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ORAL INTERVIEW

DAVID LIVINGSTON

HERBERT HILL, INTERVIEWER
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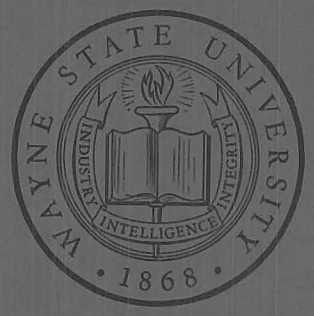

Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan

DATE: April 1, 1969
INTERVIEWEE: David Livingston, president of District 65- Retail Wholesale and Department Store Workers Union, AFL-CIO
INTERVIEWER: Herbert Hill
PLACE: 13 Aster Place, New York City (headquarters of union)

H: David, would you begin by telling us something about the early days of your work with the union, the founding of the union, when you first met Arthur Osman, something about your earlier days as a worker in the industry in New York City?

L: Our union was founded by three groups originally. I said that our union was founded by three groups: one was the Wholesale Shoemakers Industry, and one of its founders, Philip Manheim, is still on our staff. The other was the Wholesale Drivers Industry, and that was headed by Arthur Osman. And the third group was in the Textile Industry and I was one of the officers.

H: Now, when you say Textile Industry, what aspect of the Textile Industry?

L: Oh, all three unions consisted of people working in wholesale establishments.

H: Not manufacturing?

L: No. The terminology was a little bit different. For example, a driver's firm tended to be called a "jobber," a "shoot firm", also a "jobber." But, also a textile firm was called a "converter."

H: What do you mean by a "converter"? What is a converter."

L: I think that the term arose because the wholesaler bought the goods in the greige-- that means in the raw. And, then he would have it sent to a dye house or finisher and convert it into its final form as either dress goods, curtains, or whatever the case may be.

L: He would have it finished a certain way and dyed to a particular color pattern, as the case may be. So, in the Textile Industry, the Wholesalers tended to be called "converters." And, there were these three groups...

H: What year was this?

L: Well, let's make it late '34 or early '35. The Driver's School was founded in '33.

H: What did it call itself?

L: Wholesale Driver's Employees Union.

H: Is that affiliated to the AF of L.

L: I think, originally it was affiliated to the United Hebrew Tribes because the AF of L didn't consider this a suitable kind of group to charter. Ultimately it did have an AF of L charter as a federal local. You know what a federal local is?

H: Yes, I know what a federal local is, David.

L: Then, I needn't elaborate. The shoe industry, I think, had an AFL charter also, as a federal local. Our group, the textile group, originally was chartered by the CIO.

H: Do you know what year?

L: About the same time.

H: When did you go to work in the Textile Industry?

L: I had worked summers from 31 on when I entered Columbia...

H: Columbia College?

L: Columbia College. But I went to work full time in the industry in '34, late '34.

H: When were you born?

L: January, 1915.

H: In New York City?

L: Brooklyn.

H: In Brooklyn. What did your father do?

L: He was a salesman, dress salesman. And, my brother was a salesman. I escaped.

H: You became a worker?

L: Yes, I hate salesmen. I work hard. Actually, what I did was become a unionist, really, because I entered the industry much more as an aspect of my unionism rather than out of a desire to become a shipping clerk. What happened really was that, in as far as I was concerned, in 1934 it was supposed to be my last year at Columbia College, through a combination of circumstances, I failed to get a scholarship at the Law School that I had been promised. Actually, I got it a year later. But, by that time,I was already fully involved in the union. I'd figured out that I'd be a labor lawyer but, I was better off to be a union officer and tell the labor lawyers what to do, I guess. Anyway, in 1934, I did not return to Columbia, more or less because I didn't get the scholarship that I'd been promised. And, I was already doing summer work active in the old office worker's union which still organizes the beginnings of organizational efforts at this time for a person. And, one of the people in the union was the bookkeeper for the Textile Company. So, really, as a way to continue my labor activities more than anything else, I got a job in his shop. And, that's how I got into the Textile Industry.

H: Well, where did your interest in unionism come from? Was there some political interest or some political involvement?

L: Well... You know I was a Depression generation head?

H: This was the height of the Depression?

L: Right. And, it's very hard to single out any one thing. I needed the scholarship to go to law school because I couldn't afford to go to any other way. And, my father was a pretty good salesman but, in this particular year,

L: he had had an automobile accident and his earning capacity was quite low. I traveled with him for a while, actually. So, you're in a period and...Just as today, it's very hard to get young people interested in labor. I think, almost the reverse was true then. You had a sense that organizing people and fighting for better conditions was the right thing to do. This was just before the formation of the CIO. If you remember, when the CIO was formed, it unleashed just a wave of youthful enthusiasm amongst college youngsters like myself and others who said, "This is the way we can really make a contribution to making America a really decent place in which to live."

H: When did you first meet Arthur Osman?

L: Probably in 35'; I'm sure of the exact date. What did Arthur say? you talked to him?

H: I don't recall. You were not at the famous party,_____?

L: No,no. That was before your time. That was about 33'.

L: Yes.

H: There was already a nucleus that Osman had formed.

L: Yes. His group was formed a little earlier and it certainly was more stable than either our group in textiles or the shoe group.

H: Originally then, you suggested it was a merger or coming together, not a formal merger, between these three groups?

L: There was a formal merger.

H: There was? Would you tell us about that formal merger, when and what were the conditions and circumstances?

L: That takes us two years into the future in '37. By this time the CIO was well established. And we, that is, the textile group, had a

L: charter from the CIO--from the Textile Worker's Union. As a matter of fact, we were chartered as Local 65, the Textile House Workers Union. We weren't domestic, we just were textile houses. And, we had a CIO charter. The other two groups, expecially Arthur's, now Arthur's was much more stable but it didn't have that CIO charter. And by that time, we had all sort of reached the conclusion that there shouldn't be a Wholesale Drivers Union or a Wholesale Textile Union and a Wholesale Shoe Union and also jewelry union, and also a lot of the etc., etc. We sort of felt that there should be a union of all wholesalers. I think the phase we used was "what united us was not the commodity that we handled, but that we handled commodities". We were workers in the distribution industry. Actually, this is quite similar to the British development. The British have a union called the Distributive and General Workers Union, which is a very large union--one of the largest in the British Isle movement. And, it does consist of people whose work is distribution. Now, in the United States no such single union exists, but there are quite a few, several at least, which have pieces of that industry (if you want to call it that)... Teamsters, for example, are a big piece of it. But, if you took the truck drivers out of the Teamsters Union, I guess you'd be left with probably a million to a million-and-a-half workers in that field of distribution. The warehouses, wholesale establishments and so on. And, this concept ??? us, so to speak. We all felt that this was right. Arthur advocated this very vigorously. And so, by this time, Arthur was already in sharp conflict with the AF of L.

L: He had spoken up at the AF of L convention on the subject of the CIO. And, it was obvious that he belonged in the CIO. And, I guess as a matter of practicality more than anything else, it was decided that the simplest thing to do was to merge into 65, then chartered by the Textile Workers Union. So, that's what happened. In effect, Arthur took over. And thus the dry goods union, became the central section of Local 65.

H: So you were Local 65 of the Textile Workers Organizing Committee or was it already an international?

L: It was an international.

H: When did district 65 become a district? And, would you tell us about the next step?

L: There was a very big gap in between. I mean we didn't become a district until 1948. Much had occured prior to that.

H: You didn't stay very long on the Textile Workers Organizing Committee.

L: No, we didn't. We left or shifted our national institution, so to speak, by agreement. Again, you have to remember something about our industry. We could organize a textile converter who had six stock clerks and shipping clerks and floor office workers and five salesman--a total of 15 people--and the factory, the mill where the goods were made could employ 15 hundred people.

H: These were essentially small units that you organized.

L: Yeah, they were small units of big companies.

H: Right.

L: And, this was Hillman's concern. Sidney Hillman was the chairman of the TWOC and he was worried that we might, for the sake of arguement be forced to strike--a textile company of 15 people. And, he would be obliged

L: to support that strike with 15 hundred. And, so he just didn't feel right about organizing this section of the union. I think that he was wrong, by the way. I think that history has worked out in such a way that what seemed like "the tail then wagging the dog" is a little bit the other way around. If we really had effectively organized the total of textile distribution, I'm not so sure we would have as many unorganized workers as we have in this outfit.

H: How long did you stay on the Textile Workers Organizing Committee?

L: Just months.

H: Then, what was your next affiliation?

L: Well, Allen Haywood was then the...

H: Director of Organizations...

L: No, he wasn't Director of Organizations. He was the New York Regional Director.

H: I see.

L: And, he first suggested that we associate with the I.L.W.U.

H: Will you tell us what those initials stand for?

L: That's the "International Longshoresman Warehousemen's Union on the west coast.

H: Harry Bridges?

L: Harry Bridges. And (What's his name...?)... just bear with me a little. Well, his idea was that we should associate with them. But, after reflection and with Haywood's agreement, we decided not to do it. We were small. By that time, I imagine, we still were in the magnitude of maybe a thousand workers, all told. And, we felt, and he agreed, in light of the

L: strong hostility between Bridges and Ryan, who was president of the ILA, that for us to become sort of the East coast representatives of the I.L.W.U. would just make us sitting ducks. And, we would be readily crushed by the longshoresmen's union. We then had, by the way, very close ties with the teamsters. So after some consideration, again by the agreement, we formed, actually, a new union. The CIO was just then chartering a group of retailers which had left the RCIA--Retail Clerks--it was then called the RCIPA, Retail Clerks International Protective Association. It really was a protective association, believe me.

H: In the majority sense?

L: Yes. If I know what you mean, the answer is 'yes.' And, the CIO was just chartering a group of them as the Retail International. So, Haywood came up with the idea that they should form a Retail and Wholesale International, which seemed to make sense. And, so we joined that international, forming the Retail-Wholesale International.

H: Who was the head of that?

L: Sam Wolcheck.

H: Samuel Wolcheck.

L: It's become significant in the light of much later events, of the last few weeks even, that one of the conditions of that merger was that the International would form a wholesale department which would function as an autonomous division of the Retail-Wholesale International with responsibility for organizing. At that time, I would say three-quarters of a million workers in the wholesale industry in warehouses and so on, which are today in the teamsters' words "not organized," that there was real appeal and a real possibility. At that time, the St. Louis warehouse group, headed by Al Gibbons, currently the vice-president of the teamsters and currently president or chairman, (I've forgotten what

L: they call him) of the Central Conference of Teamsters, that was supposed to be originally headed by Harper--he was part of the Bar International ...

H: He had Local 688 in drive.

L: He still does, Local 688 of the teamsters union. So, we went into this International with high hopes.

H: About what year?

L: Again it was 37'.

H: '37.

L: I don't know. Do you know(????)

H: Fairly succinctly.

L: Well, from 37 to 38 --- really, from 1940 on --- 37, 38, 39 we grew at a moderate pace. We were a thousand in 37. By 40, we were maybe 4 thousand. I remember we had a drive for six thousand which we hit, I guess, by 1940. We must have gone from four to six, from 39 to 40. And we went from six to ten in 41 and our slogan was "ten thousand, in 1941.' And, then we went from ten thousand to seventeen thousand.

H: Now, these workers that you organized were mainly small units in various distributive trades in New York City?

L: Yes and no. First, let me finish the one sentence I was about to say before. We went from ten thousand to seventeen thousand in seven months. That was our famous"Seven and Seven" Drive which we reached in June, 1941 Now, what kind of people were they? Well, they were mainly in small establishements. But, I said that the answer to that was yes and no. We included Lerner Stores, for example--their home office and warehouse which is I'd say about a thousand. We included Revlon, which now is about two thousand, but even then it was about 700, thereabouts, 500 maybe. So we always had about 40% of our membership in large establishments, give or take 5% (I know that figure isn't perfect). On the other hand, you had the remainder of our membership in several thousand small establishments. Well, you can't quite say it was this way or that. We always had those. But, I would say that the wholesale industry--

L: Wholesale Dry Goods, Wholesale Textile, Wholesale Textile, Wholesale Shoes and so on--the smaller firms were characteristic.

H: Would I be correct in assuming that it wasn't all distribution? I recall that when I was kid around the middle 40's, I worked in several shops of downtown New York near Cannal Street, Lower Broadway, Lesbernard Street, I worked in some print shops. And, I remember when I was hired, District 65 had an organizing drive on. And, I helped to bring that shop into District 65.

L: What year are you talking about?

H: Well, 46, 47, maybe. This was right after the S. Blackman strike. What year was the Blackman Strike?

L: Oh, that was 42.

H: 42... Well, this would be in 43.

L: It would have to be over that because 42 would be during the war, maybe 40.

H: Well, this was about 45 or 46, I guess.

L: After the war?

H: This was right after the war, yeah. I remember working in some shops. So, organizing drives on then?

L: Let me say this: our method of operating the union led to, from time to time, our accepting people whose major characteristic was that they were poor and put upon and that nobody else wanted them. And that was almost from the very beginning. Now I'm sure that you have become familiar with the fact that we have always relied upon the members of the union themselves. And, I'm sure you spent time on this with Arthur as to how this came about and why. But, it bears repeating because it bears on the subject you've asked about. And, I know that's something of special interest to you. Because we had so many shops, because it takes us as much effort to negotiate. And, there's more effort to negotiate a contract for two workers than it does for 2 thousand. We never could rely on paid personnel to do our work. We always have to rely upon volunteer, rank and file, activity to negotiate contracts, to

L: handle grievances, etc. And, because our organizing efforts were in considerable measure among small shops, you couldn't rely on paid representative organizers to do the organizing. You had to rely upon the members themselves. And, our most successful campaigns in this regard were where we succeeded in making it easy for the members to organize. In other words, we said, "Organize the shop next door. Don't worry what kind of a shop it is. If you work at 34th Street, you don't have to go down to Canal Street. Look around, whatever shop is nearby that is unorganized, bring it in." Now, we wouldn't organize an automobile plant and we wouldn't organize a company that clearly belonged in some other union. But, in this area, particularly in this New York Metropolitan area. There are tens of thousands of workers in thousands of establishments which had no clear identification. What union does the Aquarium Manufacturing Firm belong to? There isn't any, no clear identification. What union does the Aquarium Manufacturing Firm belong to? There isn't any, no clear plant. So, as we grew and as we carried on our campaigns to organize the shop next door, our members came in contact with a signigicant number of what we then, and now, call processing firms. They were largely small manufacturing establishments. And, they didn't have a clear characteristic about them so they belonged in some specific union. They tended to be, in considerable measure, minority groups. And, they tended to be very low paid.

H: Well, I would like to stop you at this point. It was my understanding that initially there was a very high concentration of Jewish workers in 65. When did the racial-ethnic composition began to change? When did Blacks and Puerto Ricans in significant numbers began to enter into your union, into the labor force and the industries in which you operated?

L: Well, we have to go back a step, because minority

L: groups entered our union in two ways. One is we would organize a type of shop which was likely to have a larger concentration of Black and Puerto Rican workers in these processing establishment.

H: This was essentially unskilled?

L: Unskilled, semi-skilled, low paid, often in racket unions. And that's one way that such people came into our ranks because we organized their establishment or helped them liberate themselves from a racket union. Another way was through our "hiring hall." Now...

H: You established the "hiring hall" very early?

L: Very, very early. And, we fought religiously to prevent violations of hiring from the union.

H: What year did you establish the "hiring hall?"

L: Almost from the very beginning, Herb.

H: Can you tell us how the "hiring hall" operates?

L: At the time we're talking about, we had a rotary hiring system which meant that you registered in the hiring Hall and you were dispatched in accordance with the date of registration--first come, first served. Now, currently the Hiring Hall operates a little bit differently than that, largely as a result of Taft Hartly and so on. Now, it's based upon seniority in the industry. But at that time, it was a rotary hiring system. We had a space in our building set aside for our headquarters for the hiring, When you became unemployed, you came down, you registered, you got a number and your number with your name on it was posted on the board. Jobs would come in to the employment office and then the dispatchers, we called them, and you would go out on them in your turn. And, your turn was determined by how long you had been unemployed--the number you had received.

H: Now that returns to job skills now. Is some differentiation made there in the operation as whole today?

L: Today? Well, our hiring hall has a number of improvements.

L: In those days, the contracts that we're talking about, that is, in the late 30's and early 40's, the employer was obliged to call the union. But, if we couldn't meet the skills, then he was free after a given period, usually 48 to 72 hours, to hire on the open market and the person would have to become a member of the union. But, our current "hiring hall" operates somewhat differently, since our contracts now require the employee must hire the person that we send.

H: Must hire?

L: Must hire! And, there is in our contracts what we call "experience rated"--somebody who has, let's say, two years of experience..(Remember, we're talking about unskilled workers) gets a higher rate than someone who comes in inexperienced. Now, from the very beginning our "hiring hall" was a very important factor in enforcing fair employment practices. I said earlier that there were two ways in which minority groups came into our ranks. One was through organizing shops or industries in which they had already been employed and the other was through a conscious policy that we installed, instituted in the union, to guarantee that Black and Spanish workers came into our union. Our earliest measures in this regard were motivated by an awareness that discrimination existed--that it existed, primarily I would say, against Black workers. And, so we made a decision that we wouldn't tolerate discrimination and that we would bring Blacks into our union in considerable numbers. And, we used our hiring hall to effectuate this. What we would do was send a Black worker out and, frequently, this meant white workers had to give up their spot on the "extra" board, as we called them, so that the Black could go out. And, if he were not given a fair opportunity to work and was sent back by the boss, then we'd get other white workers to give up their spot on the board and send nothing but

L: Black workers until we broke through.

H: David, there are many other big unions--bigger unions, the richer unions--in New York City, all the unions in New York City, than District 65, such as the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, and others that have big memberships here in the city. They all say that they don't believe in racial discrimination. They've all pledged fair employment practices policies. What makes District 65 different? Obviously in a great variety of ways, your day-to-day practices are different than these other unions that give lip service, but operationally do not try to bring Black workers into the industry, do not try to increase the job mobility of Black workers, and worse. Why is District 65 a different kind of labor union for the Black worker in New York City? You want to think for a moment?

L: I'd like to state that we're different and better because our people are different and better, but I'm compelled to say that I think we're different and better because we had to be.

H: Would you explain that?

L: Well, we never had anything except our unity, that is, we were always unskilled workers, unneeded people, poor people, unwanted people. We always were rejected by the AFL or the powers that be in the labor movement. And, the nature of our industry, as I indicated earlier, was such that to survive it all, we had to get an enormous response from our rank and file. And, to get that kind of response, you had to appeal to something in people that was... I'm sorry; I'm searching for words that will give you the sense of what I'm trying to get at. You could always appeal to a human being if you could say, "I can get you two bucks more, or I can get you a better vacation, or this or that." We had to appeal to something to that, of course. But, in addition to that, we had

L: to say, "You have something in you that hates rotteness, and hates indecency and hates oppression. And, we could appeal to that and you would respond to that appeal by giving more of yourself and giving your time and your energy in quantities that you never even dreamed were possible. Now, we did this, as I say, because we had to. Some unions can afford to tolerate discrimination. You know, it doesn't ruin the union... To us, if there's discrimination, and therefore, there's division among the workers, and, there's something less than that high degree of harmony and high degree of devotion, then, our union is weak and we can't succeed.

H: Well, what you seem to be saying is that the membership composition of your union, the labor force of the shops in which you organized, were significantly different from that of say, the ILG or the Amalgamated?

L: See, I'm not saying that Herbert. If that's what you're getting, the message isn't getting through to you.

H: Well, okay, would you clarify that?

L: Because if you took a hundred members of our union and put them in a room, and took a hundred members of the ILGWU and put them in a room, and a hundred members of other unions and put them in a room, you would be hard-put to distinguish one group from the other. I don't mean that by this time, you won't find more Blacks and Spanish and so on, and, I guess you can tell them by color. But, what I mean is that if you took a mixed group of roughly the same number, and you didn't have an obvious distinguishing characteristic of race, you'd be hard-put to tell them apart. What I'm really trying to say to you is that if the same approaches were taken in other unions, you also would get the same results. In other words, there's nothing inherent in our people.

H: All right, well, let me try out a theory on you then. You see, I think there was some distinctive charactistics to your situation, here. Let me try out a theory, if I may? My studies of American Black Labor history would suggest that unless two pre-conditions were operative, an American labor union would almost--there are some exceptions--but would almost inevitably become an instrument of racial discrimination: First, an idealogical sensitivity on the part of the leadership to the question of race and the significance of this question for the American working class; and, number two, a significant concentration of Black workers in the industry.

L: Well, our experience doesn't have both those characteristics, because there wasn't a significant concentration of Black workers in the industry until the war. By that time, we had carried through our major organizing drives. So, that characteristic wasn't present.

H: All right, well, how do you explain the fact that your reaction is fundamentally different? When I say 'your reaction', I mean the reaction of District 65 to the entry of large numbers of Blacks into your jurisdiction is fundamentally different than that of the ILG. For instance, the ILG. For instance, the ILG has resisted in a variety of ways in two significant forms: First, the mobility of Black workers in its jurisdiction to the skilled job classifications--You can count the number of Blacks, say, in the pressers locals or cutters locals--and totally resisted and effectively resisted the movement of Blacks into leadership positions within the unions. Now, you've obviously taken a different course here. The ILG and its leadership remains a "lily-white" leadership. On the

H: 36 member Executive Board there's not a single Black. On the International Staff there's not a single, in terms of the elected officers, there's not a single Black person. Not a single Black person in the local unions of New York City, some of which have 99% Black and Puerto Rican memberships. You've taken a totally different course here. You have Blacks in every stratum of leadership.

L: You know, we've changed our historical position in our discussion. In other words, At one point we were talking about 1941. Yes, we've changed the period.

H: Well the entrance of Blacks into the industry in large numbers was soon after World War II. This coincides with the large scale entry of Blacks into the garment industry when young Jews and young Italian workers stopped coming into the industry. Their response was one essentially of resistance both within the union and within the industry. Yours was different. Now, there's one thing that suggests a difference: the ILG leadership had an ideological involvement at one time with the Socialist Party. Your ideological involvement was with another racial tradition. Do you think this was significant? Because there was obviously a difference between the emphasis of the SP and the CP in this question.

L: First of all, I'm merely taking your description of the ILG in my mind, I mean, I'm really not equipped to discuss this.

H: Okay, for discussion purposes.

L: I don't think our approach to the race question... The difference between ours and the other people arises from a difference in political orientation. Now, you know, this is a hard thing to put your finger on because our leadership does have a certain character and integrity. It does a lot because

L: it thinks it's right. Now, what we think is right, how much that's related to what happened 30 years ago, the Lord only knows. And, we had people coming here who had no political position at all and who now share our basic approach to the race question. So, I don't think you can put it quite on that. I'll say, and this I would prefer off the record.

H: Sure. This will all be off.

L: That our political history is very similar to the department stores and the personalities of the same ones, that is, the ones that they were 25 or 30 years ago. Yet, the department stores basically broke with us over our proposal to establish a new and much broader multi-racial leadership. So, that suggests that even right on this target, I mean, that's a generalization, but people went through with us. The very identical experience ended up with a very different position on race.

H: I'm trying to isolate what might be the decisive factor. You see, I think District 65 is different on the race question.

L: I think so, too.

H: I'm trying to locate...What are the social forces that operate that made it different? You know, it's not just that you're a "good guy" and somebody else is a "bad guy." We have to find out what are the social forces.

L: I would like to strongly urge that we continue discussion on the relationship between trade union democracy and a proper position on the race question.

H: All right. However, before we do that, may I suggest one other point that I'd like to examine for a moment? How important do you think, as a relative factor in all this, would be the nature of the labor force that you were dealing with? Obviously, it was different from say, that of the Amalgamated or the ILG--unskilled workers, marginal workers, casual workers-- to some degree outside of society in some ways. Obviously the base of your labor

H: force was significantly different from that of the ILG--a different class, a different strata of the working class.

L: Except for this: I think that's a little will O'the wispy; this comparison between us and the ILG, and may lead us into some wrong conclusions. And, I'll tell you why I said that. We have in our ranks some industries in which we have a substantial number of skilled jobs. A job that pays $4 an hour, that's a skilled job, right?

H: A skilled job, yes.

L: _____ industry and the direct mail industry, which came into us from the UOPWA originally when the UOPWA was falling apart, we adopted them. Then too, there are some highly skilled industries--I mean, highly skilled jobs. In both cases a Black man is either "the" or second in command from the union point of view. There have been entrance of Blacks into the industry. But, they don't constitute the majority in either group and they're large groups. They're 2,000 workers each. As a matter of fact, directed mail is probably close to three thousand. And...

H: We were discussing the relationship of union democracy to why the District 65 was essentially a different kind of union.

L: We have to first define 'union democracy' a little bit because many people say that they have democratic unions because they have voted with IMA. Now, I'm talking about a definition of 'union democracy' that's very different-- a definition which includes the concept that an overwhelming majority of the membership must participate in the union and make decisions in the union. Now, you know that that's not an idle dream with us. We've just concluded an election where 89% of the eligible voters actually voted. You know about our rule about obtaining an absolute majority of the eligible voters in order to

L: take office.

H: Explain that.

L: Well, supposing you had 20,000 eligibles, supposing 15,000 voted and supposing someone who were running unopposed and he got 9,000 "yes" and 6,000 "no". He's not elected. He must get a majority of the eligible-which in this case would be 20,000. So, you can see that the persons elected must reflect the sentiment of the membership as a whole.

H: Well, how large is the membership now? What is your membership in April of 1969? What is the membership?

L: Approximately 26,000 workers . That's without department stores.

H: And what if we include the department stores?

L: About 34, 35,000...

H: About 34,000 with the department stores, 28 without the department stores.

L: About 26 without.

H: 26 without?

L: Right.

H: What proportion of this membership is Black--is Negro?

L: I would say there are somewhere between 7 and 8 thousand Blacks, in other words, about 30%, give or take 5%.

H: All right, about 30% Black.

L: About that .

H: How about Puerto Ricans?

L: About 25%, All right, 25%. give or take 5%.

H: Right. Just off hand, could you just, without consulting any of your files. How many collective bargaining agreements do you hold at the moment, just roughly?

L: About 1500.

H: You have 1500 collective bargaining agreements. This is not just in New York City but all over, where 65...

L: Well, it's in the Metropolitan area. About 7,000 of our members are in New Jersey. That's 7,000 of the 26. But, I think for our purposes, Herb we ought to talk about the 26,000. Apartment stores

L: are an autonomous union, and their policies are different, their attitudes are different and so on. I can't speak for them. And in Long Island, perhaps another 2 or 3 thousand

H: Alright, Well, Let us go back to the points we were making about...

L: I was trying to say to you that I believe that our ability to produce a response from the overwhelming majority of our members is the central factor in determing the race policy of the union. Both our ability to do that and the necessity to do that. We've just changed our constitution recently.

H: Would you explain that?

L: Yes, we substituted for the existing leadership body a new leadership body which we call the Executive Committee. It's a body of 18 people. And, five of its members are Black and 3 are Puerto Ricans. Now, this didn't just happen. This was a conscious policy presented to the membership, discussed by the membership for months. Now, why did this come about? Well, on the one hand, it came about because it had to. Our conviction is that the labor movement, perhaps more than other American institution, is in great danger, precisely because of its failure to come into harmony with the efforts of minority groups to win their rights in this country. Just as there have been burnings and riots and so on in the country as a whole, I think--and this isn't a personal opinion, this is our common conviction--that the labor movement by virture of its failure to come to grips with this question, is in line for terrible storms, battles, struggles within it and against it which could??? to wreck it So, our decision was that, in order to protect the union, we have to take extraordinary measures to guarantee that there would not be a struggle for power within the union. Our slogan, which is more than just a pretty phrase, our concept of how to run the union is "Shared Power and Shared Responsibility."

H: How do you explain the fact that the rest of the American labor movement doesn't seem to be aware of this danger that you've just described? I think you're right. And now that you used the phrase to say, "I'm not in harmony with Black protest," on the contrary, it's much simpler that they are not in harmony-in many cases they are in direct conflict with the goals of the Black protest movement today. How do you explain the fact that they got this condition of conflict and confrontation as rapidly developed?

L: Well, you have to remember, Herb, that of the 74 million workers in America, only about 17 or 18 million are organized. And, a great proportion of those that are organized are craftsmen or people in a specific industry. And, the union has become, in these cases, an instrument for getting the share of this craft or this group from this affluent society. And, it gradually develops in such a way that the union begins to identify with the society. Its members have got a pretty good thing, or at least they think they've got a pretty good thing out of it, and they look at the mass of the unorganized as a threat. And, you see, this, in many ways--there are some exceptions to it but,...And, I think District 37 of the public workers here in New York...

H: Yes, International State, County and Municipal,

L: Yes.

H: I'd forgotten that.?

L: Yes, is a possible exception to it. But, all too often, the public workers are saying, well, they're going to get their's. And, you know, I don't know that I would keep the police out the labor movement, for practical reasons. But, I'm a little disturbed at the fact that nobody wonders whether its a good idea

L: to have the police as part of the labor movement. Maybe there is something to think about here, you know.

H: There's an article in the current issue of Commonweal called the "Blue Meanings in the AF of L." It deals with precisely this point.

L: Well, I didn't see this article, but there is that question. And another thing is that, well, you know very well, the tremendously dominant position of the building trades in the American labor movement is very decisive thing because this group is almost consciously the enemies of the aspirations of Black people.

H: I would just remove the modifer "almost." Honestly, I think quite openly they are...

L: All right. That's a matter of... But, the net affect of that is, given the dominance of the building trades in the AF of L particularly, it's not hard to understand why these unions, in their dominant influence on the AF of L have tended to create an atmosphere in the officials of the labor movement and, in all too many cases, among some members of the labor movement that the Black movement is the enemy. So, that accounts for a lot of it. Even some Black workers are themselves prisoners of this development

H: Obviously, you as a leader of this union don't think that the sole function of the union is to"get a little more," is to "get a bigger piece of the pie." Obviously, you think in social terms. This, once again, raises the question that I tried to introduce earlier, of the importance of ideology in leadership. You don't think simply getting a bigger wage increase fulfills the union's function. That the union has to do something

H: else.

L: No, obviously, I don't feel that just getting a few dollars increase is the only function of the unions. But, I suggest to you that, again, there are others who... You see there... Again, for the moment at least, I want to talk off the record (you don't have to take it off) but, I'm just saying...(leave it on, but (you know that [H: Yes, I understand]) I don't want this in the book and let's take a look at it together)... Let's take the UAW. And their concept... They say that they are for community unions. They have now introduced the Teamsters to social unionism. They say so and they're going to make available huge funds and they are interested in a broad variety of questions: housing, the national health bill - active movements. They're interested in ghetto areas, and this sratts operations and so on. But, so, on the surface, the leaders of the UAW are, well, they're saying the same thing that the leaders of our union are saying. But, I had a meeting with some of the leaders of the UAW to discussed community organization in the metropolitan area. And, I said, "Well, what I think we should do is gather the members of your union and our union together in Bedford Stuyresant or Sack or wherever, and let them identify their problems as residnets of that community, which you can't solve in the shop and let them decide what to do with it. Let's just tell them one thing: that we'll back their plan. And, here are good people. They say, "It won't work." From their experience in political action, they know the only way you can get people to be active is to pay them.

L: Besides which they said, "This is a fine person. How can you go to such a meeting without a program? What will you be telling them anything. I'll be asking them. And, my first task is to organize our members." I won't do what they're doing. Their concept of organizing the community is to gather a handful of people who are in that union and to organize the people at large. I said, "I'm not for that. I'm for organizing our own people and having them say what's important to them." And the reason why I'm a well social unionist is because our members have needs that they can't deal with in any other way except through some form of social action, whether its in the community, or whether its in the legislature, or wherever. Now, I don't think I'm oversimplifying. The fact that the union doesn't belong to the membership guarantees that it will not reflect the membership's desires. And, when the membership's desires are reflected and the membership wants to do something about it, then you get a District 65. When the membership's desires are suppressed or no channel is provided... I remember when I was considerably younger than I am, having (I think I mentioned this to you before) a lunch or dinner with leaders of, I think in this case it happened to be the ILGW, and they always regarded me, though I'm now 54, to them I'm still a youngster, you know, so they have a benevolent attitude toward me, and we were discussing this very point. And, I described our typical membership meetings, as 60, 70% of our members "month in and month out." They say they can't get it and they give reasons for it: "a lot of their members are women and they got to go home and they got to cook and so on." And, I say, "Well, I grant that that's a practical problem, but I believe the basic

L: reason that your members don't participate in the union is because you don't permit them to make their own decisions,"-denials and so on. So, I finally said to them,"Well, how big is the largest local?" It was Local 22, I think,

H: Yes,....

L: About 22, 25,000. I said, "How big was the hall that you rented for the membership meeting? They said, "Well, about 500." And I said, "Well, my case is closed, You, by renting such a hall, in essence said the membership: 'You're not expected to be present; you're not expected to make decisions." And when I was talking to these UAW people, and this was only a few weeks ago, and I talked about our rules, and about our rules, and about gathering people together, they said, and these are, I repeat, good people, and they have a quorum in a local of 5000 of a 100 people. And they can't fill the quorum!

H: Of course, you also have something else that's really very unusual, and that is that your members have to come to the union office to pay their dues; you don't have a dues check-off.

L: That's true.

H: Is this a matter of policy?

L: Yeah.

H: That you do not want a dues check-off?

L: We wouldn't have it.

H: Why wouldn't you have it? Most union leaders would give their eye teeth for a dues check-off.

L: Well, a dues check-off is more efficient; it's cheaper.

H: But...

L: When you use it, you're deprived of a very important piece of information. When a member doesn't pay his dues, he's telling you something, and when you get the money sent by the boss, you never hear it.

H: I'm going to_____

L: But this is, this question of check-off is not understood at all.

H: This is a matter of policy for the union-no check-off.

L: No, we wouldn't have check-off; the only exception to it is we might have a shop like, we have a shop 150 miles away, why then we have it.

H: But let's go back. The story you told about the ILG is, of course, a very important, one. And the reason we talk about the ILG is the ILG is the biggest, most important, most influential labor union in New York City and it's in a comparable industry with your own, so that one is tempted to make analogies. How do you explain the fact? I really don't know the answer to this How do you explain the fact that the work force in the garment industry in New York City is quite clearly rapidly undergoing racial shifts as the racial composition of the entire city changes, and all the projections we have indicate that the alleged composition of New York City, especially among the workers, is going to be a black city. It'll be a city, of rich white folks and poor black workers. The garment industry has become, if you take Puerto Ricans and Negroes together now, I'd say they would make it almost a third of the labor force in the garment industry. But, as I said before, the ILG has clearly resisted, so that there is not a single black person in the General Executive Board. Now, local unions in this city, like Local 62, Locals 22, others, that have, not majorities, but, you know, they're in the vicinity of 90%, 96% black and Puerto Rican, they will have a white local manager, who really is bigoted, or they will have one or two ritualistic black people in positions that have no power, they're in no position of make policy. How do you explain the fact that they have resisted so? Your whole point has been that

H: it corresponds to the interests of the union as an institution to involve these people in sharing power, and identifying with the union, and, in fact, making decisions that affect their own lives. The ILG's response has been directly opposite to this. Is it that they're not good trade unionists? Is it that they're racists? What is your explanation? Obviously they are good trade unionists, at least they have been up until now.

L: I think that the explanation is political, but not in the sense in which you used it before, such as-are they radicals?-. The American labor movement is historically, Yes. In other words, as distinguished, let's say, from the European labor movement, where the political parties preceded the organization of the unions, and, indeed, were instrumental in organizing the unions; in the United States, it's the other way around. There's been a substantial labor movement organized, and, with the possible exception of Eugene V. Debs, there's scarcely any clear political participation. I guess you have to include William Z. Foster, and Debs. But, the net effect of this is that the labor movement has lacked a capacity to see the future. Someone who has some political understanding can make a judgement, maybe good, bad, or indifferent, but he can make a judgement about what's likely to happen. You asked me about a question, and in the course of it referred to what the city is becoming. Well, the labor movement. in the main, doesn't deal with what it is becoming, and what the city or the state or the nation is becoming. The only area in which the labor movements regard it as proper to look ahead is in economics, where there is some research departments, and so on.

H: Some projections.

L: But, I don't know of any major union which has ever said, "Well, now let's see. The demographic trends in our area are such that in ten years the majority of our membership will be black and Puerto Rican, or whatever, and the consequences of that are likely to be very great stresses and strains on maintaining the unity, the brotherhood of our union, and, therefore, we ought to think about how to deal with this."

H: David, I have to reject your explanation. I think... for the purposes of discussion, I'm going to reject it. I think you're partially right, but for the purpose of deepening the discussion, I'm going to reject your explanation, and suggest that there may be another explanation. And that is that other explanation may be found in the rise of union bureaucracies, that begins to perceive that it has a series of interests of the institution. One might logically say that, if the Dominsky-Stolberg leadership of the ILG was interested in the maintenance and the growth and the continued power of the organization, they would begin to train black people, they'd bring them into leadership, they would do all the things that you're doing with the leadership training clause. I want to suggest that they're no longer functioning on behalf of the workers, or even on behalf of their union. They are now functioning, and have been for some years, on what they perceive to be the interests of their own bureaucratic leadership, which, I repeat, in my opinion, has begun to take on a series of interests and obligations that are deametrically opposed to the interests of the rank and file.

L: Well, I think we're not as far apart as it sounds; that is, what I said and what you said are not as far apart as they sound when you talk about "you'll reject my explanation." I think what you said is

L: a consequence, and not a cause. And, but, they are both part of the picture, I grant you that. I don't like the hobgoblin theories of history. I don't like the "bad-guy" explanation of history. Because we would have to go to your explanation, and say, "Why did it happen?" I grant that there is existing a bureaucracy, who, by the way, lives differently...

H: ---

L: That's right. And begins to see itself as having interests which are different... I don't believe that they ever identify their interests as different than the interests of the institution...

H: But they perceive....

L: It's the other way around. They tend to believe that what's good for Jones is good for the union. Maybe in their heart of hearts somewhere they have a different belief, but they're not going to articulate it. As a matter of fact, if somebody were to say that to them, they would shrink in absolute rejection.

H: I think once you make a distinction, however, between their perceived interests of the union as the state from the interests of the rank and file workers, certainly the black rank and file workers, they no longer correspond to the interests of the union.

L: They don't think this.

H: I know they don't think that, although I have some indication that there have been one or two situations that would certainly suggest that maybe even they are aware of this and they have begun to rationalize this then.

L: Well, you know more than I do about this. I'm not... I can talk with some authority about District 65; I can't talk with much authority about the ILG or, for that matter, other unions. I believe that this lack of politics, in the best sense

L: of the work, or social development-I don't know what language to use to describe it-of looking ahead and placing the union in the context of society. Failure to do that is very much related to the development of the bureaucracy, because you don't see this as a social phenomenon. You tend to see it as something that's happening to you. You see these people coming into the union, challenging your power, threatening you.

H: That's the point.

L: Yes! But, the reason this happens is because you don't see this as a social development. You don't see this as something that's happening all over the country, or all over the urban areas of our country, at least. And, because you don't see that, well, you see it as something happening to you, and then begins a series of events, causes and effects, indistinguishable from each other. It's like "who started the argument", you know, like "who started the war", and who the hell knows who started it, and the important thing is that measure and counter-measure, and offense and defense, and offense and defense, and you don't know which is which anymore.

H: Alright. Will you elaborate a little more on your concept of shared power? What do you mean by that?

L: Mean by it? The leadership, authoritative leadership of the union, should include within its ranks, and does include within its ranks in our union, significant numbers of black and Spanish-American workers who share the power of projecting policy and of executing policy once approved by the General Council. Now, I will say that, in order to accomplish this in the first place, some white, Jewish leaders with more experience and, at least in the past, more contributions to the union, had to step aside. I also say that it's very easy to slip back. That you have to be constantly conscious of the fact that what these people do for

L: themselves poorly is better than what someone else does for them well. And we are aware of this, and I'm terribly sorry you didn't come to our convention, because you would have seen how we... I think you missed a very...incidentally, I think it would be worth your while when the tapes are finished, to actually listen to those tapes from start to finish. It's five days, it will take you quite a while.

H: _____. In the interest of time, I want to skip, and we've left out a great deal that I hope to discuss with you. Perhaps we can do this again. But in the interest of time, and let me raise another question. Approximately two weeks, shortly after your convention, you announced the possibility of District 65 disaffiliating from RWDSU. And prominent in the reasons that you gave was the failure of RWDSU to respond to _____ the racial challenge in this period. Would you please elaborate on this, and would you tell us what your hopes are for the future of the union, and where you see District 65 going in terms of the black working class of this city? What I'm really asking, David, is what is your prospective?

L: First of all, let me just, for the sake of historical accuracy, say that this wasn't something that happened <u>after</u> our convention.

H: It was <u>at</u> the convention.

L: So it happened at the convention....

H: I see. All right would you, in a sense, establish that. That at what convention...?

L: Well, at the District 65 biannual convention...

H: Held...

L: Held at the Laurels in Monticello...

H: March of 1969.

L: March of '69. And attended by approximately a thousand stewards and local officers who constitute the delegates of the convention. Amongst the things that they did was to approve the cessation of

L: dues papers to the national union, per capita, as it's called. And to instruct us not to attend the board meeting of our international union, and to instruct us to use the money it will save, which is somewhere between 150 and 200 thousand dollars a year, for organizing actions and organizing activity. Naomi Atrash_____ tried to reach me and I was on 6 (CUT OUT). Present at the convention were representatives of locals of our international from Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia Tennessee, Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, Pennslyvania, Arizona, and even some from Canada. And they all supported our position that we would not pay per capita unless the international...

H: These were other locals of the international.

L: Yes. Unless the international were to agree to four points. One was the sharing of leadership, in accordance with the original merger agreement with the RWDSU. The second was restructuring the leadership to eliminate its lily-white character. The third was to establish an autonomous wholesale department so that we could do the organizing in our type of shops, which isn't handled by anybody. And fourth was that we would have the right to cooperate with the UAW and the Teamsters through the organization they will establish called the ALA. At the convention, top spokesman of the Teamsters and the UAW both pledged support, physical and financial, to our efforts. We will...I was authorized to report at the convention that the UAW would be, in effect, matching our money, about..... with substantial financial contribution, so that they would assist in our organizing efforts.

H: So you're planning a big new organizing campaign.

L: Well, we've already put on....or will have on by next Monday...approximately 50 organizers, who will be operating in the metropolitan area. And we will be assisting these various locals that I mentioned to you from the various states with organizers out of

L: town, other...and I would say, preferably having people from their own ranks, but where that is not possible immediately, sending people for the purpose of developing people for them.

H: Will there be a major emphasis upon organizing black workers?

L: Well, as heard, Herb, most of the states represented were southern states. and as a practical matter, in our kind of industry, we're talking about black workers.

H: Yes. This also means that you no longer recognize any limitation of District 65 to operate within the five buroughs, and...that is, within metropolitan New York. You're almost passively starting to operate as an international union, as an organizing center, at any rate.

L: We have come to that conclusion through a variety of routes. One, we find that in our industry the process of dispersion of companies that we deal with, opening plants in Arizona, or Kansas City, or wherever. So, for the protection of our own membership's collective bargaining, we need to do something about that. The international union did not. And we have an estimate of what's likely to happen in this country. I guess that brings us back to history, or sense of history. It is our view that in the next five years or so, there's going to be something happening in America, which, numerically is not too different than the CIO bar. In other words, we expect millions of workers to be organized.

H: But in new unions and different kinds of unions.

L: Yeah, if you will. We expect millions of workers to be organized. We think great numbers of them will be black and Mexican American and so on. Now, as to where they will organize, that's a little bit unclear. In some cases, there may be unions into

L: which they can organize. In all too many cases, it'll be necessary for them to organize their own unions. And really, what we tried to get done with the RWDSU, and I don't think we've succeeded, and therefore what we will do in whatever ways are possible for us-perhaps through establishing a new national union of our own-is to create an instrument, a union, in which black workers and Mexican-American workers, the poor people of this country, feel at home. Not just in the sense that they feel at home. Not just in the sense that they feel welcome, but feel this is their home to build the way they want, with the methods that they consider suitable. I think that our limited experience in the South is such that to teach us that black workers in organizing unions in the South will very frequently turn to organizing a whole community, in which the collective bargaining phase of their activity may be only...may be minor, certainly not the only thing they do, and the collective bargaining will be, perhaps, unrecognizable to some labor practitioners of today. I think that organizing a union will always be central, decisive to effective organization in a community, and that is because of the many advantages which accrue to collective action as a union that are not present in any other kind of collective or group action. You can stop the movement of traffic, and you can stop the movement of goods, and you can stop the movement of persons, and, in most instances, that's regarded as a normal attribute of labor unionism. The same kind of actions applied to other kinds of institutions would be regarded as conspiracies and unreasonable restraints and so on. So it would be very foolish to fail to start the effort to control_____ started any other way but by forming a union. And we believe that in the next five years hundreds of thousands of the working poor, great numbers black and Mexican-American, but not only, are going to be

L: organized, as I said, by the hundreds of thousands. And we're determined to make available to them our organization, our knowledge, and our commitment. So that's our prospective. Now, if we can do that within the RWDSU, fine; if we can't, and we have to do it through some other union, fine; and if we have to create our own new national union, fine. I will say this, that from my discussions with the leaders of the UAW and the Teamsters, without perhaps having thought through every implication of every action, that they're generally sympathetic and aware of the things that I'm saying now, and in support of them.

H: Do you think that there's a possibility that you may remain within RWDSU?

L: Well, we've had a checkered history as to where we are, where we were. We were AF of L a while, we were CIO a while, we were AF of L-CIO, we were independent,we were_____. So we're not too concerned about_____. If the RWSDU were to turn around tomorrow and say, "Okay, we're going to restructure this lily-white leadership, and we're going to create a wholesale department, and you are free to use the per capita of the locals that are part of it to organize, and you're free to offer your cooperation and enjoy the cooperation of the UAW and the Teamsters," why, then we'd have no reason to leave. As to whether I think that's likely, not very likely. But, I must say that it's a great loss to them, and to the AF of L. So, I wouldn't say it's impossible. I've told people, like the leaders of the New York labor movement, that if they can induce the RWDSU leaders to straighten out, measure up to the tasks of today and of the next five or ten years, why, great!

H: Now, you mentioned before District 37,_____ group in the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. Do you see any other sectors of organized labor that you think has the potential

H: for moving in the direct; on you've just indicated?

L: Well, I always regarded 1199, the Hospital Workers, as that way. I must say that their failure to support our struggle within the international is disturbing. And there are some other disturbing things about 1199 between the leadership, the white leadership and the black leadership.

H: Do you anticipate a conflict there between the white and black of the leadership?

L: I think it would be a terrible thing, if foolishness by the white leadership were to bring it about, but some of them are foolish. A very distinguished white leader, when asked how he could explain 1199's failure to support our struggle with the international, gave a fine answer. He said, "The leadership of this international is so corrupt that I wouldn't subject a black man to it."

H: (Laugh). That needs no comment.

L: And there are other things that have happened. You know, and again, if you study 1199, you will see that on the question of genuine internal democracy, it leaves quite a lot to be desired. And, as a consequence, it's running into some factionalism and some problems. See, we never have factionalism in our union. Because anybody who wants to can develop.... our process now is such that somebody who can gather support of the membership is more than welcome.

H: Before we conclude, is there anything you would like to add?

L: Let's take a look at it, and you look at it... I do feel that_____bothered with the telephone, it hampered us a little bit, because there is something to.....you see, what we did is we started to talk historically, and then we shifted to the current. And precisely because I happen to believe that a lot of the current problems in the labor movement are related to the past. I think that I may be doing you an injustice, so why don't we set another day?

H: I would like that very much. It was originally my intention to do a kind of chronological history of the union with you today, but, between the telephone and time pressures, I decided to make a big jump to the contemporary scene. But I would appreciate very much an opportunity for another interview, so we may pick up the chronological thread. But thank you very much, David Livingston.