IRVING BLUESTONE

Retired VP, UAW

Interviewed by

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TD: This is an interview of Irving Bluestone, former head of the General Motors Department of the UAW, also a board member of the UAW and many other titles that we'll get to. This is Saturday, April 22, 1995. We're now being videoed in the Okemos studio of LTS. Let's start in, Irv, just a few things. What's your personal background, where you were born, where you went to school and so on.

IB: Well, I was born in Brooklyn, New York, and went to grade school there, but high school was in Washington Heights. My dad died when I was only 12, and he was only 47, so we moved from Brooklyn up to the Bronx and then Upper Manhattan, in a section which is called Washington Heights. Then I had the good fortune to get into the City College of New York, CCNY. In those days, and I'm talking about the 1930's, during the Great Depression, there was no tuition required, books were free, and I received an entire college education for the grand total of $5 for a lab fee. And it was a wonderful education. Well, following graduation, which was in 1937, I received a fellowship to study abroad. For some reason, I had selected German language and literature as my major because I just adored the professor I had in that field. And so I ended up spending a year at the University of Bern in Switzerland, studying German language and literature, but my memorable experience there was that I purchased a used touring bike for $2, and I just toured all over the place. You know, in Europe you don't have to attend class, just pass your exams and you're ok. So in 1938 during the spring break, I planned a trip, first to Vienna, then Budapest, then Prague, then Berlin and back

all by bike by myself. I got to Vienna just a few days before Anschluss, so I was there when Hitler and the German army moved in in Vienna, and that was an experience. There are all kinds of anecdotes that I can talk about. I managed to get out when they opened the Swiss border. That experience in Austria alone highlighted my entire year abroad except for one thing. When I returned from Austria after Anschluss, I became involved in an outfit in Switzerland, in Bern, as a matter of fact, which was helping refugees come out of Germany. These were mostly Catholics, by the way. And at one time in the late spring of 1938, they held a dance, and I was invited to it. I don't want to exaggerate what I did with that organization, but, I did whatever little things they asked me to. And the highlight of that occasion was that Marlene Dietrich was invited to the dance, and when she walked into the room I walked over to her and in my best German asked if she would dance with me, and she did. Now, between what happened in Vienna with Auschwitz and Hitler marching in, and having a dance with Marlene Dietrich, I leave it up to you as to which ones I remember most.

TD: I'm sure Marlene remembered it, too. You knew enough German so you could get around well.

IBC: Oh, yes, I used to speak German quite fluently.

TD: Well, now let's jump from there, do a fast forward -- How did you get involved in the labor movement?

IB: Back in the days when I was at CCNY, there was a small group of us, three or four others and myself who did volunteer picket duty for the ILGWU and for the Restaurant Workers Union. So when

they needed some extra help they would call upon us, and, as a matter of fact, on one occasion I was beaten up by hired goons while picketing at one of the strikes at a restaurant in downtown Manhattan. But it was during the days of a great deal of fermentment on campus. Of course, the entire Depression period, the growth of the labor movement in the '30's, as a result of the Wagner Act, all of this was a matter of great concern and discussion among students at school. I refused to affiliate with any of the political parties. I said 'no' to the Communist party. I didn't join the Socialist party. I wanted to do my thing in terms of whatever I could to help in the struggle that was going on for the workers. And so when I returned from Europe, I had odd jobs here, there, and the other place and finally went to work at a General Motors plant in New Jersey, became very active in the union, was elected to local union office, became chairman of the bargaining committee, and then in 1945 the regional director for the UAW in the east, Charles Kerrigan, invited me to join his staff, and that's what I did. Subsequently, in 1947, after the Reuther caucus, to which I belonged, took control of the executive board of the union, Walter invited me to come to Detroit to join his staff here and that's how we came here.

TD: Well, that's a fascinating background. One thing I wanted to show, and I have here a book, *Negotiating the Future*, written by you and your son. Would you tell us a little bit about the aegis of this and how this developed from the very vigorous, you might say, vigorous relation of collective bargaining to one of a more

cooperative relationship. Would you go into your development and your own thinking.

IB: Well, leading up to the book, *Negotiating the Future*. In 1970, as you know, Walter and his wife, May, were killed in the air accident on their way up to Onaway, Michigan. And Leonard Woodcock was elevated to the presidency by vote of the UAW executive board, and that left an opening as a Vice President and Director of the General Motors Department of the Union. Under the terms of the UAW constitution at that time, to fill an officer vacancy in midterm between conventions required that it be filled by someone who was already on the executive board. Since I was not, I was then the administrative assistant to Walter Reuther, I called around and asked the board members to withhold filling the VP spot and met with Leonard, of course, and he said that if the majority would agree to that he would appoint me as director of the GM department. So actually that's what happened. We went into negotiations in 1970 soon after that. We began negotiations that summer, and I asked the negotiating committee for the union in GM, which is made up of local union representatives elected by their peers, to put on the bargaining table an issue which I called the establishment of a joint national committee to improve the quality of work life. And this arose out of ideas I had written about earlier and spoken about, namely, that management has to surrender some of its management's rights and see to it that workers have an opportunity to make decisions rather than simply being automatons taking orders from the foreman. We put that issue on the table that year. Of

course, GM rejected it out of hand because it would encroach upon their management rights by having workers make decisions. But in 1973 negotiations we got them to agree to it, and since then that issue has grown and moved into other areas of industry and even government, I might say. Well, in the early 1990's, my son who is a professor of political economy at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, and who has been a union member, a UAW member, he still is a union member as a member of the Writers' Union, which is now affiliated with the UAW -- he and I talked about writing this book which has to do with joint action between union and management, with empowering workers within the framework of democracy at the workplace to make decisions which heretofore had been denied them, and this is what we wrote about. We went one step further because in the book, *Negotiating the Future*, what we ultimately advocate is that there must be labor-management joint action in the decision making process with regard to how a business is run, as well as with regard to workplace decisions. And, of course, this is highly controversial.

TD: How successful is the idea?

IB: We use a few examples in the book such as the Saturn Corporation where decisions except capital investment are made jointly and by consensus between union and management. There are several other locations, very few. There's one called Harvard Industries in New Jersey, University of Hawaii, Magmacopper. But the idea of worker involvement and worker empowerment and bringing that kind of democratic spirit into the workplace has spread and today there are literally hundreds and hundreds of

situations in which the joint action process in one form or another is in effect.

TD: Looking back over years in the labor movement, would you consider that one of your main accomplishments or do you want to mention other main accomplishments?

IB: I don't know that you can talk about a main accomplishment. Let me put it this way, yes, I'm very proud of having generated interest in this and worked on it and still am, by the way. Fundamentally, the purpose of a union, as you know, is to organize the unorganized and to educate the organized, and essentially to improve living standards, working conditions, benefit structures, and advance industrial democracy in the sense that democratic values are brought into the workplace as they exist in the democracy at large. In that regard I would say that what we have done in the UAW and what has been done in other unions has been essentially targeted toward bringing democratic values into the workplace, where workers through their solidarity have an opportunity to improve their lot. This is what unionism is all about and this is what I feel proud of being a part of including, as Walter used to say, making progress with the community, and not at the expense of the community.

TD: Now, let's go beyond this. I remember at the end of World War II Walter Reuther was saying wage increases with no price increases. I assume you were part of the development of that concept. Can you tell how that came about, how the idea was developed. There must have been a lot of statistical work to come

to that conclusion, and I know you were a part of it. Can you expand on that?

IB: Well, I wasn't exactly a part of it in the sense of being in Detroit, because when the issue arose following the end of World War II when the 1945-46 negotiations were underway and we had a lengthy strike at that time against GM, I was still working at that time out of the regional office on the east coast. That was the New York office, and I covered all the way from Philadelphia up to Boston in my service assignment. However, the issue of a wage increase without a price increase was at the top of the agenda during the 1945-1946 strike at GM. Walter's argument essentially was that the wage increase that we asked for would be made up by productivity increases, as a matter of fact, even higher rates of productivity growth than the wage increase would have accounted for. Our argument was that under those circumstances, there is absolutely no reason for the corporations to increase their prices since there has been and would have been no pressure on price. That was one of the basic demands in the strike. And we were unable to achieve it. One reason was that in the steel industry, the steel workers union settled for a wage increase at that time of 18 1/2 cents an hour without any reference to pricing at all. And the UE, at that time, it was before the IUE was organized, the old UE settled similarly and that put the heat on, the pressure on us and the UAW to settle for the same amount.

TD: Did the War Labor Board go along with that or was that involved?

IB: No, the War Labor Board was not involved at that time. This was following the war and this was during the period of the strike which lasted 113 days against General Motors.

TD: What was the relation of Walter with other labor leaders? Phil Murray? George Meany? Gus Scholle? Other people like that? That's a pretty general question.

IB: At that time, of course, we were not in the AFL as a merged organization. We were in the CIO, and had a close relationship with Phil Murray as president of the CIO. We had good relations generally within the CIO. One of our problems was with the IAM in the aerospace industry, and that got worked out but not until the 1950's. So that in the period following World War II there was very little love lost, let's say, between the AFL unions and the CIO unions and the UAW, of course, was part of the CIO.

TD: Now, Irv, the other thing is the matter of unity in the UAW. Basically, and I talked about this with Doug Fraser, basically the UAW membership consists of considerable numbers of southern bible belt whites, Afro Americans, or we used to call Negroes from the south, then eastern European Catholic. Now, with that combination, how was it possible to bring about the unity that was done in the shop within the UAW?

IB: That's a good question because that unity was achieved and in large measure because of the leadership that was given by Walter and other leaders of our union. I would put it this way because I did a lot of inquiring myself in talking with folks about it. I did work in the South and I've come to the conclusion that the reason why it was possible to get a Southern white anti-Negro, as we

called it at that time, point of view to solidify behind the social and political program of the union was essentially that we were doing so well in terms of building up good living standards, decent working conditions, good solid benefits, which came about over a period of time, that those who were the bigots, so to speak, were willing to accept the union and support the union even though we were the most active of the unions in the civil rights struggle. So, it was a matter of, hey, we're getting a lot of good out of this so if they want to talk about equal rights and equal opportunity, we'll let them go ahead and do it, and Walter got their votes at the conventions.

TD: Now what about the attempts to carry that over into the community housing and neighborhood activities?

IB: We were very active in that. As a matter of fact, Walter gave a lot of leadership to these community-wide issues, these broad social issues, as a person who had a social vision as part and parcel of the vision of unionism and so, yes, our union was involved in developing low cost housing, deeply involved in the civil rights struggle and the relationship with Martin Luther King and even preceding that in the whole civil rights arena. As I say, the acceptance of this nationwide within the union, although there were hesitancies, as you can well imagine, was based, I think, essentially on the fact that we did so well as a union in meeting our obligations toward the members that members were willing to accept what they disagreed with in terms of social issues, and they did.

TD: Did the idea of working together was quite well established in the shop, how well did that carry over into housing and community activities?

IB: That was far more difficult, to say the least, and we always had problems with that, as you can well imagine. One example, for instance. When our family moved to Detroit we moved into an area which, over a period of time, began to change. As African Americans moved into the area, whites fled out into the suburbs. We tried our very best to maintain an integrated neighborhood in which there would be that kind of understanding and appreciation for living together and working together -- very, very difficult to achieve, and the union itself was deeply involved in these efforts as well as we as individuals. In the final analysis, it didn't work that well, quite frankly.

TD: If I were to use one word to describe Walter, I would use the word *global*. Would you want to comment on that? Well, for example, you said he marched with Martin Luther King, with Chavez, went to Berlin, India, but you're saying he could do those things because he had good union contracts and good grievance procedure. Am I putting words in your mouth?

IB: That's part of it. That's part of it, but also he was a great educator. One of my favorite anecdotes about Walter is that one time when I was at his home when I was his administrative assistant, when we got through the business for the day, I said, Walter, I've got a question I want to ask you. This would have been in the mid-1960's. I said, you've been president of the union now for about 20 years -- What would you say, in your judgment,

was your greatest achievement as president of the union? And without blinking an eye, he turned to me and he said, 'Irv, I think I'm a good educator.' Which is precisely what he was, aside from being a brilliant strategist, a man with social vision. He knew how to educate people to a point of view which related to the broad issues of society and the need for people working together, living together, and being together, helping each other. And in that sense he had a global view which went outside the borders of our union, outside the borders of the country itself.

TD: And even the routine of adult education of learning the grievance procedure and how to file grievances. Do you want to comment on that educational process?

IB: Well, that, of course, is one of the requirements of a union educational process. I, for instance, when I was servicing local unions, made a point of holding education classes for committeemen and other classes for the members on issues involving the contract, its interpretation, what its provisions mean, how to use the grievance procedure, but also the broad issues in which the union was involved on a national and worldwide basis. Each of us, in turn, as staff representatives, felt an obligation to do this.

TD: Now, I remember in that time union members often saying 'keep the union out of politics and keep politics out of the union'. I also heard Walter talk about the relation of the ballot box and the bread box. Would you tell a little about what the efforts were made to get union members to realize the importance of their political activities.

IB: The union right from its early period, but it was emphasized even more during Walter's period as president, had a Citizenship Department. As a matter of fact, his brother, Roy Reuther, was director of that department. Its purpose was to bring to the forefront the importance of politics, the importance of issues of a legislative nature to the workers, to the communities in which they lived, to the nation as a whole. And so there was a great effort with staff assigned for this region by region all over the country to meet with local union officials as well as local members and impress upon them the importance of the internal relationship between the ballot box and the bread box. And, by the way, we had a very important example that told that story in a concrete way. When we negotiated supplemental unemployment benefits in 1955, the idea was that unemployment compensation was there and the SUB would be in addition to unemployment insurance payments up to a given percentage of what would have been the ordinary income. Well, there were a few states which took the position that as long as people were receiving SUB, they could not simultaneously receive unemployment compensation, and we had the task at that point of getting the legislatures in those states to reverse their position, which we succeeded in doing. Again, we were able to establish in the minds of our membership the importance of politics and legislative activity tied in with collective bargaining so that in the final analysis in those states people could get both unemployment compensation and SUB when they were laid off. This is a good lesson to learn.

TD: That was a good bread and butter issue.

IB: Oh, absolutely.

TD: Now, I want to go into the really rough part of the union factionalism. Certainly, that's something everyone in the UAW was involved in in leadership positions. Do you want to go into the history of the factionalism within the UAW, how it finally got resolved and what the effect has been.

IB: After the split with Homer Martin and the UAW moving into an independent operation within the CIO, it became quite evident that there were strong differences of opinion within the UAW leadership. On the one side, there were those who themselves were not members of the Communist party necessarily but who had been given enormous political support by members of the Communist party, active within the union. And, on the other hand, there were those who belonged to what we called the Reuther caucus, and I was one of them when I was in the shop -- I was a member of the Reuther caucus right from the beginning -- who opposed Communist domination and felt that we have to make our own way, so to speak, unrelated to what was good or bad for the Soviet Union and the Stalinists. That led to a very, very serious factional fight within the union. On the one hand, there were those who felt that they needed the input, so to speak, from the Communists and from a political point of view obviously it meant votes. On the other, the Reuther group, and we called it a Reuther caucus at the time, took the position that that kind of influence is not designed essentially for the benefit of the workers. It was designed for the benefit of (and largely influenced by) the Soviet Union. Let's talk about workers' problems and deal with

workers' problems. And that's where the difference lay. Now, that doesn't mean that leadership like R.J. Thomas or George Addes who were supported within their own caucus by Communist party elements were themselves members of the party. They were not. But, the fact is that that is where a good deal of their political power came from. This was finally resolved in this way. In 1946, Walter ran for president against R.J. Thomas, a very, very close race at the convention at Atlantic City. He won with the support of the Reuther caucus by a very narrow margin. I think it was about 120-odd votes difference out of some 8,700 votes cast. But by 1947, he had been able to pull together sufficient support that in that convention the overwhelming majority of the executive board came out of the Reuther caucus and they were elected and that solidified the political infrastructure of the union so that we could pay a heck of a lot more attention to collective bargaining and members' benefits and members' wages and standard of living and working conditions without constantly bickering and fighting internally about who is going to dominate the political scene.

TD: What were the specific issues between the -- it's hard for people to realize Walter Reuther was considered the right wing and not the left wing -- but, what were the specific issues that would come up?

IB: You mention left wing and right wing, and these were unfortunate phrases, quite frankly. Walter was, by no means, what one would call a right winger. What he did, in effect, was to argue vigorously that we've got to pay attention to members' problems and move together relative to those as a union. What

were the differences in the issues? Let me put it this way. When I was in the local union we had a few members of the Communist party within the local and their argument constantly had to do with what do we do as a union and a nation which is good for the Soviet Union. Now, they didn't say this explicitly but that's what it amounted to. So, for instance, when the Soviet Union joined with Germany and divided up Poland, they supported that. We did not. They did not support the allied nations until Germany marched against the Soviet Union. Then, of course, they argued we've got to get behind the Soviet Union and support them. And we said, of course, but our support stemmed from the opposition to Hitler Germany and not simply because it happened to be the Soviet Union and the Communist party that was now involved. So that the differences of opinion that were expressed during that period of time were differences between what is the best thing for the workers within our national scene as contrasted with the Communist party which was constantly arguing what's the best thing for the Soviet Union.

TD: So that was a 180 degree turn.

IB: Oh, it certainly was. All of a sudden, to the communists, the world war became the war of the proletariat when Germany marched in on the Soviet Union. Prior to that, it was just a capitalist war.

TD: You know, it's hard to think back of those days to realize how intense they were. Now, jumping around another point, I remember one on the matter of endorsement for candidates. This was not done nationally, just by Walter Reuther and the board. I

recall the one meeting, I forget where it was in Detroit, where there were voting machines, hundreds, if not thousands, of delegates came and actually voted individually. Do you recall that meeting?

IB: No. What year would that have been?

TD: I'm trying to think when, I think possibly it was '46 or '48, but the individuals met and then debated whom to endorse and then went up secretly and each voted on a voting machine and cast the vote so it wasn't Walter or the board saying, 'here's who we endorse'.

IB: I was back East probably at that time so I was not in the Detroit area at the time.

TD: Also, do you want to go into a little more of the relation with the Democratic party particularly in Michigan as far as Governor Williams goes and then there were many UAW members of the legislature, Joe Kowalski was speaker, Ed Carey, Jack Fuller. I don't know if those names are familiar to you.

IB: Oh, of course, they are. Joe, of course, was a member of the staff of the UAW before he ran for the state legislature -- Joe Kowalski. All of us became activists in the political life of the community. When I was back East I was active and then when we moved to Detroit obviously I became active in Michigan and frankly every staff member felt a responsibility to be an activist on the political front and the legislative front so that it was a matter of getting out to the local unions and not only talking about the contract and its provisions and negotiations, but also talking about the basic social problems and which party stood for what and which candidate stood for what so that just as all the other staff people were that

much concerned, I was as well and was actively engaged in election campaigns including doorbell ringing on election day.

TD: How about running for precinct delegates? Was there much activity there?

IB: Yes. All of us, not all of us, I shouldn't say that, but many of us ran for precinct delegate. I did, and was a Democratic Party precinct delegate for a period of time.

TD: Do you remember the district you were elected from?

IB: We lived downtown on St. Aubin, which is right in the downtown area, not far from Ren Cen.

TD: There are a few other questions here. Now, at this period there was a very good working relationship say with labor unions not only the UAW but many of the other labor unions, womens groups, ethnic groups, racial groups, ecology groups, a whole broad umbrella. What's happened to that in the last year? Say in the last November election. There were a lot of books written. What's your feeling?

IB: Let me put it this way. In my own judgment, the labor movement has not done a sufficiently good educational job with regard to its own members in the political scene and as a result we have seen a 'floating away' in many respects from what the labor movement advocates in political and legislative matters. One of my experiences this past election campaign brought it home to me. I was a speaker at a luncheon on behalf of Congressman Sander Levin. There were some 900 people at the luncheon, mostly UAW folks, and I spoke on behalf of Levin. He was unable to come in from Washington for it. The response was excellent, but then

afterward, about a dozen of the members came up to speak to me, telling me that they would, under no circumstances, vote for Sander Levin. I said, 'my God, why not? You'll rarely find a fellow who, a congressman, who is as committed to labor's cause and workers' causes as Sander is. So why wouldn't you vote for him?' Well, they told me, 'because he voted for the anti-crime bill, and we can't buy assault weapons.' Now, it's true these came primarily from Macomb County, but there seems to be the need for a very expansive and vigorous educational drive to let members understand and appreciate why the union's position is so and so and what it means to them personally in terms of their life, their, and, of course, what they can anticipate for themselves and their children and their grandchildren within the framework of the union movement. I think a lot more has to be done in this regard.

TD: Do you see a coalition of say the NRA, the religious right, other groups like that in driving a wedge of anti-affirmative action, kind of an unofficial political coalition of that type taking place?

IB: I don't know if we could say there's an outright coalition. I don't know personally, for instance, what kinds of meetings, if any, are taking place between the extreme right wing and the NRA folks, but the fact is that the issues which they support are such that they have a so-called common enemy. And the common enemy are those who have a deeper social vision for the economy as a whole, for society as a whole, while they relate themselves to single issues like assault weapons and the people who support the NRA. The fact is that they have grown in significance politically within the nation which is evident by the last election last

November and what's happening in Congress currently. What's needed, in my judgment, and what has to be done is a mobilization of those forces which say, 'uh huh, that's not what America stands for. That's not where we ought to go. It doesn't mean they're wrong about everything, but the general tenor of what they stand for is designed in effect to emphasize values of greed, I want for me rather than for society as a whole, and also those values which have to do with making the rich richer.

TD: Now, you and I remember the 100 days under FDR.

IB: Yes.

TD: A lot of people don't. Now, what do you think of the comparison of the 100 days in the present congress to equate that with the 100 days under FDR?

IB: If I were looking for exact opposites, I guess I could put it in those terms. What FDR did in the first 100 days was to respond to the Hoover period, the growth of the deep Depression and the fact that people were hurting. They were starving. There were no jobs available. Everything was going to pot in the nation, and so his response was, as a nation and a people, we have an obligation to all of us, not to just a few. Today, we find pretty much the opposite occurring because what's happening, in my judgment in Congress today with the Contract with America or Contract on America, if you want to call it that, is looking at those who need it most and saying, 'it's your fault'. I'm appalled, for instance, when they say the children should not have lunches at school, that we're going to eliminate welfare because there are those who take advantage of it which means that millions of people who are

not taking advantage of it but who actually need it because there are no jobs available for them or they haven't been trained for jobs will lose out. I have that feeling that what we are losing is, I guess, what the Bible talks about, and that is, we should treat others as we want to be treated. Help thy neighbor. Be a good citizen. And it's more than just looking out for one's self and saying, you're no good.

TD: I want to show you a headline here. I don't know if we can zero in on that. This says, *Tax Bill Could Mean a Windfall for the Well Off.* Can you guess what publication that came from?

IB: I see it's the Wall Street Journal, quite unusual.

TD: Well, that is really, that is a contrast from the 100 days of FDR. What do you think is happening in the country? What about the problem with the blue collar worker? The studies I've seen from, I think, Secretary of Labor Reich, was saying the standard of living has not been increasing. Is that? Or what do your statistics show?

IB: That is true. Beyond question, there has been a growing gap between the haves and the have-nots in this nation. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer and we're losing out within the middle class. The middle class has been shrinking. One reason for that, I feel in my own mind, is the fact that the labor movement as a whole has been declining in terms of its percentage of the work force which is organized. Back in the '50's we reached a figure of about 35% of the total work force organized within unions. There's no question that collective bargaining at that point gave the opportunity for improving living standards.

Today it stands at a little under 15% and in the industrial sector only about 11%. In part, because of the introduction of new technology, in part, also, because of what happened since the Reagan-Bush administrations and the antagonism that employers have exemplified in their anti-union tactics, beating down the unions, and the difficulties that exist at the collective bargaining table in matters such as health care as one example. So that what has been happening is that one of the main forces in our national economy which has meant building up a middle class and seeing to it that there is consuming power to buy back the goods we produce has been weakened. We have to re-strengthen the labor movement.

TD: Well, now, in your period when you were active in the UAW generally there would be a rise in the standard of living and now you're saying that's not happening.

IB: That's right.

TD: So that this brings all kinds of problems, but what about it? Are we shifting from an industrial economy to some other kind of an economy? Hamburger flipping economy or something Secretary of Labor Reich said we not only have to work hard, we've got to work smart. But what is happening to the economy?

IB: The son of ours, with whom I co-authored the book, *Negotiating the Future*, had previously some years ago co-authored a book called *The De-industrialization of America* dealing with what's been happening on that front. We are still an industrialized country. With the introduction of advanced technology we have been able to increase our great growth of productivity at a pretty

decent pace although not as good as we would like and we've done that by the introduction of capital investment in equipment which, in effect, has created less need for workers who, in the past, were semi-skilled and non-skilled. So we're shifting from the need for the industrial worker in the old sense to someone who is better trained to meet the skill requirements of the new technology. What Secretary of Labor Bob Reich has been advocating is that the government and industry have an obligation to see to it that this training is made available so that people indeed can perform the jobs which the future holds in store for them. The right wing Newt Gingrich types are opposed to that and by comparison in Germany, for instance, there is a law which requires that kind of training in skill enhancement to be undertaken.

TD: What about the 50 year-old laid off auto worker? For example, Dodge Main is no longer in existence. What do you do with that situation?

IB: I am not at all convinced that the 50 year-old is untrainable. We have found time and time again that people are trainable regardless of age. The question, of course, is that the down sizing which has been taking place -- there's reason for that, true -- as new technology comes into place. The question is, at the point that people are losing their jobs by reason of that, what are we doing, as a nation, to see to it that they are re-trained and that we are creating the kind of capital investment which will allow them to seek out jobs which will retain their living standards. And we're not doing that as a nation.

TD: I learned to use the word processor in the last year, which has increased my productivity. Now, going back to your work with Walter Reuther. Do you want to tell a little more about his relationship he had with FDR, Harry Truman, LBJ, the Vietnam war, just some comments on what was happening with the whole economy. Well, Governor Williams, Senator Hart, Senator McNamara, Blair Moody, people that we all knew at that period of time. I know he was close to. We want to know how close was he to them. Did they consult him? Or what was the relationship?

IB: With most of these whose names you have mentioned, he had a good relationship and one in which, yes, they sought out ideas that he might have. By way of example, when we got into World War II, Walter came up with the idea of converting the auto plants to the production of airplanes, 500 planes a day. Of course, the industry, the auto industry said, 'not on your life -- we're going to continue to build automobiles'. But Walter was able to move to people in Washington, including FDR who were influential and it was established and proven that, in fact, we could convert the auto industry to building airplanes. Willow Run was a darn good example. Time and time again Walter had meetings with people who were in the forefront of legislative work or leadership, political leadership within the country to talk about issues. The Peace Corps was something that he discussed with John F. Kennedy and Kennedy adopted it and, sure enough, we have a Peace Corps. There were all kinds of subject matter and issues of national significance, which Walter advocated and then brought to these people.

TD: I'd like some more of these specifics. I know you were involved when you were working with Walter on many of these concepts that people just haven't heard about. When Doug Fraser was here he told us how really what was done to save Chrysler. Now, for instance, the Peace Corps, the conversion, generally, I remember about that, but would you elaborate some more on the ideas that came out of the UAW that were not just wages, hours, and working conditions, but were much more.

IB: There were many such. Walter, for instance, as I said, had this broader vision of national need. One of them had to do with the environment. It was clear and established that Lake Erie was a dead lake. We knew that the environmental problems were increasing in significance and would have an impact upon the life that we lead. As a result, Walter, as president of the union, mobilized and organized a series of conferences along the Great Lakes having to do with cleaning up the lakes, getting a decent environment and it got a lot of publicity at the time and alerted people to what was going wrong and what had to be done about it. As one example, even in a personal way, for instance, when Walter and May lived up in Rochester, there was a brook that ran near their home and it was clogged. Walter and May organized the community to come out on weekends and clean it up. It was a matter that was important to him, not only in terms of personal life right now where I am, but the life of the community and the nation as a whole. And that's just one example of many.

TD: I remember often workers were told, 'do you want to fish or work?'

IB: Well, that's essentially it.

TD: And he wanted to do both.

IB: That's right. He was a fisherman.

TD: Is there some more? We're about ready to wrap up. It's been very good to hear you and, Irv, I know there are many, many more stories you have. Is there anything you want to wind up with at this point?

IB: Well, we can wind up with so many different anecdotes. I'd put it this way -- Walter would say time and time again to business -- 'We have more in common than we have in conflict.' Ok, we'll fight over some things, but let's look at where we also have common problems and see if we can't work them out. And today we see joint action processes just growing like topsy around the country leading in that direction. Walter also, of course, took that wonderful position with regard to the social issues that are important not only to the labor movement, but to the nation as a whole which we've talked about. And in that regard, it is abundantly clear that his legacy goes not only to what he accomplished for the workers and their families at the collective bargaining table, but what he did for the nation as a whole.

TD: There are certainly terrific differences from the 1930's when management and labor were at each other's throats when people actually got killed for joining or supporting a union and now there's been a development into what you call joint action. I wonder if you would go into that a little more telling how the evolution has taken place, what you think the prediction will be for the future, also the technological change in the labor movement itself as well as the labor force.

IB: Well, there's no question that for years and years the adversarial relationshp dominated, and still does. The fact is there still will be difficult negotiations from time to time, as well as strikes. However, there is an increasing understanding and appreciation for the fact that there are, as well, common interests between management and labor. I know for myself, I never enjoyed the opportunity to be at the negotiating table with a company that was willing to open its books because it was losing its shirt. That's tough bargaining. I much prefer it when a company is profitable. It's easier then to work out the negotiating process. What has been happening, and I mentioned earlier about working out with General Motors to set up the joint national committee to improve the quality of work life. The thrust of that is that management has to understand that workers have brains. They've got experience, know how, and that just treating them from the neck down, for their arms and legs and shoulders and hands and so on, just as order takers, is not going to improve productivity or quality. Workers have a lot to offer in terms of their own experience and their know how. As a result, there has been a growing opportunity for management and labor, even as they sit at the bargaining table in an adversarial mode, to work out arrangements to open up the opportunities for employees to make decisions which previously were foreclosed to them. This has developed into a joint action process between management and labor so that, aside from seeing to it that workers now do make such decisions either individually or as work teams, in order to improve efficiency but not at the expense of the workers, to

improve quality for the benefit of everybody and to make work life more comfortable and more secure, and to provide dignity and respect for the workers which heretofore was denied them, we have the insertion, through negotiation by the parties, of the worker empowerment process. It's gone a lot further than that, however. In more recent years where problems have arisen, instead of working out a contract clause where you have every semi-colon and comma in place and every dotted *i* and crossed *t*, subject to the grievance procedure, the parties say, 'hey, here's a problem -- why don't we form a committee -- equal members, union and management, and figure out how to manage the problem. And these issues now have grown to the point where there are literally several dozen such issues in which the parties through joint action are trying to resolve an issue which otherwise would be purely of adversarial and controversal concern. Examples: one of the early ones had to do with something that I was involved in with GM. I mentioned earlier the union's demand to improve the quality of work life and creation of the joint national committee. We also proposed to GM that we establish a joint alcoholism rehabilitation program. Instead of disciplining and discharging workers suffering from alcoholism, why don't we help them overcome their affliction? Help them keep their families together, keep them as good, solid employees. GM didn't want any part of it. Well, by 1972, in mid-term of the contract, we got them to agree to it. Literally, thousands of people have taken advantage of it. Now it's called EAP, Employee Assistance Programs. Drug addiction,

alcoholism, problems at home, family problems, all kinds of issues are taken up now where, instead of disciplining people, they are trying to find ways jointly to provide the opportunity for correction so that they keep their jobs and remain as vibrant employees for the corporation. Health and safety -- the same thing -- health and safety is damn important to the work force. For years and years management took the position, "that's our business, we'll decide what to do". Today, you'll find joint action health and safety processes all over the country where union and management, workers and foremen, are using their experience and their knowhow to improve health and safety conditions in the work place.

TD: I remember the time when the employers were asked how many people worked for them, they would say there's so many hired hands there.

IB: That's right.

TD: Well, now you say we employ so many brains -- is that kind of symbolic of the attitude that's taking place?

IB: You don't hear the expression, 'we hire brains'. But you don't hear so much either 'we're hiring more hands' because there's an opportunity for clearly understanding and appreciating what value the employee has over and above what he can do with his hands. And this is true in the service-type operations, as well. And now we're getting into joint action processes with regard to child care, with regard to all of the benefit subjects. For instance, there are joint committees in the administration of the pension program. We have joint committees that are being set up with

regard to how you do the job, the methods, means, and processes of work operations. How do you improve quality? So we establish joint quality networks, and we see the results of that in industry after industry, including the auto industry, where today quality is equal to that of the imports or even superior to it. So there's a whole list of these kinds of joint action operations which are not purely adversarial in nature because the parties are saying to each other, 'hey, this is a problem that concerns us both, let's work together on it and in a co-equal setting'.

TD: Now, Irv, let's talk a little about the competition, well, NAFTA, my wife and I traveled in, oh, Thailand and Southeast Asia some, where the wages certainly aren't a fraction of what they are in the United States. What's the answer to that global competition? I think aren't engine blocks being made in Mexico now?

IB: Yes, indeed.

TD: And at what, a dollar a day, two or three dollars a day?

IB: Well, it's up to around a little over a dollar an hour.

TD: A dollar an hour?

IB: Within the labor movement what we talk about is not uninhibited free trade, but rather reasonable policies aimed at fair trade. For instance, what about child labor? We know that in Mexico, despite laws which may prohibit it, child labor is prevalent. You can go down to the Maquiladora area and you'll find child labor all over the place. You'll find the same in China. You'll find prison labor in China and the exporting of products which are made by prison labor. The question is, how do you establish a system of trade, which is, of course, vitally important, so that it is fair? And, by

fairness, we mean that there would be the opportunity for unions to organize and to bargain in a free society, which means that there would be the opportunity to improve living standards, increase wages and benefits, and improve working conditions. There is always the question also, and we're going through this with Japan right now, of saying, 'ok, so you're not imposing a tariff on our exports, but you've got other ways of blocking our exports. For instance, in the auto industry, every single car that's exported to Japan is examined and inspected by the Japanese, and they charge for that -- into the hundreds of dollars per unit, which increases the price. Or, we had a situation not too long ago in which one of our industries wanted to make arrangements to sell its product in Japan. I think it was batteries, and arrangements were made with wholesalers and retailers in Japan. The battery manufacturers in Japan simply went to these wholesale outlets and retailers and said, 'if you sell American made batteries, we're not going to sell you our batteries.' That's one way of stopping the importation of our batteries. That's unfair trade, and so it's a question of developing in the negotiating process with these countries a fair trade approach to free trade.

TD: Now should that be done country by country? Or union by union?

IB: Well, it has to be done country by country, although obviously the internationalization of unions is also vitally important.

TD: But within the joint action that should basically be done by labor and management without legislation or should it be legislation also?

IB: Part of it obviously can be managed through labor-management negotiations regarding outsourcing, for instance or leading towards some kind of conclusion through the joint action process. But, in the final analysis when you're dealing with a foreign nation and trade with that nation, it has to be done at the governmental level.

TD: But as far as retraining programs, that's labor and management and there's a need for some governmental input on the training.

IB: It would help to have governmental input as is being advocated by Bob Reich in the Department of Labor, on the basis that we've got to train people to the new technology so that their skills are highly developed and can be utilized in job openings. But in addition to that, training and development and enhancement of skills is being done in many, many locations today through the joint action process. Right now, for instance, in this area in Michigan, there is a manpower skill and development center which has been put together between the UAW and Ford Motor Company. They have a separate building in Dearborn. They also have offices down at the Renaissance Center in Detroit. Union and management representatives together are constantly coming up with ideas as to how to advance and enhance the skills of the employees.

TD: Let's jump to another subject. We talked a little about in World War II there was that tremendous unity after Pearl Harbor. Walter Reuther took the lead in saying there should be conversions instead of building entirely new war plants. The Vietnam War there was not that unity. Were you involved very

much in the discussions on Vietnam? What was the, well, relive back in that period of time compared to World War II.

IB: Yes, I was involved. Our son, Barry, was a leader in Ann Arbor, at the University of Michigan, in the anti-Vietnam War movement. Within the UAW, I was deeply involved in this sense. At one time, there was put together a nation-wide, union movement against the Vietnam War. A conference was held in Chicago. I attended it with Emil Mazey. There were differences of opinion, by the way, within the labor movement, as you know, concerning support for or support against Vietnam. But in 1967, at the Democratic Party Convention, Walter Reuther asked me to join with one other person who is outside the labor movement, in writing up a statement on Vietnam. We did that. And it was then given to the leaders within the Democratic Party asking for their approval so that it could be brought to the convention for passage. We couldn't get agreement to it, in part because President Johnson, of course, was putting his pressure on everybody at the same time. But then an interesting thing happened. I don't know how many people know about this. After the convention was over and Hubert Humphrey was nominated as presidential candidate, he went home for the rest period before getting out on the campaign trail. He called Walter and asked if Walter would come out to his home in order to discuss the campaign, the issues, etc. Walter asked me to accompany him. I was then his Administrative Assistant. We visited with Hubert at his home in his study and they were talking about the various issuees that would be coming up in the campaign and how to handle them.

And Walter made a very sharp point that Hubert Humphrey had to come out with a statement on the Vietnam War which would be antagonistic to what Johnson stood for. Humphrey's immediate reaction was, 'if I do that, Johnson is going to take me on and we'll lose Texas and we'll lose the South.' However, he was finally convinced that something had to be done. So before we left he asked Walter to have a statement drawn up and sent to him. Walter assigned me to see that such a statement was written and two other fellows on the staff and myself wrote it and gave it to Walter. He did his 'Reutherese' editing and sent it off to Humphrey. I happened to be in Walter's office a couple of weeks later when Hubert Humphrey called him, told him he'd gone over the statement and it was right on target, as Walter explained it to me. Humphrey said, however, that it sounded a little too much 'Reutherese' and he wanted to change it to sound more like Humphrey. It was agreed in that telephone conversation that he would make that speech by Labor Day. He didn't do it. He did address the subject a few days before the election, but it was too late, and all of us at that time who knew about this, were convinced that, had he followed through earlier, Hubert Humphrey would have won the election.

TD: And that would have been a watershed election. How do you explain that LBJ was so terrific on civil rights, voting rights, race relations, really, but for Vietnam, I think his picture would be on Mt. Rushmore, and then on Vietnam got so far off. How do you explain that?

IB: I can't, quite frankly. As we know, LBJ was...

TD: Let me interrupt. Do you agree that he was terrific?

IB: Oh, absolutely.

TD: He did what Kennedy made speeches about, he implemented. Do you agree with that?

IB: No question about it. He was excellent on the basic issues you name, in terms of the national issues of social significance he was right there. I don't know how you explain the Vietnam thing except perhaps to say that Johnson was the kind of individual who, once having made his mind up that he's going to do something in this and this way he just went ahead and he pushed everybody aside. And that's what happened on Vietnam. Once he was committed, he was going to make it go.

TD: And Humphrey and Walter had always been very close. Is that correct?

IB: Yes, very, very close relationship between Hubert Humphrey and Walter.

TD: And Eleanor Roosevelt the same?

IB: Even more so. With Eleanor Roosevelt, the Reuther family each summer spent a long weekend with her at her home in New York. Walter would tell me about these visits. There was general discussion between Eleanor Roosevelt and himself concerning basic issues of national significance and international significance. There was extensive conversation. The two girls, Linda and Lisa, were there, as well as May, and it was a very warm and -- I don't know how to put this -- but, it was a question of each having such deep respect for the other that that friendship grew not only because there was good personality between them

but because their thinking and their vision and what they talked about was consistent with their beliefs.

TD: How about the relation with FDR?

IB: Walter had a good relationship with FDR, although this was a period before I became his Administrative Assistant. And, of course, I was still in the East during that period. But what I did learn in my long association with Walter when I became his Administrative Assistant, was some details of conversations he had had with FDR -- it was a good solid relationship -- and any time that he had something to say, he had no trouble getting an appointment with President Roosevelt.

TD: How about Harry Truman?

IB: I think that the relationship there was equally good in the sense that again if Walter had an idea and he wanted to convey it, he had no trouble getting into the White House or getting in to speak to the people closest to Truman. But here, again, I cannot speak from personal experience.

TD: Walter had, it's hard to put, I want you to elaborate on how that almost the genius of the ideas that came out of that man. Now, I think you're too modest, in fact, certainly you made a contribution to those ideas and developed them. How about his staff work? Did he encourage people to come up with ideas, Walter?

IB: Always. Nat Weinburg, who was the Director of the Research Department, at some point said, 'Look, I don't want to do this administrative work. I want to do thinking and grapple with new ideas'. So we brought him up to the president's office, and his task essentially was to deal with the economics of the various

industries, the nation and the world and come up with ideas. One thing about Walter which was so interesting and fascinating is that if he came up with a notion, he loved to have you come in and tell you, 'I've got an idea, and I want you to oppose it.' And we would sit there for hours on end, either at his home or in his office, and I would play the devil's advocate, so to speak. And he did that with other staff people. The idea was that he was testing his notions, his ideas. And at the point we had something to say, which might cause him to change it in some fashioin, he would give it deep thought.

TD: He didn't feel threatened by your challenging him.

IB: Quite the contrary. He invited people to come in and tell him what they think.

TD: Now you and Nat Weinberg played that role. Did Jack Conway? Was he involved?

IB: Jack was the chief administrative assistant to Walter before I became his assistant. When Jack left to join the national office of HUD is when I was invited to take his place. That was typical of Walter. He wanted to have in depth conversations and discussions about ideas and notions. You know, even with regard to the slogans that we put around the convention hall, I would write many of them when I was his assistant and bring them to him. We'd just sit for minutes and minutes on end talking about the right words to use. And one of my favorite little anecdotes about Walter was we always kidded him about the fact that he could never say something in brief. You know, they used to take bets on how long his speeches would be.

TD: I think it was you ask him what time it was, he'd tell you how to make a watch.

IB: That's right. Well, on this particular occasion we were in national negotiations and we settled. And we had to send a telegram to the local unions about their turn now to intensify their local negotiations, etc. So Walter asked me to write up the telegram message, and I did, and I gave it to him. He said it was too long. I said, 'well, if you think it's too long, why don't you take a shot at it.' We ended up betting five cents that when he got through his would be more wordy than mine. He beat me by one word.

TD: By one word! Now, another thing, I felt that Horace Sheffield was given a great free hand in the whole field of race relations, and Horace believed in real integration in the best sense. Is that correct?

IB: Yes.

TD: And that Walter backed Horace when he was very active, I'd say, members from the deep south were not particularly sympathetic. Is that a safe statement?

IB: Yes, it's a safe statement. As I pointed out earlier, our members in the south or the leadership in the south didn't protest vigorously against our convention resolutions on civil rights or anything like that because they knew what we could do at the bargaining table. But when we got to Horace, it wasn't Horace alone. Bill Oliver was director of our department in that regard. Horace was, of course, extremely active in the community in the development of organization as well as within the union. And I

might tell you that at one point in the 1950's Walter specifically asked Leonard Woodcock to put Horace on his staff and then Horace would have the freedom to get done what he felt was vitally important. And he did a magnificent job.

TD: I had planned to interview Horace and had talked to him very recently. I'm just very sorry. I had great respect for him.

IB: I attended his memorial service.

TD: Now, as far as the role of women, certainly there was a certain amount of male chauvinism, a certain amount of Archie Bunker. Now what was the role of Millie Jeffrey? Was she given somewhat of a free hand in the sense that Horace Sheffield was in women's rights or Odessa Komer, the head of the recreation department.

IB: Olga Madar.

TD: Olga Madar, I knew very well.

IB: Actually, it was Olga who was the mainspring of our efforts within the union for the whole feminist movement. Millie Jeffrey was active in the Democratic Party primarily and did a lot of good work in that area, but as far as internal union efforts were concerned, Olga Madar was, as I said, the mainspring. And she was put in charge of the Women's Department when we first organized the Women's Department as a separate department from the Citizenship Department and she did an outstanding job in pulling that together and making it an effective instrument within the framework of the union as a whole with the full support of Walter.

TD: Olga developed the actual women's family camp for FDR. She did an excellent job. I was very fond of her. So, I think really that

Walter not only did a good job, but he had the ability, well Guy Nunn was another person that was a very unusual person, very competent, and I don't want to put words in your mouth, but Walter was not only competent himself, but he, what is the Peter Principle, you hire people dumber than you are. Well, maybe it was hard to find people smarter than Walter, but he did not feel threatened by having competent people around him.

IB: Quite the contrary. Walter wanted competent people and extraordinary people around him, in my judgement, because they had ideas which he fed upon. Or his own ideas were fed to them and he wanted reaction. Guy Nunn, as you know, during World War II, was a captive of the Germans and he escaped. He was a remarkable individual and headed up our radio department. We had regular radio programs. We had regular TV programs. Eventually, they became too costly and we also got so much opposition from the field within the telecommunications industry that we finally had to eliminate it.

TD: What was the opposition?

IB: Oh, we had trouble getting radio stations to accept our program, even when we paid for it. Eventually we donated our radio station to Wayne State University. It still operates as WDET.

IB: TV was the only one we could get, and the radio programming we had difficulty trying to get into cities where we had a good number of our own members, so it was a constant hassle.

TD: But I think that the contribution there that was made it's now, again, people say what would Walter do if he were alive today. I think that's too simple a question. Well, there is the great man

theory of history, but certainly Walter made a contribution and you were a very integral part of that. I think you're being too modest.

IB: Well, for the period of time from '61 until '70 until he died, when I was his Administrative Assistant, I was involved, of course, in all the basic operations within the union as well as all major collective bargaining. I think from my own point of view what I enjoyed especially in that work was that very frequently I would be at Walter's home. Let's say he'd been away for three or four days and he'd call and ask me to bring the mail out and discuss whatever problems had come up in the office. Anything of major significance within the union came through my desk at some point. Walter would call me in to talk about it. The conversations with him at his home were an enjoyment all by themselves. We discussed not only what was going on in the union, but what was going on in the world, what was going on in the nation. He would discuss all kinds of issues and ideas that he had and he would ask for ideas that I might throw at him. One subject, for instance, we have an educational center up north, near Onaway, Michigan and it's called the Walter and May Reuther Family Education Center, family education, ce- I was at his home, We were discussing the UAW's educational program. And what we were saying to each other, in effect, was that we've got to develop an expanded educational program so that we can develop on-going leadership and future leadership in the union. And we came up with the notion that we would set up educational centers around the country, geographically, so that in the regions they would be

able to get leadership to these educational centers where people would be taught what we do as a union, what we stand for, what the issues are, etc. In the course of that conversation, his wife, May, was listening in. She said, in effect, you know, there's one thing missing in your discussion. What's that? She said the people you're talking about are constantly at meetings, they're away from home, they're travelling here, there and the other place, they're in negotiations, and as a result their spouses, in that case the wives because we didn't have very many women in leadership at the time, they begin to resent them being away so much. Why don't you establish an education center where the entire family is present so that everybody is participating?

TD: That was May's idea?

IB: It was May's idea, and it was adopted at our convention. As a matter of fact, I wrote the convention resolution, and it is called the Family Education Center. And so anyone who attends the center now for educational purposes brings the entire family. We have a children's camp right along side and the spouses will attend the educational classes along with their husbands.

TD: So there was not the resentment or the feeling the man's off having a wonderful time and the mother's home taking care of the kids living on hot dogs.

IB: That's part of it. The other part of it is that the spouse is getting educated as to what the union stands for and is more accepting of what we stand for.

TD: And then can be part of the leadership back in the community.

IB: No doubt.

TD: Now, Irv, you're a young, what 78, now?

IB: Yes.

TD: Now, what do you plan to do the rest of your life? What have you been doing since you've retired?

IB: Well, my wife, Zelda, keeps telling me that I flunked retirement.

TD: You flunked retirement.

IB: I've been retired 15 years, and I've been at Wayne State University ever since. I was invited by the president of the school and was free to do whatever I wanted to do. I've been teaching in the master's degree program in industrial relations -- very, very interesting. Of course, I'm involved in all sorts of activities outside the university, as well -- speech making, serving on various committees and commissions, etc. How long I'll keep it up? I don't know. Doug came into Wayne three years after I did, and we've talked recently about how long are we going to stick around? Well, we haven't made a final decision.

TD: I'm having somewhat the same problem. I'm trying to cut down from 9 days to 4 days, and I guess it's, you're not going to be in a rocking chair.

IB: No, but I have made a commitment which I haven't kept yet to my wife that I'll take one day off a week. I haven't done that yet.

TD: Well, that's a good start.

IB: Ok.