

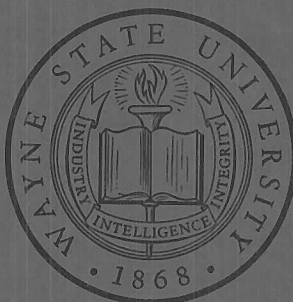
Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs

ORAL INTERVIEW

GEORGE ROBERTSON

ROBERTA McBRIDE, INTERVIEWER

SEPTEMBER 21, 1967



Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan



George Robertson - R
Roberta McBride (Interviewer) - M

Date: September 21, 1967

- M: Mr. Robertson, I'm here to ask you about your experience in Local 265. When did you start working there?
- R: In 1946.
- M: And you left the Local at what time?
- R: I left the Local in 1962 to come on the International Staff.
- M: What were conditions like in the plant when you went to work there in 1951, as far as race relations are concerned?
- R: In 1951, or in 1946?
- M: That's what I mean, don't I, in 1946?
- R: Well, at that time they had Negroes working on the machines but that was as high as they went.
- M: Was that the job at which they were hired into the plant?
- R: They were hired into the plant as janitors prior to 1946. During the war, that was when an effective order was sent out to place Negroes on the machines. Prior to that they did nothing but janitorial work.
- M: So when they were placed on machines, that would be the next step up?
- R: That would be the next step up.
- M: And that's where it stood for a while, was it?
- R: That's where it stopped until such time as 1952. That was when I made a request for the Class A relief man job. That's when I was told I would not be given the job, and I was told that was a white man's job.
- M: Was that according to the contract?
- R: No, according to the contract they have a non-discrimination clause in the contract which says that you will be promoted based on your seniority, merits and capacity.
- M: But apparently those were just words?
- R: Those were just words in the contract at that time.
- M: Well, how about the union officials? How did they feel about that at that time?
- R: Well, the union officials - well, they seemed to resent that portion, but on the other hand management, especially in Chevrolet, they had taken a hard-nosed position, and there was nothing too much the union

could do at that time.

- M: Did management have any excuse for its hard-nosed position?
- R: No. Their reason for giving the promotions to the whites was - well, they qualified, and the Negroes didn't qualify.
- M: Did you have anything to prove that wasn't true?
- R: Yes. My merits and my seniority on the job; and the fact they asked me to break in the individual they promoted to the job. This was proof positive he didn't know the job, and I did know the job.
- M: You mean that you broke them in, but then you stayed at the same classification, and they moved up ahead of you?
- R: They moved up ahead, right.
- M: How did you break that situation?
- R: Well, I, like I say, at that time there was nothing I could do about it. I explained to the Committeeman after we had been in the office -
- M: That would be a white committeeman, a member of the union?
- R: Yes, and at that time when they didn't give me the job, and I insisted on filing a grievance on it, why immediately thereafter in the next couple of days, the management told me that I was running in the court.
- M: Running in the court - what did they mean by that?
- R: Well, in going to lunch, we ate lunch in another plant than the plant in which we worked. The court is right between the two buildings. The foreman said I was running, going to lunch. This I wasn't doing. I grant you that I was walking fast. We had to walk fast because we only had a half hour for lunch. But I wasn't running. He said that I was, and placed a notation on me.
- M: That was the only thing they could think of to get you on, was that it?
- R: Yes, the supervisor came down to my job, the assistant superintendent, and the foreman and the general foreman, and they asked me if I had anything on my record. I told them, "No." "Well, you got something now," they told me. I asked them what. The notation was "running in the court." So I told them that I wasn't running in the court. So he says that they said I was running in the court, so they were placing a notation on the card, and they walked off. Now this is different from the established policy. The policy is that if you are going to be given a reprimand or a disciplinary layoff, why then they take you to the office and hold a disciplinary interview. But this time they came down on the job and told me that, and then they walked off. So I called the committeeman, but he told me he couldn't do anything about it, that he couldn't file a grievance because they had the credibility on their side, because there were two members of supervision who said they saw me running. So it was my word against their

word. That held true and the notation remained on my card. Two days later they came down, and they told me I was running scrap stock.

M: You were doing what?

R: Running scrap stock. This means that on the machine I was working on, my work was inferior, and that I had scrapped some parts. I took them into the office this time, and I took the wheel shaft to the office too, and in front of my committeeman they told me they was penalizing me for the balance of the shift and for two days. This time I told the committeeman -

M: This is the union man who should be upholding the rights of all the union members. Is this what his function is?

R: That's true. Then he didn't know that I had run scrap stock, but in observing this scrap stock, I looked, and I observed that the mark of my machine on this was a different mark. So I immediately brought that out to members of supervision, and to my committeeman, which he said nothing at that time, and then management asked for a recess, and so they went back into the office and talked about it, and came back and told me they was giving me a break this time, and to go back to my job.

M: Would you call that a break?

R: No, and I told them I didn't think that was a break, because I told them that I didn't run the scrap stock, and I pointed out that the machine the stock was run on was not my machine, and I knew all the machines by their stock number. This is one of the things that they recognized then, that I knew that I didn't run the scrap stock. So then the supervisor told me, "We say that we are giving you a break, so go back to your job." So I said, "I will have to go back to my job, but I want you to know you aren't giving me a break." So, on the outside I asked the Committeeman why didn't he say something on my behalf. He said there was no need to say anything "because management didn't penalize you. So that's the reason I didn't say anything." So I told him at that time, "I think I'll run against you in the next election." So at this time he tried to tell me I wouldn't like the union movement because you have to attend educational classes and monthly meetings, and at that time I was around 24 years old, and he told me that a young man definitely wouldn't like it. So I told him, "I think I'll like it anyway." So at this time what I did was I didn't run against him that particular year, but I spent this year educating myself to the union movement, on contracts and all that, so I really became active one year prior to me running for election. So at that time I ran for election. I was successful by 2/3 votes. I won by two-thirds votes.

M: And that was for Committeeman of 235?

R: Yes!

M: You must have got a lot more that Negro votes, didn't you?

- R: Definitely, because Negroes in the plant, I would say that they were about one-third of the plant. Then at that time everybody, regardless of what his race was, there were conditions that were existant at the time, he didn't care who it was resolved them, he was looking for some relief, so naturally they were taking a chance on me.
- M: I see. So the previous committeeman whom you beat wasn't very popular, not only because of his race policies, but for other things too.
- R: Right. He seemed to more or less want to side with management, and take their word, rather than the union member's word.
- M: Tell me, what would be a committeeman's action in a situation like that, now?
- R: In a situation like that committeeman's, you would immediately file a violation of 63A of the National Agreement. And we would process the agreement all the way through the procedure.
- M: That's the GM National Agreement that has this anti-discrimination clause? And now it's more that just words?
- R: Right. In fact, now it's stronger that it was at that time. At the time of the last contract in 1964 we have a clause in there, 63A, that states that if management violates this agreement, they will have to pay retroactively from the time they violated this agreement. Prior to that, at the time that I made my claim, there was no lost time on that, there was no liability as far as management was concerned. If the Umpire said that I should have the job, all they would have to do was to move this individual off the job, then to place me, or some other individual on the job. But now, we do have the power, if the Umpire rules, that whoever should have had the job, in the first instance, would have back pay for all the time since the violation occurred.
- M: Do you have any underlying philosophy of how Negroes should get their rights in the union? And, how they should get their rights in the company?
- R: Well, my philosophy is that according to the contract we should follow the procedure, and we're entitled to the job, and there is a procedure to follow, and we have been successful on that, in that matter since that time. And being a district committeeman, I saw to it at that time that I would file any grievance for any individual, and often, since that time, I have filed grievances for whites also who claim they were deprived of higher paying jobs. And now, at this time, there's just about the same difference - we file about as many complaints for whites that we do for Negroes, in the plant which I service. I've charged management with a violation of 63A, that they promoted the wrong individual. In fact at that time there was no Negro promoted to any job except machine-shop jobs.
- M: That's not true at all, now?

- R: That's not true at all, now. I'm happy to say that, because I feel that I might have had a little to do with it in the plants I serve.
- M: Do your jobs, does your job in servicing now have especially to do with taking care of the grievances of Negro members?
- R: My job is to take care of all the grievances of all the people in Local 235, Chevrolet Gear and Axle, Chevrolet Forge Plant, Local 262, and Chevrolet Warren Local 909. I take care of all the grievances -
- M: White and Negro?
- R: Right. And I do say that we have a pretty nice relationship in that regard, because regardless of who filed a grievance, I like to look at the grievance and not at the color of a man's skin.
- M: Mr. Robertson, I believe there are some Negroes in some unions who believe they still aren't getting a square deal out of all this. What would be your advice to them?
- R: Well, my advice would be to become active, an active union member; this is one of the things I recognize that management recognized during the years when I was first getting started, because they didn't have any union representative; well, naturally, they didn't see any reason to elevate. Well, off the record, management has told me, in 1955, when I was elected as first shop committeeman that they were more or less glad to see me on the shop committee, because, well, in talking about this they said they wasn't the ones who were discriminating - it was the union who was discriminating, because the union didn't have any active representative from the Negro race. Well, at this point I had to analyze that as such. Well, I told all the people I knew that in regards to race, creed, or color, if I could find a man who did show potential I asked him to become involved, to become active. Of course, now I grant you, there was quite a number of Negroes who once they saw I had broken the ice, they did become active.
- M: Were you, then, the first Negro to be elected to any union post in Local 235?
- R: Well, not to any union post. We had, prior to my time, we had a treasurer, a Negro. His name was Eugene Ford. Prior to him we had Jimmy White. All this, these people before my time, of course, Eugene Ford, he is still active, he is still treasurer. That's no job of no distinction; all he does, is sign the voucher for the financial secretary to write the checks out - that's all his job consists of. Being an active representative, representing the people, helping management with their problems - I was the first Negro who was elected to do that.
- M: Were you alone in that kind of a post for a little while?
- R: Yes, from 1955 until 1958 I was alone in the post, and then Joe Ganaway, he was elected to the shop committee. Then, in 1961 I was

elected chairman of the shop committee. With the exception of Joe Ganaway, all the other members of the shop committee were white.

M: What's it like now?

R: Well, now, they have about half and half, half white, and half Negro. And the chairman of the shop committee, he is colored; his name is Howard?

M: And people just don't think very much about that - don't analyze it in terms of how many Negroes, how many whites? It's just a committee, function for the -

R: It's just a committee now, looking for results. And whoever gives them results, that's what they look for. And naturally it comes with dedication to the job, a man shows himself as being dedicated, well, then he's more or less the choice of the people, rather than being held back because of his color. This doesn't exist, now, in fact, I would say all over, now in the locals I service, I couldn't say the union is discriminating now; I couldn't say management is discriminating now, in the sense of discrimination. Of course, you can look at it from a higher vantage point. Of course, we do have Negro supervisors now, we have Negroes in first aid, all the way around; we have Negroes where no Negro has been before.

M: They're not members of the union, but you think they owe the union something?

R: I would definitely say so - they do owe the union something; because of the union, they had this opportunity. And without the union they would never have been placed in these jobs, because management pointed out to me if they would have promoted the Negroes, and this had been in the past, my boss, George Merelli, this was back in the forties, when they first elevated the Negro to a machine job, there were members of the white race that told the regional director, George Merelli, that they would not work on a job beside a Negro, on a machine beside a Negro. So he went out to a meeting and told them they didn't have to work beside a Negro if they didn't want to. All they had to do was just go and tell management that they quit. But if they were going to work at a plant they would work beside a Negro.

M: I see, beside a Negro -

R:or quit. They didn't have to if they didn't want to.

M: I thought you were going to tell me a case of rank discrimination on the part of the regional officers.

R: No, no. In fact, that was one of the things I was very proud of about the regional director. I learned about this before I was even promoted to his staff, that he did take that stand, and any time now if there's a problem in regard to race or anything, he speaks out right away. He tries to stamp it out wherever he can; I'm quite sure he is doing the same thing in the whole region one, he's not just speaking out in

Local 235. That's his local - the same local I came from, that's his local also. Wherever there's discrimination, he speaks out against it.

M: Well, thank you, Mr. Robertson, for a most encouraging report on race relations at Local 235.

R: The pleasure was mine.