And he would not recognize me so I finally addressed him and he looked down and I said, "I just read your comment and

if you are going to put that in I am going to put in something devastating." He said, "What do you mean?" and he began arguing with me on his terms and I said, "I don't care, you heard our resolutions on teaching, integration, on forward movements, on respecting other peoples religion and ideas," I said, "That is what we are here for and that is what we are spending our lives for and you want to put this in as an explanation of your point of view?" I said, "I will deal with that." He got a little bit worried and he looked around and he saw this big crowd outside and he withdrew the column and the reporter just sent in a factual report.

If you think that is the end of it you are mistaken. When I got back I received a letter from him saying, now this letter was typed very poorly and there were insertions. Now nobody in his position would have sent out a letter that looked like that. I think he wrote it. I couldn't figure it out any other way in which he asked permission to come down and address my Executive Board to show them the truth. He wanted to come down to New York to our Executive Board and explain everything and show them the truth. I wrote back and said, "We don't do business that way, if you want to communicate write me a letter." I got another letter in which he said you won't believe it, "I think you are more anti-Catholic than I am anti-Semitic." It was stupid plain stupid, I am sure that his superiors would be outraged to hear it. So that was the story and that problem has

grown so that now really what we were considering was almost a prophecy of what was happening right up to this granting of tuition to "people that are making it" a free choice.

Another vital issue with historic significance has been the whole matter of integration particularly in education. It had always been a concern of the AF of T and of the Guild and the old union, out of it grew so many other questions. For instance, the whole business of financing the fund, the Southern schools that were referred to as the poorest of them all were not integrated schools. We felt there was money that was being put into them but in the wrong hands and the wrong way and it was a matter of national importance. And so through education, through meetings and all we did consider the matter of integration as a very important thing.

From time to time, our own black members went down South and came back with horror stories. For instance, Dick Parish, who led that group in the Committee on Integration within the New York local would tell us how he would stop for a Coke at a bar and the man would give him the Coke but order him to stand back away from the counter. This is just a little story about a great issue and about so much that was going on in the black world. So we were very much aware of this and as was natural, we had locals in the South, black locals and white locals not as a result of discrimination but as a result of the way things were in the South. The utter separation of the two races in all areas.

When the Brown Decision was being discussed in 1954 I think it was, we were a friend of the court. We were very anxious to have it go in favor of integration and in each case we had the support of the whole organization of the American Federation of Teachers. In conventions there were resolutions to that effect. There were long committee reports on what was going on down South and what had to be done to correct it. And finally the decision came through and we were left in the uncomfortable position of being friends of the court in integrating the children who were going to the schools. Having chartered members black locals, the teachers who were teaching the black children and the teachers who were teaching the white children in other locals and so it was really an appeal to our conscience to do something about this.

We did not want to take the radical hard step of throwing the locals out. Don't forget, we had very few to throw out down South and this problem was one that we were struggling with and not finding good answers. It was difficult to do to get them to integrate. So beginning in 1954 and for I believe five years afterwards, at every convention we discussed the merits of taking charters away. There was no question about our being in favor of integration as the Brown decision called for but how to get the teachers together with the least destruction of what we had built up over so many years. That was a most trying time because to reconcile those two it was very difficult and we were not finding the

answer. Each time as we met in convention we would reiterate our sympathy with integration and we would war over how to do it for teachers.

In 1959 as the result of a previous resolution which limited our time for further debate on a subject, in other words, we could not debate it and do nothing about it. We had to come to some conclusion and that was the bloodiest fight of them all because people felt definitely that we really can't solve it at this time having given more than five years to the subject. So the debate went on so hot that some of the leaders of our most liberal groups those that came from California and Colorado they were the nearest to New York in terms of what they would do and how, decided it was unfair to take away the white charter and leave the black because that was not an integrated chapter. Now you can see what difficult reasoning that was. Now the white people had the support of their community, they were the whites they belonged to the trade union movement down there that gave them good support. If the blacks lost their charter they would lose everything. It was prior to the action that I visited the Southern locals going through the South on my way to Mexico.

It is hard to relate the feelings that one goes through, the contradictions that hit you as you drive and talk. We got to the black local where we were most heartily embraced in New Orleans. Real friends you know they met with us we met with the executive board, they had a tea in the afternoon. I was driving with another person from New York. When they called for us at the hotel they parked a block away and they

apologized that they had to do it not for their sake but for our sake, for fear that the motel would put us out if they saw what we were doing. Men and women both in their own car and we went to their home a beautiful townhouse a principal, he was in the local down there. A committee had gone before us all blacks had prepared a beautiful tea and we held a long meeting and discussed everything and they felt it would be very difficult to integrate with the whites.

The blacks realized they had to keep their charter, if they didn't have the charter they would have nothing. The whites had other advantages. They treated us royally and they invited the head of the white local to come up and talk to us there. She was the most arrogant person we could have met. She didn't want to discuss it and I don't blame her she had nothing to say. It was very hard for her to take a stand silence and hoping you can understand was her best weapon. She didn't want to talk to us and we were really given the rough treatment. That night I got a telephone call from the executive board of the white chapter.

They are very polite you know Southern politeness is well-known asking us to be visitors at their executive board meeting and so we went up there and I never heard an American group so fearful. It was genuine fear. It was just a hair-raising thing to note that these people who really were the free people in their community who had worked so hard to build up that local, who were really quite successful, who had membership in their labor

groups, who had every confidence of their community said that they would be thrown out if we remained in an integrated chapter. This went on for hours and finally I said, "I think we have to call it to a halt, but I would like to say something before I do that I never thought in our country I would sit silently by listening to what sounded like Hitleresse protest."

You see the evident cleavage between the white and black not particularly among the teachers particularly among the community. They were horribly fearful of what their community would do to them if they bowed to the blacks. Their premise must have been, they would not say it, they were too wise to say it. I don't know whether they believed it but in self-defense they would have to argue that they are a different breed and that they are different and that to me was talking as Hitler would be talking so I left on that high note.

I came back to our executive meeting at the American Federation of Teachers with a lengthy report of my unhappy visit. Then we went to that convention at which we had that fight and I was really fighting with people who were my friends. I mean these westerners whom I knew were liberals, who didn't like integration but at that moment the survival of as many Southern chapters in terms of organization was of the utmost importance. There again you have one of the leading problems which if I

had my way would probably be my underlying premise that you can't sweep these things through by wishing or thinking you knew, you have to make it part of what will work.

You see one of the problems is to find that happy ground where people have good goals and clear ideals of what the ideal would embrace and to see it through without utter destruction. To find that ground is a difficult job everything depends on it everything that you can see happening immediately and not in the remote future. For instance salaries, working conditions, employment, integration in its widest sense all of those things are recognizable and bring effect to the subject bring pressure on to the subject. The choice is between what is good today and what will be good in the long run and what is the moment to strike. That was the thing that was so difficult to arrive at and for that we allowed five or six years, I think it is that length of time to argue. We were groping shall we force integration among the teachers? It was so difficult. We couldn't come to it because those other present union issues that are easily understood for which people really join a union in the main not because they see pie in the sky by-and-by.

They join because they hope next month the rent will be eightieth day so that was our big problem that is why it took so many years to come to a conclusion. It was very hard to fight it at the convention without destroying the rapport that really was basic in that union. They wanted integration, they wanted integrated charters but they were afraid to do it. There were those who were afraid. I remember a man from Binghamton getting up and making a speech. Those Southerners are marvelous speakers you know they are wonderful. He got up there and described what would happen in Binghamton to their chapter if we passed that resolution in the bloodiest terms. It was my chance to get the floor and I took him on and he called out from the back of the auditorium where he was sitting. He said, "Sister you belong on my side." I don't know if that is worth putting in or not.

Well, I was arguing against him and I was talking so convincingly so that's the length to which things went and it was at that convention that we started to withdraw the charters. It has taken years. We left the black charters as they were but it has taken years to rebuild charters in the South. It was a hiatus there for a long time. We could not begin organizing. There was no room to move about but now we have a number of very good locals down there all integrated so there was something achieved great things. We were the first international union that did that it was a job that most unions did not want to entertain, it was too difficult. That's right it has integration of locals, 1950 was a very different time to 1980, it is hard to imagine.

I think back of our own personal experience in union organization having considered recently all this about other charters. I think what's so interesting was we had tensions to overcome with the factions in the old union. Some of these spilled over into some of the issues like the salaries and so on, but as time went on there was a real recognition of our all belonging to the same thing. Yes, there would be differences I would differ with some of the people. There were moments when for instance, the high school group said, "Don't you think someone else ought to be president?" Now that is a worthwhile thing to consider and a very common problem and I said, "No, I remain next year" and it was a test. Again is this the moment to do what you were asked to do which is right which is commonplace? It is not radical but those people was a union of that other group that came to me not a group of the whole union. I felt shall I hand it over at this moment when we have our differences or do we wait until that moment comes? It wasn't long after that I gave up but I felt secure as I did when we learned to trust each other more and not trust each other utterly and forever that would be too utopian. I mean we were both molded in our own separate ways but enough to make us really feel more secure.

The fact that I was the one who suggested Charlie Cogen for president we had conferences with him, we talked with him. We said, "Would you be willing?" and he was slow to do it. It was a terrific responsibility but

he did and when we established our executive board we were a mixed group. It wasn't capturing one side or capturing the other and while we continued that thing we had to remember at all times that we were a union. There were all kinds of little rough edges to be filed off after we in the local union in the Guild had organized with the other group out of the union. It was a sensitive thing to do because both groups felt very sensitive on their own behalf naturally.

I was just about through with a meeting we held the yearly meeting and I was asked to meet with a group of people whom I recognized as my friends coming from the Guild. They told me that I was being criticized for not moving fast enough on organization and that another group had formed and wanted me out in order that they might proceed more rapidly in their organization. My response was "No, I will not head any group and you get out of it we have no room for factionalism and whatever was our problem we will face outright," and that was part of our structural reform.

I confronted Dave with it and the next day I had a hard time getting at him I think he got word of the whole thing and I said, "I am not asking for explanation but I am just telling you what you may have heard about my forming a faction is untrue, I have stated my position and by no means are you to do it you are our organizer." You know it was abrupt, it wasn't particularly schooled, it took nothing special no special talent and it stopped right there and then. We proceeded with more confidence with each other than we had before. There was no room for secrecy, it did not belong in the democratic process and that is why I hit it head on.

Now it wasn't long after that I myself decided that it was time that I gave up the pace I was going at, that I needed a rest, that I would take a sabbatical. I gave up the presidency but not before I worked very hard with Charlie Cogen to see whether he had my confidence and I had his. I was convinced that Charlie was a thoroughly honorable gentleman and I cared more about that than I did his power as a president. I couldn't prove that that would have to be proved as we went along. He was selected president and we were able to close all those chinks in that wall of suspicion step by step until I think we really did it.

Second, now there is no end to the number of issues great and small that have been covered in the last three and four decades that I have actively been involved in the union business. I look back on all of them to see what we have accomplished and how. What lessons we can get through there? What can we credit ourselves with? What have we achieved? Or has it all been a question of being busy? I think it is well to take one's measure maybe we can learn from it for being busy. Holding a lot of meetings doesn't often measure your worth and your success it just tells you you have been very busy and I don't think that is enough.

When I entered the union actively I was in a sense a novice. A novice to the union not really a novice I hadn't discovered anything new I know of some of the union issues, I had known of its pains and frustrations. I felt for them but really didn't know how to put a handle on their problems. What was involved in solving the problems. I knew that there

were some kinds of radicals that my mother and father did not like. I knew that in the Jewish press they resented some papers that were attacking their press, a press that they helped to build. As for personal involvement, it was interesting but really not personal. It was when I became involved with the union that I paid closer attention to what was important and what was fun and what was interesting. All those elements played their role and one has to remember which role you are playing at what time and I tried to keep that before me.

My first step was as vice-president of the elementary school division. I rose to speak at a delegate assembly. I don't know if I said anything really remarkable. I haven't the faintest idea of what I was talking about but I imagine I said it pretty well because I was much applauded and two months later I was given the job of vice-president of the elementary school division. I worked my way on to the executive board activities not because I wanted the job but because I just naturally found myself moving in that direction. People seemed to see that I was going there. I never asked to be elected, I never electioneered for a vote, never. If they wanted me they would let me know.

Then came the awesome business of deciding to break my union by leaving it in 1935. Here was something I put so much hope in from the time I was a little girl. I understood that was necessary to form another union and to break away from the mother union the American Federation of Teachers. I don't think people had any idea of how awesome that kind of a

decision is when it is not a matter of personal values, it is not the money you make, it is not the position you hold, it is not the equipment you have worked with to break away from everything you believed in on the social scene. It was terrifying and it was days and nights of consideration with a handful of people, brilliant people who knew much more than I did that we decided to leave.

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REBECCA SIMONSON INTERVIEW

June 30, 1985

Tape 3

But to have solved that problem rather to have made that decision would be a better way to put it is not to have solved the problem. Here we were confronted with the old union five times the size of those of us who walked out. Really many who didn't walk out had gone through the same pangs that I had but many had just taken it on as a lark. They were flying around the city shouting and calling as though it were a parade, as though it were an experience to enjoy rather than something earnest that was calling for their participation. There was that long period over five years of not only working for what you believed in the Guild but confronting an enemy every step of the way. The old union was the prize hatchet man. There was no question at all about their giving a great deal of attention to pull in sets so there was that long span in which I was intimately driven. Driven is the word that was really very difficult and hard to go through.

The breaks in personal relationships during that period were horrible. They were unbelievable that you gave up friends whom you didn't know, of course, you had known them for a long time. You didn't know how earnestly they would take my position of having walked out of the union

that to them was the primary thing. You just had to break off relationships, we couldn't go on. People that we had been with for many years and really enjoying deep friendships. It is hard to remember and it is hard to believe. I have said countless times when people say, "Do you remember?" and I say, "I don't want to remember never want to go through that again." It goes against my every bit of temperament you know.

The people who had stayed in the union but were not Stalinists decided with the help of Professor Counts and John Childs and a group of other people in the union to bring us together. Our night meetings were long and we did not discuss ideologies, we did not talk of you said and I said and didn't I tell you and so on as these things generally go. We worked at how could we possibly get together after what had happened? How could we get together and trust each other. How could we build an organization that we fought to maintain that we had left because we couldn't maintain?

The whole question of eligibility for belonging to the Guild came up and we had to come to certain conclusions that we really didn't enjoy. No you must pledge yourself not to be a faction member, no you must not be a communist. There is no room for a communist no matter how philosophic the position is and impractical in our organization. We don't work the way communists work not from what we know. We have lived through that and we had to go through that period and was that easy? It was terrible, we were constantly trying to solve problems and we came to these conclusions and

we did get together and yes we looked with suspicion one upon the other. We worried about whether it would work, on the other hand we were terribly glad to meet some of these people. We got to love each other and I said love really advisedly they became real friends and yet there were these moments that we had to clear up. There were differences as there should be in agendas. There should be differences in emphasis that is what legislation is that is why executive boards meet.

The degree to which you bear these things as life and death issues is the great danger that confronts us. The self imposed virtues, the sureness with which I have all the answers when goodness knows there seem to be no certainties in this world. You know, it's hard awfully hard to maintain your faith. We filed them down little by little not always easily but with faith. Certainly the people that are there now are dear to me as I hope I am to them.

I had a letter from Sandy, who is not in either group this last week that was just delightful, thrilling. You know who I mean by Sandy Feldman, you feel the warmth and you feel the passion and the interest. While of course with the years many have passed away you know but I can go out and have lunch with Al and he takes the trouble to take time out. We have heart to heart talks and sometimes we disagree but what of it did you ever know situations where there isn't some disagreement emphasis mostly. For instance, in becoming political when the union takes a position for a certain candidate there were times when I didn't agree with Al either.

With the person he chose or the way he approached it but he did it awfully well and I had to admire it. I thought well maybe I don't understand up know.

I wasn't there, I was sick at that time but I am saying the Kennedy one. I remember I was in my caution and I have caution. I mean I am not one of these that boasts of not being cautious, I was afraid we had jumped the bandwagon too soon. Why? Well I wanted to know who else is jumping with me this is a political fight. I had a certain respect and also a much better politician than I am but I did not hesitate to state it publicly at the lunch meeting. Didn't interfere with our friendship or anything like that so there are times but on the whole I am deeply appreciative of Al.

I feel very worried when he leaves the presidency because throughout the years there have been moments when some of us have done pretty well you know. You appreciate what was done but there is no doubt about Al's being very sharp, very intuitive on a number of things. He has made mistakes but I understand that you can't help it if you are on something day and night year in year out. What kind of person are you to make all right judgments? You can't do it. Just as in our personal lives we overstep the bounds, we do things that are silly the same thing is true in organizations. You cannot always be right and if you were I would suspect you very deeply.

The Oceanhill-Brownsville strike in 1962 a great deal of what we were doing in New York before Al became president of the AF of T. The executive board, the vice-presidents it was a good deal of dissension. We had what I would call the liberal group which my enemies might call the radical group and the conservative group. The conservatives believe me were not conservative but in our organization they were apt to take the much more cautious step than we were on our side. It was one election for president of the AF of T on which a man from Chicago was running. He was a conservative and Chicago was always conservative and here is where our political know-how comes in. He had distributed large sheets of yellow paper saying that New York is running a typical New York campaign with Tammany Hall as an example and by that time Tammany Hall had been dead and out of fashion for a long time. I took the floor and said, "I am really not surprised that this attack has come on the yellow paper because there is Cook in Chicago and there is nothing New York can teach Chicago," and the whole convention stood up and applauded and that settled it. The convention was wonderful.

Cook was running the Tammany in Chicago. He was really the power known. From the time I was a little kid I heard about Cook. The politics you know crept in always and there were these two groups of conservatives so called and the liberals. I always like to remind my friends who listen that these people whom we cited as conservative were the heroes in their communities. Chicago for instance were leaders in organizing the union movement and had some of the most brilliant women come through that

organization. We have to be very careful when we say these things and I like to explain them not to be guilty of the popular way of doing things. A lot of the problems that exist in localities that carry into a national convention and made hay of sometimes but on the whole they are wonderful performers and great integrity. While there are differences and we don't like some people and it is not surprising we have a deep appreciation of the majority of them and how they work. When they needed and I suppose it is not altogether immodest to say when they needed a stirring up they asked me to lead it which I was glad to do and enjoyed and often met with success. There I was for sixteen years some of it running parallel to my presidency and vice-presidency in New York.

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