

Interviewer: Steve Babson

Interviewee: Flora Walker, AFSCME District Council 25. Detroit, Michigan

Date: April 30, 1983

Transcribed by Meghan Courtney, January 16, 2015

Flora Walker: Flora Walker.

Steve Babson: And what's your position?

FW: Field Staff Supervisor, Tri-County Area.

SB: Okay. Flo, why don't you tell me what the prevailing conditions were as you recall them among clerical workers employed by the City of Detroit before AFSCME organized the clerical workers?

FW: Well, prior to 1966, the Detroit clericals had no organization and they were at the mercy of what was the Civil Service Commission. But it was still the old merit system, with favoritism on the job, relatives connections, and you didn't have guaranteed rights, such as promotions through seniority, job security, step increments.

SB: Wait, hang on a second.

FW: Okay.

SB: When you say favoritism, what do you mean by that?

FW: Supervisors, particularly, they had favorite employees. Some employees they gave special time off the job, if they came in late that was okay, if they didn't come at all that was okay, depending on who you knew, how you dressed, those kinds of things.

SB: Was it political ties also?

FW: Yes, it was political ties, because of the Mayor's ability to put who they chose in jobs.

SB: So one of the things I'm curious about is what was Mayor Cavanagh's relationship to all this? He was a liberal mayor, after all.

FW: Basically he was, and I think he had a lot to do with the union's being able to organize. He was political enough, though he didn't want damage done to his reputation because he was a new mayor, and not a well-known person. And so he wasn't really what you would

consider anti-labor. I would say Cavanagh was the best mayor as far as I was concerned, in terms of labor.

SB: So you didn't feel like you were dealing with a hostile top manager.

FW: True.

SB: What about department heads and further down you go in the management hierarchy?

FW: Well, naturally they rejected the union, because number one they were not familiar with it. They didn't have to deal with it before, and they always saw the union as a threat because of the UAW history, and knowing that labor had enough clout to make some decisions on the job. So they rejected that automatically.

SB: What proportion of City jobs were civil service?

FW: Well, in '66 I remember basically the majority, excluding the appointees, were supposed to be civil service.

SB: So what did that mean in practice?

FW: In practice, no, it was different. In practice it was the patronage system. Depended on who you knew, what kind of connections you had. People were hired, true enough, but they were in the low, entry-level positions. Promotions were the biggest issues, because once you got into the city and you were working, you could stay there basically for the rest of your life. If you came in as a clerk – a junior clerk – you could promote to a clerk and you'd be a clerk for the next 25 years unless you knew somebody.

SB: Okay. But did civil service prevent you from being laid off?

FW: Layoffs were unheard of at that time. When I talk about job security I mean being able to keep a job based on your ability to perform a job. It was not done that way. You kept the job based on who you knew and who liked you. If people didn't like you, you got fired.

SB: Okay. So you could be fired?

FW: Oh, of course you could be fired.

SB: Okay. What was the pay at that time, for City Clerks and Clericals?

FW: If I remember correctly it was about, maybe - less than 5000 dollars a year during those years.

SB: I didn't know that.

FW: I think that's right. And here in, let's see, 1983, the average clerical employee is making probably about 16,000 dollars. That's not what the papers say, but that's what it actually is.

SB: What about benefits? Compare then and now.

FW: The benefits, I think they're graduated as far as the amounts for each benefit is concerned, but benefits were normally a part of the civil service system. So they were basically there. We didn't have that many new benefits added as relates to the union, but they were improved by the union.

SB: So in civil service you had no layoffs and you had civil service benefits but low wages.

FW: Right.

SB: So the attraction of the job was the job security?

FW: Job security was the attraction.

SB: What departments had the largest number of clericals? When you were approaching the City of Detroit and you were looking at the strategic departments where clerical workers were concentrated, where would you see that?

FW: In the City-County Building. You couldn't define it down to departments, but the City-County Building was a target in a number of departments. It was spread out pretty equally in the departments. The department I worked in was Buildings and Safety Engineering, and we had about a hundred clericals at that time, in '66.

SB: -Inaudible-

FW: Michigan Bell Telephone Company. I worked for Executive Staff. In fact, I left Bell because - I had worked for Bell for ten years. At Bell Telephone Company I was making \$101.50 after ten years. And City Typists started out at \$102.50, so that's why I went to the City.

SB: I see. Did you have experience in the union at Bell?

FW: None.

SB: None? How come?

FW: I was an Executive Secretary - not in the bargaining unit.

SB: I see. Okay. So how did you get active in AFSCME?

FW: Well, as an Executive Secretary to a District Traffic Manager, he received grievances. So I knew there was a union at Bell and he had to answer grievances. It seemed to me that was a good mechanism for employees. So when I went to work for the city, because I had been indoctrinated at Bell Telephone. You know, at Bell Telephone we had little white gloves and a little hat and we had to dress properly and all that. When I went to the City, there was a

more relaxed, casual kind of dress. The first day that I was on the job my supervisor told me that I didn't have to dress like that – that we don't dress that way here. It seemed immediately that I was a target for her harassment. So I had a probationary period to do, and I wanted to do it safely. I started to ask around about a union. People were telling me that we didn't have one, and the only people who did have one was the garbage workers. I found out it was AFSCME, and I called AFSCME, and they said yes, they were interested in organizing clericals. So we started an organizing drive.

SB: So how did you start an organizing drive? What was the first –

FW: Well, we had to go around and get employees to sign cards saying they wanted to have an election. And it wasn't easy, because most of the employees associated themselves with management. What happened that helped us a lot was this particular supervisor that harassed me – I chose the people that she did harass. And I started from that.

SB: You started a committee?

FW: We started a committee based on the people that she harassed continually.

SB: Was this in just your particular department, that you were organizing, or –

FW: That's where we started organizing. We were the very first department to organize, in regard to clericals. Traffic Employees, they had organized under AFSCME, but they weren't considered like a part of the City. They were over in traffic court all day. They were City employees, but they had a unique classification. In fact, they helped us, because they lent support in telling us what to do. It took a while for us to organize our one department, but after that it was easy.

SB: Your particular department?

FW: Yes.

SB: Okay. So why don't you describe the circumstances of that particular slow down that you referred to earlier?

FW: Okay, the slow down. I don't know which one you're talking about, because there were several.

SB: In 1966, it was when they went from 35 to 40 hours?

FW: Oh, okay. That was a little later than '66, though. I think it was about '68, because we had organized already.

SB: Okay, we'll get to that in a second then. What was the number of clericals that AFSCME was targeting, in the campaign that you were active in?

FW: At that particular time - just 100, at that time, because they had a departmental bargaining unit. The City, like I said, they were unfamiliar with the new laws, so there was a union. They started organizing department by department rather than city-wide. In fact, Cavanagh had a lot to do with that because the teamsters were also interested in organizing City Employees.

SB: I see. So - and so Cavanagh preferred AFSCME over -

FW: No, he didn't make a preference. Because there were other unions involved, he said that the City of Detroit, each department constituted a bargaining unit. And that was ironed out before [Inaudible] I guess that split up the pie for any union that could win the election.

SB: I see. So it was really just one department after another, not a single large campaign?

FW: That's right. The only single large campaign that I recall was the one that was for the Water Department and DPW, and that was a Teamster/AFSCME battle there. At that time the teamsters basically left the clerical people alone.

SB: I see. So the Teamsters were battling with AFSCME for certain departments.

FW: Right. Water Department and DPW.

SB: Who won that?

FW: Well, AFSCME won the Water Department and part of DPW. Teamsters, naturally, have the driving classification so it's easy for them to win the truck drivers.

SB: I see. Okay. So you're organizing now in 1966, and you're, initially, running into some hesitancy among clerical workers.

FW: Of course.

SB: Why don't you try to recall some of the things people would say?

FW: Well, they were afraid to, first of all, sign the cards. They were not familiar with the union. I was new to the department, I was not familiar with the union and it wasn't easy to tell people why we should have a union but I did know that it would give us a way to address our grievances. And the employees themselves would say we don't need a union, we don't want to pay union dues, they deal with garbage workers, we don't want to be with garbage workers, we're professionals. Over and above that it was just fear. It wasn't so much fear that we didn't accomplish our goals, because they did see a need to have some kind of mechanism. Because the Buildings and Safety department at that time was basically all white. It was [inaudible] like department. In fact, in the testing mechanism you had to make a certain score on the test to even go to that department, and I didn't find that out until a lot later on. So you have a department that was considered the cream of the crop area for working conditions, but that was the first one to be organized.

SB: That's interesting. What proportion of the clericals were Black and White?

FW: Well, when I went into the department I would say there were approximately 100 people there, maybe a little more. And out of that there may have been 15-20 Blacks.

SB: What was your answer, when people would say, "we want to be professionals, we don't want to be with garbage workers, we don't need a union?" What were the kind of grievances, specific kinds of problems that you'd focus on?

FW: Well, I'd ask them "How are you going to get your next promotion? Are you going to have this supervisor evaluate you? To determine whether or not you can get promoted? If so, how are you going to get promoted?" Promotions were the key answers to the clerical people, because every job was just a dead-end job unless you had connections.

SB: I see. What were the – what was it that the union could do that would be an alternative to the evaluation of the supervisor?

FW: In my opinion, enforce the civil service regulations themselves that would allow you to be promoted under the system – if everybody followed their system.

SB: I see. And that system was?

FW: You could take a promotional competitive examination. If you scored high – wherever you scored, that's where you would be on the list, and if you [inaudible], you would get it. And that was already there, it just wasn't utilized.

SB: They just wouldn't give tests?

FW: They'd give tests, okay, but you'd have a hard time finding out how you scored, or where you were on the list. And I'm talking about taking the test one week, and maybe not knowing for months where you were. Then the next thing you know, somebody's promoted to the job and it's not you.

SB: And it's never explained why.

FW: Right.

SB: I see. So promotions really were –

FW: That was a key issue with clericals. And I think that's still a key issue with clericals.

SB: Okay. Now, when you would enter into a clerical position, what would be your job title and what would be the titles above you that you'd be hoping to promote into?

FW: Okay, generally the City would hire into what they would call entry-level, junior positions, but when I was hired there was a need, evidently, for the classification of typist. So you didn't have to hire in as a junior typist. You took the test as a typist, and they needed typists badly because the same day I took the test, they scored the test and wanted you to start 2 weeks later. Think of the junior typists now, that were already there on board, who could have been promoted to typist but were not.

SB: I see. What was the difference in pay between the junior typists and the typists?

FW: I can't remember back then.

SB: \$102 you did remember –

FW: I knew that specifically because of Bell Telephone Company [Laughter].

SB: I see. So the \$102 was which position?

FW: Typist.

SB: Okay. What was the position above typist?

FW: Senior Typist.

SB: I see. And these were simply pay gradations, or did they change job responsibilities too?

FW: Just pay. Clericals basically do the same thing all over the City of Detroit. There really is no need for the separate pay scale, but it's there, based on seniority. That was a way to compensate people for years of service, supposedly. But if I'm hired in new as a Typist, and you've got Junior Typists who've been there a year, or two years, and haven't been promoted to Typist, that's not –

SB: So there was no seniority and there was no open access to the testing.

FW: That's right.

SB: What would be above a Senior Typist?

FW: Then we would go into what they considered the management series, like Principal Clerk, Head Clerk, those kinds of positions. You never got those.

SB: I see. Clerks were outside the bargaining unit?

FW: No, Clerks were in the bargaining unit - after we organized, and Senior Clerks were in the bargaining unit. But Principal Clerk, that's the supervisory level.

SB: I see. And were those mostly filled by men, or women, or --?

FW: When I entered the department, they were mostly filled by men. There was the one female supervisor, who started our organizing drive [Laughter].

SB: Management does provide the best organizing –

FW: Yes!

SB: So, has that changed?

FW: Yes, most definitely. In fact, it's just the reverse now. In that same department, all the Principal Clerks are female excluding one. Even the Head Clerks and the Division level people are female too.

SB: Why is that? How has that changed?

FW: Well, I think it's – let me think about that. Well, basically I guess you'd say it's because more women have become heads of household, and you know working – they started working probably in the same time I did and now, in the system, they've graduated to that point. Along with the Affirmative Action Program that's been instituted, too, it had a lot to do with that.

SB: Okay. And would the union be in there, insisting on seeing –

FW: Of course. That was a negotiating process that we used in our contract, to guarantee promotions by seniority, to include the affirmative rights, when that came into play. The union had a lot to do with that.

SB: All right. What about the – so, we've now gone through the dialogue. They would say their hesitations, you would say well, how are you going to get that promotion. Did you finally then – what was the procedure by which the union was finally certified?

FW: Oh, that happened after we collected enough cards. We needed 30% of the number of people in the department to file a petition. We accomplished that because finally enough people thought about those promotions and signed the cards. It was funny how they gave them back. They wouldn't give them to you openly – they'd leave them on your desk or they'd mail them to your house, but they'd give them to you. So after we filed the petition, we needed 51% of the people to vote. We got help there, because some of the departments started to really crack down on the people that were involved in the organizing drive, and they became really tight on the rules in ways they'd hadn't been before. In other words, you couldn't drink coffee at your desk, you couldn't have a personal phone call, you couldn't leave your desk without permission – and when they started that, naturally, then, people were upset. And that helped us get the vote for the union. Then when we did, the rules went back to being relaxed, as before.

SB: Right. So what was the vote?

FW: I don't remember the exact vote, but it was not a close vote. The union won overwhelmingly in that department. I think it was really based on that one supervisor's help. She really helped us a lot. We should have hired her [Laughter].

SB: Yes. [Laughter]. So then we come to this slow down. We've got 5 minutes.

FW: Okay. Under Gribbs?

SB: Roman.

FW: Okay, that was '68 then, right? Or was it -

SB: Let me see - '69.

FW: '69? All right. Well, that was the year we had the slow down, because Gribbs wanted to put the 35-hour employees on a 40-hour work-week. And that Department - Buildings and Safety - just decided no, we're not going on a 40 hours. And we were not allowed to strike, so we had what we considered a slow down. We'd sit at our desks and do nothing. Then we had a pattern, we had a program, where one person would get up and go to the water fountain, and then come back, and we'd start all over again, go to the ladies' room, and we did that all day. We would not answer phones. And then the order came - well, Jack Kelly was the deputy in Buildings and Safety and he didn't want to work 40 hours either. He went up to Gribb's office and said, "Look, these employees are on a slow down. The newspapers could come in about it, because nobody was answering phones," and he says, "We just can't have this, and you'd better do something." And Gribbs says, "Well, we'll go back to the 35-hour work week."

SB: I see. Was this when he had first come into office?

FW: It must have been. My memory is bad on what mayors -

SB: Yeah. When he instituted the - went from 35 to 40, what happened to pay?

FW: Well, the pay remained the same.

SB: So you were all on salary, and the pay didn't change?

FW: Uh huh.

SB: So it was just a unilateral - work more for the money.

FW: That's right.

SB: Was that what he introduced in other departments?

FW: Well, in the City-County building itself, everybody worked the 35-hour work week because of the County. The County had different hours and they worked the 35-hour work week, and they were trying to be consistent with the building. The building would open and close at the same time. So that was how it originated in the first place. The County Council took action. Now this was before a contract too – that those employees would be allowed to do that, work the 35-hour work week in the City. When we went into negotiations, which was in '67, we had gone with that in the contract and expanded it. So basically the majority of the clerical employees worked the 35-hour work week unless they were in satellite areas from the City – out in the neighborhoods.

SB: I see. Is that still true now?

FW: Basically, it is. Right.

SB: Okay. Just a couple little details: when you had your election, was that '66, in your particular department?

FW: Yes.

SB: And how many of the surrounding – if you were the first, how long did it take before, say, all the clericals were –

FW: '71, I think, we finalized the entire clerical sector.

SB: So it took a while?

FW: Yeah.

SB: How many clericals are now organized under AFSCME in the City?

FW: All of them, except the ones in the airport, and they're teamsters. But, basically all of them. Now, if you're talking about figures I just can't tell you. I would say at least 3,000 to 4,000 clericals, because the bargaining unit is about 9,000.

SB: I have 2 minutes. When you look around and you see the kinds of things that make people – encourage them to take the risk of identifying with the union – at that time, what kinds of surrounding events or people, maybe from the UAW or garbage workers – what kinds of things were making people feel encouraged about joining the union?

FW: I think the kinds of organizing drives that we put on had a good deal to do with the balance of the employees coming in, because the leafleting – one of the key things that AFSCME projected was “collective bargaining instead of collective begging.” And everybody was familiar with the past and how you got promotions. I think everybody was just a little bit tired of having somebody's brother sitting next to them and knowing that's the next promotion and they're not going to get it, although they're qualified. So the leaflets that the

union put out addressed those kinds of needs that they would take care of, and it helped. That's what happened.

Do you remember the Hamtramck school sit-down?

FW: I vaguely remember it, but not a lot.

SB: Okay. And obviously the collective bargaining law in '65, that would be important?

FW: It was very important because that's what, I think, motivated AFSCME into the area of the clericals after the phone call that I made because they wanted to get into that area, but the clericals identify with the supervisors and because AFSCME represented garbage workers, that was very hard. But that's where they wanted to go.

SB: Well, this has been excellent.