INTERVIEWEE: Thomas J. Starling

INTERVIEWER: George Tselos

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GT: ...University on April 22, 1980 talking with Mr. Thomas J. Starling a founding member of the United Auto Workers union and a longtime director of Region 8 of the United Auto Workers. We're going to be talking about a number of his recollections of his career in the union movement and related activities.

Mr. Starling, one of the things that I was hoping you could describe for our interview was your initial experiences going to work in the auto plants in the late 1920's and what it was that led you to your involvement in the union movement. I understand that you were involved in several strikes and in organizing efforts prior to the actual formation of the United Auto Workers local?

TS: Well, I'd say the main motive for organizing General Motors was working conditions. Although wages were low--in Atlanta we had 35¢ an hour--but I still think that the overpowering desire to organize was working conditions because we would a lot of times go to work at 7:00 o'clock in the morning and sometimes some of the employees would have to work as late as 3:00 o'clock in the next morning. And a lot of them would work until 11 or 12 o'clock. Of course there was no overtime pay or any compensation for the long hours and that was one of the things that organized the plant. But I still think the main thing was the working conditions that...I felt that I wouldn't be able to work for General Motors without the protection of the union. It would be a matter of a short time before I'd be out because I had seen some of them, some of the employees that had worked themselves to

TS: death. In my department there was one particular employee, a young fellow who was 18 years old, and he'd work so hard...He was a nervous type of fellow. And they'd get after him about his work and he'd work so hard until 4-4"30 in the afternoon he'd just drop out, just fall on the floor--couldn't go no longer. But he kept working until he got to the point to where by 9:00 he'd fall out, couldn't work. Well, of course, he had to leave the plant and he was off from work for over a year before he was able to do anything after that. That's just one example of several examples of the working conditions in the plant. They were unbearable.

GT: Was this in the Fisher Body plant in Atlanta then?

TS: Fisher Body plant, Atlanta, Georgia. Yes.

GT: And how did you happen to begin working there and what was your experience? Did you have any prior contact with unions? Had your family been interested in unions in any way? What was your first association?

TS: No, my family were farmers and knew nothing about unions. I grew up on a farm. I had just briefly worked under the jurisdiction of International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers as an electrician's helper and I had joined the union. That was the only experience I had had in the union prior to my experience in the union of Automobile workers.

GT: And what kinds of organizing efforts came about that you were involved in at the Fisher plant in the late 20's and early 30's?

TS: Well, really there was no organizing efforts as such to organize the plant until 1933. Although we had a strike in 1929. What happened was that they had some discussions the day before and some of the

TS: leaders in the union had been trying to get relief from the working conditions and also the pay. When we went to work the next morning the cards of those people were pulled and so the people refused to go to work. They just gathered at the entrance inside the plant, painted signés and had some of the workers to talk to them, speak to them and they formed a parade then down to the labor temple and asked for organization. But there was a lot of confusion and no union agreed to take us in. They said that if we were ever organized we'd have to be organized into several unions depending on the type of work that we did. Several international unions would have certain categories of work. We were there for two days and the AFL set up a committee and went out to the plant and met with management. Management agreed to take all the workers back except those that they had a list of who they contended were leaders. They wouldn't accept them back. So the committee accepted that settlement and we went back to work on those conditions. I was on that list but my foreman saved my job. I had worked in Pontiac for a short time for Fisher Body and the foreman was from Pontiac, Fisher, and he reported me out absent because of a death in my family. He told me to stay out until he'd notify me to come in. So he notified me a few days later to come back to work. There was nothing else said about that incident.

GT: At the time that this strike occurred where there was some leadership that was trying to remedy the working conditions, was this a formally organized union or just kind of a volunteer association?

TS: Just workers getting together and appointing a spokesman from their department to try to deal with management. There was no organization to it. No union involved.

GT: When the next strike came about, or, pardon me, when the organization efforts began again in 1933, was it based around the core of people like yourself who had been supporting the earlier movement?

TS: Yes, we set up a semblence of an organization and appointed stewards in different departments to help in organizing the plant and started putting out literature and getting some leaders to come out to the plant and speak to us either at lunch hour or after we got off from work and started organizing in that manner. And then we were organizing into a federal union, the AF of L. Then in 1935 the Cheverolet transmission plant struck in Toledo, Ohio. It was the only transmission plant Cheverolet had. And it was a pretty silly thing to do but we voted to go out on strike on support of them. And we did, and stayed out until they lost the strike at the transmission plant and then we went back to work. We were out for about a month. It was obvious, it should have been to everybody, that the plant had to shut down anyway because they couldn't get transmissions.

GT: Let me ask you something. You described here an ongoing effort which had its ups and downs but an ongoing effort in sympathy on the part of the workers in the Atlanta Fisher Body plant for union organization, and yet the image that people often have of southern workers is that they're so individualistic that it's very difficult to get them to have any kind of an interest in unions. How do you explain this, what seems to be different kind of behavior on the part of the people in your plant or do you think that the stereotype of southern workers is somewhat exaggerated?

TS: Well, I think it is exaggerated but it seems to be in some industries that there is more of an individualistic attitude on the part of

TS: workers. But in our industry we didn't experience much of that. We didn't have as much trouble organizing the south as other industrial unions had. It was easier for us to organize than it was a lot of other industrial unions.

GT: As you recall the people that you worked with there, did a lot of the workers come from families that had been around the city for awhile as opposed to coming fresh out of the countryside? Might that be one of the things that made a difference?

TS: Most of them came from the country.

GT: Oh, they did.

TS: Or either the extremely small towns around Atlanta. Some of them drove from 50-60 miles away into work there.

GT: They commuted to work from that far, from the countryside? That's interesting.

TS: Yeah. Some of them, they'd form car pools and come. Some of them, well, they couldn't get a car pool they'd have to furnish their own transportation.

GT: The people that you were working with, were they anxious to form a national organization like the United Auto Workers to move away from their status as a federal labor union?

TS: Yes, because the workers' position was, and I think correctly so, that we could never bargain successfully under the AFofL set up. For instance, I think in my plant there had been about nine international unions involved, each one negotiating their own contract without any overall coordination. And they didn't feel that that could be successful, that there had to be a better way, that they all had to be in the same union and the whole membership workers in the plant be

TS: behind one set of bargaining. I certainly agreed with them.And other industries have tried that type of bargaining and haven't been successful in effective bargaining.

GT: Let me ask you something. I understand that in the mid 30's when the union was being organized, that your job at that time was that of inspector and that there was a period when you were not covered by the union. Could you discuss that a little bit?

TS: Yes. Fisher Body set up what they called the Fisher Body Employees Association and started enlisting membership into it. It was the position of the company then that inspectors couldn't be covered by collective bargaining. So the union, I guess, wasn't too certain of how that issue would finally be settled. So the union, the UAW, told the inspectors to just sit tight until they settled this issue which we did. When they had the sit down strike then the union said If they don't let the inspectors into the union nobody's going back to work. We're demanding that they be covered by the union. The position was that anyone that didn't have the authority to hire or fire was eligible for the union. It was settled on that basis.

GT: Was the Fisher Employees organization a company union that Fisher Body was trying to promote in competition to the regular union?

TS: Yes, that's correct. The company bore all the expenses of the union and their set up was they had a committee that would meet with management and discuss their grievances, but they were never able to settle anything. And the leaders in the union, the manager every so often would bring them to Detroit for a session at company expense. And the manager under the set up with the company union, the manager was permitted to attend all the union meetings in an advisory capacity. So the plant manager was sitting in on all the meetings.

GT: Could you describe the response of the community to the sit down strike which your local union membership engaged in?

TS: Well I the response of the community was good. Of course there were people who opposed the unions period. But the general public, I thought, felt that we had a case and were justified in striking the plant. And to bear that out we got a lot of support from the local merchants in giving the strikers credit for groceries and things they had to have. We set up committees to go around and contact companies that the workers owed money to. In other words if a worker had a debt overdue he'd turn it over to the local union and it would be assigned a committee to go talk to the company that they owed and get them to hold off on payment until the strike was settled. And we were very successful in that. Even with the city and power, and water, and gas. We had a lot of bills set off, and house payments, car payments, and all. We were very successful in that.

GT: That is successful.

TS: And finally, we had a furniture dealer who had a chain of furniture stores, when we ran out of money, he loaned us some money to help finance....

GT: Did the company attempt, during that strike, to arouse violent opposition to the strike in any way?

TS: Not too much. There were some individuals that we thought the company might have had them do that. But, of course, we didn't have actual proof of that. But to a certain extent I think the officials there, the local officials there, just sat back and did what Detroit told them to do, I guess. And more or less took the position that it's in the hands of Detroit and they don't have to handle it.

GT: That's interesting. Was your sit down strike settled at the same time as the Flint?

TS: Oh yeah.

GT: They were settled pretty much at the same time?

TS: All settled at the same time. When the agreement was signed, I think it was February 11, it settled all the strikes and all the workers went back to work then.

GT: Did any of the people from your union, during the course of the strike, visit Flint, visit Detroit in terms of trying to keep up the communications and that sort of thing?

TS: Oh, yeah. We stayed in touch with Detroit and visited other locals too. See, our local was the first sit down strike and then I don't remember what order they came in. But Norwood's plant, Norwood, Ohio, went down and the St. Louis plant went down. And the Kansas City plant went down. In other words all the assembly plants in the south and west shut down before any of the plants did in Michigan. We were, what set us up, we were lead to believe that Michigan was organized and we were more or less holding up the parade because we were not organized, which we weren't. And so that is really what started the stir. But what finally caused the strike was some of the fellows that, two or three fellows that came in with the union button on and they made them pull them off. It was in the cusion department. And the next day they all decided to wear union buttons in the cusion department. So they all came in with union buttons on. So the head of the company union came down and saw all those buttons and he ran to the office and told them they had on buttons. So they came out of the office and told them that they'd have to pull off their buttons.

TS: And they said No they wouldn't pull 'em off; they had a right to wear 'em. So they said they couldn't work then. So they sat down. The whole plant.

GT: Had they...before they sat down had they been aware of this sit-down tactic as being used elsewhere or was the idea, as far as you know, just kind of spontaneous?

TS: No, we knew nothing about sit-down strikes. I didn't know if any of them had or not. But to us more or less the company started the sit-down in the cushion department. They said the cusion department couldn't work with buttons on. They said well we won't work then. So it's very easy to shut down an assembly line, you know, because when one department goes down, the whole plant's going down pretty soon. So pretty soon the whole plant...well, it spread all over the plant. Then it was known that the cushion department had sit down, so the sholw plant sat-down.

GT: Well, I was just getting at the question of why they sat down in the plant instead of as in 1929 or 1935 going outside and picketing because it's a very effective technique. I was just wandering what lead them this time to stay inside instead of going outisde.

TS: Well, we didn't have but about 10 percent membership and if we had gone outside we would have been outnumbered. But we had enought membership to stop the line and sit them down in the plant. And when we did that they rallied to our support.

GT: And you had the feeling when you were sitting down that you would be able to rally peaple?

TS: Yeah. Because there was a lot of resentment against the company, I mean, all over the plant. After the agreement was signed in Detroit.

TS: I think we did some of the most collective bargaining that we have ever done because the company adopted what they called an open doore policy. Anybody who had a grievance, management's door was open... come in and discuss it. So when one man had a grievance, everybody in the department had the same grievance. They'd all go to the superintendent's office and discuss their grievance and that shut the plant down. And we beat them over the head with that goo. And finally they came to the realization, you see, they didn't want us to have a spokesman. We had to do it individually...couldn't have a spokesman for the group. But it wasn't too long before they suggested that we appoint a spokesman to discuss grievances. So that lead into a grievance procedure.

GT: Is that the grievance procedure, that document, that you were describing to me earlier?

TS: That's the first one that was...yeah, that was negotiated. And I believe it was negotiated, it seems to me, like around July or August. But we got a lot of concessions before then right in the plant. You see, if a plant manager didn't produce he didn't have a job. I mean, General Motors would chop their heads off and go in and count 'em. We had a lot of changes. So they'd do all they could to try to keep the plant operating. They had to. They settled a lot of grievances. We'd get the line slowed down, a little increase in pay, and things like that. When I say increase in pay, they'd pay a little more per piece, you know. Still it'd be piece work you got over the day rate. But that taught General Motors a lesson. And they wanted a no-strike clause because they said we were striking. And that's finally when arbitration was agreed on and signed a contract with a no-strike clause except, of course, on working conditions. We always had a right to strike on that, work load.

GT: How did the members feel about the move to a no-strike clause and arbitration?

TS: Well, I think that most of them came to the realization that it had to be because they realized that too many wildcat strikes were going to hurt too many workers' pay and it would eventually backfire on us. So they accepted the no-strike clause and arbitration although I wouldn't say they exactly liked it. But they realized that something like that had to take place otherwise they might build up a lot of opposition to our methods of bargaining through shutting the plant down.

GT: Well, I'd like to continue this. This has been extremely interesting and I hope that we will be able to continue it at a future date. I think at this point, however, I'm going to have to get you to the airport so that you can make your plane.