ROOSEVELT UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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THE 20th CENTURY TRADE UNION WOMAN: VEHICLE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

with

MOLLIE LEVITAS

Office Employees International Union

by

Betty Balanoff

Program on Women and Work

Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations

University of Michigan - Wayne State University

Ann Arbor, Michigan

VITAE

MOLLY LEVITAS

Molly Levitas was born on November 30, 1885. Her family emigrated to the United States from Riga, Latvia when she was six. As a child she was an avid reader, and exposure to family discussions of socialism and unionism led to an interest in unions.

After two years of high school Levitas entered business school. She worked as a stenographer and then as a secretary of an engineering firm. In 1926 she began work as a secretary for the Chicago Federation of Labor. Her work for the Federation led to her deep involvement with the Chicago Women's Trade Union League. The League helped women in intolerable work situations by stepping in as negotiator and by lobbying for protective legislation to insure better working conditions for women. Levitas served on the Executive Board of the League and later served as President.

One of Levitas' major efforts has been in the organization of white collar workers. Much of her spare time was spent gathering delegates at conventions of the American Federation of Labor to lobby for AF of L support for such organizing efforts. Her efforts were rewarded in 1937 when the National Council of Office Employees was chartered and in 1944 when the AF of L issued a charter to the International Office Employees Union. Levitas served as President of Chicago Local 28 and Vice-President of the National Council of Office Employees.

Levitas retired in 1957 but has retained an interest in union activities.

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MOLLIE LEVITAS - FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE WOMEN'S TRADE UNION LEAGUE OF CHICAGO, AND OFFICE EMPLOYEES' LOCAL NO. 28

With a keen interest in the labor movement, and the recommendation of my dear friend, Lillian Herstein, I accepted a position in 1926, as secretary for John Fitzpatrick, President, and Edward Nockels, Secretary, of the Chicago Federation of Labor.

In that environment, it was natural for me to become involved in the fascinating activities of the Women's Trade Union League of Chicago, as well as in the dire need for organization of office workers.

At the turn of the century, working women got their greatest help from other women. This was supplied through the various women's trade union leagues--a partnership of feminine union members and social-minded women. Active Chicagoans included the social workers, Jane Addams, Ellen Gates Starr, Florency Kelley, and Mary McDowell, and the wealthy Mrs. Charles Henrotin.

The Chicago League supported among its early activities the organization of women workers in the packing plants in 1902. And, two years later, aroused public support for locked-out corset workers in Aurora, Illinois.

In 1905, the Illinois League demanded the investigation of working conditions for women in factories and shops, an act that led to the formation of the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor.

I served on the executive board of the Chicago League and when Agnes Nestor passed away, I assumed the presidency. For thirty-five years, Agnes Nestor was the dedicated president of the Chicago League, working in close harmony with the secretary, Mary Haney, and other union-minded women.

The League served the men and women in the Chicago labor movement for over fifty years, and a number of the Chicago unions contributed financial support. Outstanding were the Milk Drivers, Laundry Drivers, Bakery Drivers, Ladies' Garment Workers, Millinery Workers, etc.

In 1955, the officers of the National Women's Trade Union League found it necessary to call a meeting in Washington, D.C. of representatives of all their affiliates to discuss the future of the organization. Elizabeth Christman, the national secretary, with just one full-time officer helper, had, through the years, accomplished the Herculean task of raising the budget, servicing the affiliated leagues, getting out a monthly publication, and lobbying for legislation affecting women workers.

It became increasingly difficult to raise the necessary budget. The conclusion was reached that the League had accomplished its mission of education and organization, that labor unions were carrying on their own activities, and that the time had come for the National Women's Trade Union League to suspend its activities with grace and honor.

In my job, in the Chicago Federation of Labor, I was approached by girls working in offices at low salaries and unsatisfactory conditions. They asked for help in getting a union to represent them. In the late twenties, the depression years, there were only a small number

of office workers' local unions with Federal charters scattered through the country. In Chicago, the local union's membership consisted of employees of union offices and the City Hall.

I realized the great need of an office workers' union to take in those employed in commercial and industrial offices. I spent my vacations attending conventions of the American Federation of Labor, rounding up delegates from other stenographers' and bookkeepers' unions, for the purpose of having them cooperate in persuading the A.F. of L. that the white collar workers deserved help.

After a great deal of effort, a National Council of Office Employees was chartered in 1937, and by 1944, sufficient progress had been made so that that A.F. of L. issued a charter to the International Office Employees' Union. I served Chicago's Local 28 as President, and the National Council, as a Vice-President.

At the present time, there are about 400 local unions in the United States and Canada, with a membership of approximately 70,000. Not only have the members benefited, but unorganized office employees are also benefiting indirectly because of the higher standards that have been set.

With the great strides automation is making, there is no doubt that there will be a vast increase in the number of white collar workers, and the need for unions to protect their interest is greater.

In the limited time allotted to me, I have given you only the bare outlines of the history of the Women's Trade Union League, and the Office Employees' International Union--their struggles and achievements.

THANK YOU!

Oral History Interview

with

MOLLIE LEVITAS

July/December 1970
Chicago, Illinois

by Elizabeth Balanoff

INTERVIEWER: Could you tell us a little about your early background?

LEVITAS: I was born in Latvia. I came here when I was not quite six years old, and my family was a family of immigrants who struggled.

INTERVIEWER: Did you grow up in Chicago?

LEVITAS: Yes, I always lived in Chicago. I went to school in Chicago. I went to grammar school and then had two years of high school after that, and then took a business course at the Bryant and Stratton Business College. And I went to work as a stenographer. In my family in the early days when I was young, I think most of the Jewish men were Republicans. My oldest sister was married and her husband was a socialist. So in our family, there was a good deal of discussion about socialism. And, of course, unions were not very strong in those days. So it was one of the interests that I had by hearing discussions. There were no radios or televisions. On a Saturday, the Jewish newspaper would have continued stories, like maybe one by a French author; they were classical, in translation, and they would be continued and we'd all be interested in that. I read a great deal. I was a terrible bookworm. I just read all the time.

Before I went to work for the Chicago Federation of Labor, I was secretary to the head of an engineering firm, Carrier Engineering Corporation, and I had a very good job. My office was in that brand new building which is now the Illinois State Building, and I had my own office for which I selected the furniture. I was really envied by my friends. Well, Lillian Herstein, of course, was very active in the teachers' union and the labor movement in general, and so,

through her, I also had some of those interests. And then she came to me one day and said Mr. Nockels of the Chicago Federation of Labor, who'd had a man secretary there for some years, was looking for a secretary and would I be interested. Well, I was torn between my interest in that and my job at the Carrier Engineering. But I went over to see him. I had just come back from a vacation, so I told him that I'd have to stay and make up my mind and give notice. Anyway, to make a long story short, I went to work for the Federation.

At that time they were in an old building at 166 West Washington, which has long ago been torn down. It was a dilapidated old building and there was no such thing as a private office. John Fitzpatrick, Ed Nockels, myself, the engineer for the brand new radio station--we were all on one big floor, you know, like a loft. And the Federation News had another room, and the Illinois State Federation of Labor always had adjacent offices. So, that's where we were, which was quite a change from where I had been. And even the personnel, the language. Ed Nockels was used to having a man secretary, and until he became accustomed to having me around, some of the language I heard was very rough. But he learned and tried very hard. He was a very colorful personality. Of course, when I went to work there, I didn't know that they had their delegates meetings two Sunday afternoons a month, and so for years, two Sunday afternoons a month were given over to Federation meetings, which was tough because some of the best invitations I received were for those Sundays. I took down the proceedings, which were printed in our weekly newspaper. The Federation News is a monthly now, but it was a weekly then, and the minutes of the Executive Board meetings were always printed so that the members had a chance to know what was going on. The meetings were extremely interesting because the delegates from the various affiliated unions would make their reports of what was going on, and in addition to that, we had many visitors who would be invited to speak.

For instance, when the coal miners in Kentucky were having trouble and were shot down, and some of the guards that were hired by the mine operators were shot, and they had men in prison--the miners were in prison--a committee from these Kentucky miners came to the Federation meeting. They were really traveling to collect funds to help the men who were in trouble. When you listened to these men--they were not accustomed to getting up on a platform and speaking, but what they said was so shocking. They told about how the coal miners practically owned everything in these mining towns, their groceries, the places where they lived. One

of the miners said a child of one of the miners died and couldn't be buried because the coal operators owned the cemetery. They told about the conditions and you know they were not primed in any way. I remember one time--this was in the summer--there were three or four girls who came from North Carolina. They worked in the cotton mills. I don't know who owned those mills, but they wanted to organize. And, of course, you know the South didn't want any unions. They had been sent to tour the country to raise money. And I remember Morris Bialis of the [International] Ladies Garment Workers [Union] got them dresses from some of the factories who donated them. When they had their pictures taken for newspapers, they really looked very nice. But this Sunday, when they came to the Federation meeting, I thought, "how strange." It was one of those warm, beautiful days, and the girl who got up on the platform was wearing rubbers. And it just didn't dawn on me that her shoes were torn or that she hadn't any. Well, at any rate, they told how they were working for about $2.00 a week and they stood in water, it seemed. I don't think they were rayon mills; I think they were cotton mills. But apparently there's water on the floor and they worked under conditions that were really unbelievable. The mother worked; the daughter worked. Maybe a granddaughter went right along into the mills. And you got this information at first hand from people who didn't even know how to put their story across in a dramatic way. They just told you what actually happened. And we had very interesting people who would be invited to speak, to come to the meeting. I can remember when Congressman Morse spoke to the Federation, and he was a very fiery liberal. I think he was still a Republican then. And we had Golda Meir who's in Israel, and she addressed the Federation meeting many years ago.

INTERVIEWER: What was she doing at that time in her life?

LEVITAS: Well, she was in Palestine, but it was her earlier days in Palestine. She was speaking to various organizations. Of course, you see, the labor movement in Israel is very important because they really have been responsible for the building of Israel. They have set up the health and welfare and pensions and everything. The labor movement is a very important part of Israel in the early days.

And I met Tom Mooney when he was released from prison and came to Chicago because, you see, John Fitzpatrick and Ed Nockels had always done everything they could to help him by raising money and so on. And we all went to a Hungarian restaurant somewhere on the north side and celebrated and danced, you know. And when the McNamara brothers came out

of prison, they also stopped off in Chicago on their way to Indianapolis and we met them. And, of course, Matt Schmidt* was paroled to John Fitzpatrick and was given a job in Downers Grove where our [radio] transmitter was. He was a very capable engineer without formal training. When he was in prison, he was very valuable in his supervision of building and everything else. They treated him with a good deal of consideration and respect, and he had a vast influence over the prisoners. When he was paroled, the prisoners had a plaque made, which they presented to him. He was sort of an easy-going, pleasant person and had no rancor or anything. He said he did it. He did it for a cause and they caught up with him. But, at any rate, when he was released from prison and then had been paroled to John Fitzpatrick of the Federation, he used to come in every week to the office. He had a form to fill out for his parole which I usually did, and which Mr. Fitzpatrick would sign, and quite often I had lunch with him. Our office was in the Furniture Mart and he would come in and pick up the payroll for the boys who were in Downers Grove. You see, the offices and so on were in the Furniture Mart, but the transmitter was in Downers Grove, and that's where he worked. Then, sometime later, he went back to San Francisco and he married Elizabeth Sivermore, a woman from a wealthy family related to the Morgan family. When I was in San Francisco one time they entertained me at their home. It was a house on Russian Hill, which was built on the hillside, and it really had four stories without being a big house. A niece of mine and I were staying at the Mark Hopkins on Nob Hill. When we were there, it really only was $10.00 a day, and that was a very swank hotel. So Matt Schmidt came over to pick us up to bring us over to his place, and he was kidding me about being on Nob Hill, which is considered swank. I said, "Well, you've gone a long way up from San Quentin Prison when you're on Russian Hill," which also was a very fine residential neighborhood--that's where his wife's house was. They came to vist in Chicago several times. They were friends of Anton Johannson who was a well-known labor leader. Well, his wife died in an automobile accident, and then Matt Schmidt lived a few years more. Tom Mooney really didn't survive his release very long because his health was very poor.

INTERVIEWER: Did you say that Fitzpatrick never believed that Mooney was guilty?

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*Matt Schmidt was convicted of planting a bomb in the Los Angeles Time Building. He and another man delivered the dynamite to the building.

LEVITAS: Neither Fitzpatrick nor Nockels ever believed that Mooney was guilty, and there's a book that goes into a good deal of detail about it. Nockels felt that there'd been a lot of phony witnesses and so on. And they did everything they could to show that Mooney was not guilty; but, well the feeling in California at that time--they were very anti-union. And even though many of the witnesses were shown to be people of no character, it didn't seem to help. He was in there for many, many years. John Fitzpatrick and Nockels always were in the forefront when it came to helping these men who really had sacrificed themselves for labor. Mooney was an organizer, and Schmidt was only about twenty-four or twenty-five years old when he was involved in the Los Angeles Times Building [bombing]. But those are things--there have been books written about those cases. I always did the corresponding with them because Nockels was out. He was in Washington, fighting for the radio station, and they generally wrote to him. And then, of course, when they were released, we met them in Chicago. So, it was interesting.

INTERVIEWER: Could you describe Nockels personally a little more?

LEVITAS: Yes. First of all, he was a big man. He was tall and wide. And when I first came to work for him he had just shortly before that come back from Battle Creek, Michigan, where he had diabetes. And in Chicago, in some hospital, they were going to amputate his leg. John Fitzpatrick and Anton Johannson refused to permit them to do that and they hauled him off to Battle Creek, Michigan. He was there for some months. They did not remove his leg. He was put on a very strict diet and he survived. He was diabetic. He was a very forceful, dynamic person. He was a person with strong convictions. For instance, it was he, when radio was brand new, who decided that it was very important for the labor movement to have what he called a voice of labor on the air.

The Chicago Federation of Labor in those days had very little money. And then the affiliation with the Federation was voluntary. You see, unions did not have to belong if they didn't want to. They could be chartered by the A.F. of L., but affiliating with the Illinois Federation of Labor or the Chicago Federation of Labor was optional. Unions paid only two cents per member per month, and they often cheated on their members, you see, because if they had 10,000 members, if they felt like it, they would just declare a thousand. So the Federation did not have much money.

So when Nockels decided that they ought to have a radio station, he persuaded the unions to assess their members a dollar a year towards the radio station. He always used

to say that he hijacked the channel, which he did. I think it was K Y W or something, in Philadelphia. Some big newspaper or corporation had a channel and they didn't use it. So he hopped on it and applied for it for the Federation. Of course, when they first started, they were on a very low power. But they went through a great deal of hardships in order to hold the station. And when they went to 50,000 watts, they had to have the transmitter about twenty miles out of the city. They bought farmland in Downers Grove, and the Laundry Workers Union loaned the Federation $50,000 to pay down on this acreage. Of course, they sold part of that land, and they still have their transmitter out in Downers Grove. But it was Nockels who fought for that. When he would go to Washington he would have to get some of the senators and congressmen to back him up. One of this biggest supporters was Senator Barclay of Kentucky and J. Hamilton Lewis, a senator from Chicago. They were always his biggest supporters. And we sent letters to all of the local unions to ask their support, to write their congressmen. He really did a magnificent job. They're making money. And the Federation is in good condition. It's quite different than the old days.

In the early days of the radio station, it was a real labor station. We used to get all the labor publications from all over the country, and we had a program that we called "Labor Flashes." I used to go through many of these papers for John Fitzpatrick and clip out the things that I thought would interest our listeners. And he would sort of look over them, and then we'd have someone put that on the air. If a union was on strike or had a story to tell the public, they were given free time on the air. And I remember when gangsters tried to horn in on the unions. Robert Fitchie, who was President of the Milk Drivers Union, was kidnapped and held for $50,000 ransom, and the police didn't seem to be able to find out anything. Well, the secretary-treasurer of the Milk Drivers Union was Steve Sumner. He was a kind of short, jolly man--very courageous. He came on the air and said if the police didn't know the kidnappers he could tell them; and he wasn't afraid. Eventually, I think the ransom was paid and Fitchie was released. I don't recall that anyone was ever arrested.

INTERVIEWER: Who paid the ransom, the union?

LEVITAS: The union must have, yes. Who else would have? Yes. And then there was the time that they were after the radio station. There are some things that even though you're a private secretary, you don't know all the details. But I remember, my office was right outside of John Fitzpatrick's

office, and his door was open, and there were three of four men in there. They were trying to make some deal in which they really would be taking over the radio station. And while John Fitzpatrick was not given to profanity, I heard him say to them, "We built this station and by God, I'd wreck it before we'd turn it over to you." They never did get it on it.

INTERVIEWER: Did you know who the men were?

LEVITAS: No, I didn't know who they were.

INTERVIEWER: They weren't other union men?

LEVITAS: No, they were not other union men; but, you know, some of these racketeers get some connections with some union officials whom they terrorize or who are susceptible to bribery. But they were not; I know they were not union officials, that I would have known. Fitzpatrick was a man of great courage, and he was a man who had principles and stood by them. I remember his telling, when he was to be married, there was no jeweler in the city that had a union label on a wedding ring, and he finally got one in Delaware. And you know, during the war when coal was being rationed and all that, he lived in that neighborhood on the South Side where Mayor Daley lives.

INTERVIEWER: Bridgeport?

LEVITAS: Yes, that's where his wife owned several bungalows--all these years he never moved--and one of his friends called up and said, "You know, John, there's going to be a shortage of coal, and it'd be kind of hard to get coal, and I'm going to see that you get a couple of tons of coal so that you'll be supplied." And so this man arranged to have coal sent over there. And when it was delivered, his wife wanted to know how it came about and he told her. And she said, "Well, all right. I'm telling the neighbors to come with their buckets and take coal." And when he died, one of the men was sent to tell her that they would continue to pay Fitzpatrick's salary to her, because he never had received a big salary. She said, "When he worked, he was paid, and now he is gone. I don't accept any salary." She was the same type of person. He has just one son. His son is an engineer.

INTERVIEWER: Do you know where the son is now?

LEVITAS: I really don't know where he lives. He did at one time live in Crystal Lake, but I don't know where he lives now.

INTERVIEWER: What about Mr. Nockels? Did he have a family?

LEVITAS: No, he never had children. I always kept in touch with his widow. She was a very fine person, but she was a hypochondriac for many years, and was always wanting to go to different climates and different doctors and all kinds of fad diets, you know. She died in California some four years ago, I think. She lived to a good old age. He died in 1937, but she was the one who was always sick.

INTERVIEWER: How about some of the early community involvements that the Chicago Federation had in Chicago?

LEVITAS: Well, the Chicago Federation of Labor was involved and interested in all the organizations, or the things that were to serve the people of Chicago. I remember many years ago when one of our delegates had gone to visit a relative at Oak Forest, and he came to a meeting and told about how terrible the conditions were, the lack of proper food and so on. And the Federation sent a committee out there to investigate, and it had quite an effect. They did improve conditions. Anything that was brought to their attention that they felt concerned the people, the working people, whether they were union or nonunion, they worked on it. And they were represented on the Welfare Council, on the Tuberculosis Sanitarium. They were interested in the school system, and then, of course, in labor education. Some organizations invited them to be represented officially, some things came to their attention through members or delegates to the Federation, and they would usually look into them. And the Federation had a committee which was set up to help a union that was having difficulty with an employer before they went on strike. In many cases the Federation's representatives would offer to meet with the employer's representatives and the union. And they did succeed many times in getting adjustments that were satisfactory, and there was no need of a strike. And if a strike was in progress they gave publicity and did all they could to help the union.

INTERVIEWER: Were they able to collect money from other unions and channel it to a striking union?

LEVITAS: They would not collect it. But what we would do, for instance, if the Federation endorsed the union's activities or needs, they were given publicity in the Federation News. It was announced in the meeting and it was on the air if necessary; and, in some cases, where there was time enough, letters were sent out to the other unions to support the strike, but they never collected the money. It went indirectly. Oh, yes. We were represented on the Red Cross and

the Community Fund. And when their annual drive was on for funds, we helped. I worked for President Lee for eleven years, after Fitzpatrick's death. He was a representative on the Community Fund, the Red Cross, and so on. And I would usually send a letter to all our unions, which he would sign as the representative, telling the unions the nature of the cause and urging them to contribute as generously as they could. We had about one hundred employees, including the radio station, the Federation News, and the Federation. So we would send letters to all our employees, urging them to contribute. Then, once a year, the Chicago Federation of Labor has what they call the WCFL Frolics, and they put on a big entertainment. They used to do it in the Streetcarmen's Hall, and I think the last time they did it at the Auditorium. All the money that they raise there they distribute to the Cancer Fund, the Polio Fund, and whatever they decide.

INTERVIEWER: How about labor education? You started to talk about that a little earlier.

LEVITAS: Well, for many years, they had labor union classes in which the University of Illinois cooperated by sending one of their instructors who for a long time was Herman Erickson. And they continued these courses for a number of years, but since I've been away from the Federation, I'm not too sure about it. I think that most of the courses are being given at Roosevelt University.

INTERVIEWER: What did they do in the courses? Was it to train people how to operate a grievance procedure, or did they teach labor history, or what?

LEVITAS: They taught labor history, and they taught labor procedures, and they taught about the federal labor laws on our books. Most unions have to have a labor lawyer. It really isn't possible for any union official to operate on his own unless he's a very unusual man with some legal training. But in order to get the union members interested in the organization of labor, these classes gave the labor history, gave the methods of organization, the procedures of handling meetings, and so on. They were very good courses. We would print the pamphlets for the year's courses. And the classes were held in some cases in union headquarters, in some cases, if they didn't have the facilities, somewhere else.

INTERVIEWER: Did they teach them one union at a time, or did people come from different unions together for the classes?

LEVITAS: In some cases, some large union might want to have just their, and in some cases they had whoever wanted to enroll, members of any union.

INTERVIEWER: Did the Federation have its own lawyer, or did they rely on a number of lawyers?

LEVITAS: They always had their own lawyers.

INTERVIEWER: Who were some of their lawyers?

LEVITAS: Well, years ago there was Dan Carmel whose son, Sherman Carmel, is still a lawyer for the Chicago Federation of Labor. Of course, in more recent years, there've been other lawyers. In the very early days, there was a lawyer by the name of Benjamin F. Goldstein who represented the radio station—that was the early days, early beginnings. The telephone company, the Illinois Bell Telephone Company, had been overcharging their customers, and there was a suit brought against the telephone company, which Banjamin Goldstein handled. The Federation became interested in it and threw their strength back of him, which, I think, helped a great deal in settling that suit. And the Illinois Bell Telephone Company had to pay out the money that they were charged with having gotten from their customers, which they shouldn't have. And so, that was one case that the Federation became involved in. They were just, I suppose, friends of the plaintiffs. But Mr. Goldstein, who was the attorney also for the radio station, had the support of the radio, of the Federation, and most of the labor movement.

INTERVIEWER: Can you think of any other cases that the Federation was involved in that were sort of public interest cases?

LEVITAS: Let's see. . . .

INTERVIEWER: Or, anything even involving health and safety in Chicago?

LEVITAS: Oh, periodically we always had the representative from the Safety Council address the Federation. You see, the Illinois State Federation of Labor was responsible for state legislation. And resolutions that were adopted by the Chicago Federation of Labor would be referred to the State Federation because it had to do with legislation, and they would carry on from there. Now, years ago when the coal mines and other industries in Illinois were responsible for causing many illnesses that were due to the work, the Chicago Federation of Labor always cooperated with the State Federation in getting improvements there, so that the State Federation would have the support of the Chicago Federation, through resolutions and lobbies, and so on.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me a little about the Women's Trade Union League.

LEVITAS: Well, Lillian Herstein was active there for quite a long time before I was, and she could give you their early beginnings. But the women around the turn of the century, that would be about seventy years ago, women workers really looked to other women to help them because they were considered the least important in the working world. Even the men, before unionization, were badly off, and, of course, the women had less than the men did, in jobs, hours, and so on. And the Women's Trade Union League was formed by women union members and socially minded women. The active women in Chicago were Jane Addams, Ellen Gates Starr, Florence Kelley and Mary MacDowell and the very wealthy Mrs. Charles Henrotin. Wherever there was any great need to help women workers, where the situations became so bad that women walked off their jobs, or just wouldn't take the hardships anymore, the Women's Trade Union League stepped in and helped. And, as a matter of fact, there were times when there were strikes among the men clothing workers where the Women's Trade Union League and the socially minded women who helped them set up soup kitchens and did everything they could to help.

INTERVIEWER: So they helped the men, too.

LEVITAS: Yes, they helped the men, too. And then when I became active in the Women's Trade Union League, they were pretty well established in the larger cities. In Chicago, we had a building on Ashland Boulevard, near Jackson, and we had a circulating library for members. The union women were paying. We had labor education courses to which the various unions sent their members. And the Women's Trade Union League building had all the facilities. If they had a party, they had a kitchen and dining room, and they had clean floors. And there was the library. Then there were the rooms where meetings were held, celebrations. Mrs. Roosevelt once visited there. Mrs. Roosevelt was very, very active in the New York Women's Trade Union League. The League lobbied in Springfield [Illinois] when the unions to which men belonged needed women's support. For instance, I remember one time when the Firemen's Union had the reason to demand better conditions or more money. Their wives joined some of the Women's Trade Union League members and went down to Springfield to lobby. The firemen joined the officers and members of the Women's Trade Union League and also went down to Springfield to lobby. Sometimes it was at city hall. The Women's Trade Union League was helpful to the men's unions when they needed them. And the unions, like the Milk Drivers Union, the Laundry Drivers, where they had only men, they made financial contributions to the League, because otherwise the League really couldn't have operated.

INTERVIEWER: Is that where most of the money came from, from men's unions?

LEVITAS: Well, most of the money came from the unions that contributed, and also from the dues of the members. The dues were small amounts, and sometimes some wealthy patron might give money or leave a legacy. But they never had enough money. And when they did go out of business, it was the lack of money. It was also due to the fact that the services of the League were not needed so much. As a matter of fact, I think it could have continued for a women's organization. But the real purposes of the League were already achieved because women were organized. There were courses in labor education, through some of the larger unions themselves and through the Chicago Federation of Labor. So the League had served a very important purpose and when the League chapters dissolved, they were not missed as much as they would have been if it happened in the earlier days.

INTERVIEWER: What did they do specifically for women, for women only, in the early days that unions were not doing, or were not able to do? What about protective legislation?

LEVITAS: Well, legislation that the League worked for or fought against was mainly on the state level, in Springfield. Now in Washington, Elizabeth Christman, who was the secretary-treasurer of the national Women's Trade Union League, was also a lobbyist on federal legislation. And there were times when we worked with lobbyists for unions in which men were involved, or for legislation that concerned women only. For years, there were always efforts to do away with protective legislation for women because many businesses wanted women to work longer hours at certain times, and also not to demand the same rates that they were paying men for the same work.

INTERVIEWER: How did the women workers themselves feel about it? Did they ever oppose protective legislation, or did they want it?

LEVITAS: In the executive positions and in some jobs where they wanted the overtime work, they may have. But they were not very vocal about it. The organized women's groups were opposed to doing away with protective legislation. And, as a matter of fact, in Illinois, I know when they had the forty-eight hour week, there were certain times, like Christmas, that it was permitted to work longer hours for those special periods. But then, of course, there got to be a forty-hour week. But I don't think that the women who now are fighting to do away with legislation that has been passed to protect women are concerned with the types of work that were considered at the times that those laws were passed.

INTERVIEWER: What kinds of occupations were particularly hard on women that made other women want to help them by getting this legislation?

LEVITAS: Well, the women who worked in the stockyards, women who worked in factories, and even the women who worked in department stores. You know, to this day when I go to shop in a department store, I think it's terrible for women not to be allowed to sit back of counters because they have to be on their feet all day. Now, of course, conditions are so much improved, but there was a time when women had to eat their lunches in the toilets, and they sometimes had only one facility for the men and the women. There was no consideration. Everything that has been improved has been brought about by efforts on the part of unions or individuals, [in] organized groups. Now there are laws that have to be observed. They have factory inspection laws where they send out inspectors to look to see whether children under age are employed or whether women are working more hours than they should. But these improvements all came about through the efforts of the unions and the Women's Trade Union League. But they had to fight for them all the way. Well, if these laws were removed now, it might benefit some women but it would be very bad for other women workers.

INTERVIEWER: For primarily the industrial women workers in the poorest paying jobs?

LEVITAS: Yes, and there's no doubt some of them would want to earn extra money by working unbearably long hours. Of course, times have changed, and many women are now protected by their individual unions who look out for their interests so that they're not exploited. But at the same time, there are others who would suffer as the result of the removal of the protective laws.

INTERVIEWER: I suppose a good many hospital workers and laundry workers and people like that who aren't unionized might.

LEVITAS: Well, they are unionized in the cities here now. And then you have states, like Arizona, which have what they call right-to-work laws, which means that if, say, a laundry should want to hire a person who doesn't join the union, the union can't keep them from hiring that person. In a unionized plant an employer is allowed to hire a person and keep them for thirty days to decide whether that person will stay. If the person stays, they have to join the union. But in states where they have what they call the right-to-work laws, they don't have to join the union, so you see you

have the competition right there. If the unions have contracts for so many hours and such wages, the person who doesn't join the union could work longer and take less.

INTERVIEWER: And I suppose they could eventually replace union workers with nonunion workers, through attrition, if workers died or left, or something like that?

LEVITAS: Oh, yes. I don't recall right now how many states have what they call right-to-work laws, but Arizona, I know, is one.

INTERVIEWER: How about the race situation in unions in the early twentieth century?

LEVITAS: The unions were accused of wanting to keep Negroes and others out of the apprenticeship programs. As I saw it years ago, the apprenticeship educational programs, which were handled by the Board of Education in cooperation with the unions and where the unions could say how many apprentices could go in, it really wasn't a matter of keeping Negroes out. For instance in, say, the building trades, the electrical workers, or the iron workers, originally most of their members were Irish immigrants. Well, these men, when they became journeymen, had sons and nephews and friends. And so they brought their own in, and that was true in most of the good-paying jobs where you had to have the training. And you could not have too many apprentices graduating because they couldn't get a journeyman's card until there was a job.

So, I know in my own family, my oldest brother had been a sort of a circulation manager or distributor for the Hearst papers many years ago. Well, my youngest brother became a printing pressman, a web pressman, and he worked for the Hearst papers. But he had been through the period of apprenticeship until he became a journeyman. My nephew, because his uncle was in there, also applied for an apprenticeship, and he took his turn, and he has worked for newspaper printing, and so on. And it's usually family connections, so that you find that the Irish would predominate in many of the building trades. They took care of their own. And I remember during the Depression, a man from the Anti-Defamation League came to the office to see me. And he complained about a young fellow he knew who wanted to get a job as an elevator operator. And I said, "Well, he can see a member of the union." And he said, "No, he's willing to join the union, and there's a building where he knows the owner who wants to give him the job, but he says the reason they don't give it to him is because he's Jewish." And I said, "That isn't

true. In the first place, there are very few Jewish young fellows that are elevator operators, whether there was something about their makeup--it was too monotonous a job, or what--but they didn't go for it. And another thing, if you have members who are out of work, they're not going to permit a nonunion man to be given a job because he knows the building owner." "So," I said, "it's purely economic. It's not anything else, I know that."

But, you see, that's been the feeling among the Negroes, too. Well, it was true that in the building trades there were very few Negroes in the unions simply because in the skilled crafts there was a limit to how many apprentices they could train and how many journeymen they could put to work. And usually they took care of their own. So there was a period of time when a group of building trades people from the South Side, Negroes, had sort of formed their own organizations and worked as nonunion men. But they proved to us the fact that they couldn't get any of the union jobs, even in their own location. And so they came to see Mr. Fitzpatrick, and he arranged a meeting between some of the officers of the building trades unions and the Negroes from the South Side. And they sat down and discussed the problems, and they said, of course, that they couldn't get into the unions. Many of them were painters, you know, and carpenters, and so on. But they were not union members. They couldn't get union jobs. Mr. Fitzpatrick was the chairman. I sat in and took the minutes. And they discussed it. And, of course, these Negro leaders of the workers there pointed out the fact that a lot of work was done in their neighborhoods. They weren't getting the benefit of it. And if there was an epidemic of disease out there, they said, you people get it, too. So, it was quite a discussion on what their needs were, what their demands were. But it simmered down to the fact that they just didn't have any openings at this time. And, of course, that went on for years. But it really wasn't so much a matter of racism as taking care of their own. Electricians get very good wages, you know, so if there's a chance to get an apprenticeship, invariably some member or officer has a nephew or son or a friend. They get them in. Now, of course, right now, there's been more of a demand and more of an effort, and they just have to make way for more of the Negroes to get the training that they need.

INTERVIEWER: How did the formation of the C.I.O. [Congress of Industrial Organizations] affect the city Federation? Did it seem like a major change was going on at the time?

LEVITAS: I attended the convention of the A.F. of L. when the C.I.O. was formed. It was in Tampa, Florida. Lillian Herstein and I were there. It was hectic--very dramatic!

INTERVIEWER: Must have been very exciting!

LEVITAS: No, not that. I mean arguments, discussions, and so on. And, of course, when the C.I.O. was formed, the unions that belonged to the C.I.O. were put out of the A.F. of L. I think there were about eleven internationals. Since they were not in the A.F. of L., they could not belong to the city central body or the state federation until they formed their own, you see, because they were not eligible. So, of course, we lost some. Now, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers were organized with the help of John Fitzpatrick, the Women's Trade Union League and others, and they were a very fine union body. But when they joined the C.I.O., they were out of the A.F. of L. And, I remember, John Fitzpatrick and Ed Nockels were very friendly to them. We would get letters from some city central bodies saying, "Is the label of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers legitimate?" This was so they wouldn't have to boycott them. Neither John Fitzpatrick nor Ed Nockels answered those letters. I answered them. I would be very subtle about it and tell them that they were good trade unionists. I didn't say they were no longer affiliated, which was the truth. They supported every union activity. They were good trade unionists. Their men were all members and their label was legitimate.

Now in Chicago, the Teamsters Union is out of the A.F. of L. - C.I.O., but the Chicago Federation of Labor is very loyal to them. It used to be that on the Executive Board of the Federation there were at least three members of the Teamsters' Union, the Milk Drivers, the Bakery Drivers, the Laundry Drivers. They were great supporters of the Chicago Federation of Labor. Well, now they can't be affiliated because they're out of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. But the Chicago Federation of Labor supports them in every way they can.

INTERVIEWER: You sort of implied that the Federation was friendly right along to all unionists even though they weren't in.

LEVITAS: Well, to those that they knew well enough. You see, John Fitzpatrick used to come to the office on a Saturday about noon, and he wouldn't go out to eat any lunch. He'd never go out to eat in any restaurant that wasn't unionized. He wouldn't patronize <u>anything</u> that wasn't unionized. And he would come in on a Saturday--his door was always open, so that if anyone wanted to see him--you know, people who worked they could see him. And he told me that one Saturday, long before I was there, a young man came in to see him

and said he worked in a men's clothing shop. The conditions were so bad that he felt that they ought to organize a union and that he would like to have the help of the Chicago Federation of Labor. The name of that young man was Samuel Levin, and he talked to him. And, I think, the following Saturday another young man came in and his name was Sidney Hillman. And, that's how the Amalgamated Clothing Workers got started. They struck Hart, Schaffner and Marx. And these men really had nothing to back them up, but the Chicago Federation of Labor; and the Women's Trade Union League helped them. And that was the beginning of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. Now, the International Ladies Garment Workers--I remember when some of their officers came in and they were having a very bad time with Communists who were trying to wreck the union. And the Federation loaned them some money. They were in deep trouble. You see, there was a period when the Communists would become very active in the unions, even become officers. They called it "boring from within" instead of being on the outside. They did this in the office workers union to a small extent. They did it in the garment workers union, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. They did it in other unions, too. And those were bad periods for the unions because it really disrupted their organizations.

INTERVIEWER: What was the period of the late thirties, like when the C.I.O. organizing drives were going on? Was the Federation completely apart from all of it then, or did they in any way help even though they were not C.I.O.?

LEVITAS: There were a good many Communists who were in the C.I.O.

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

LEVITAS: And they meant well. Well, when the A.F. of L. threw the internationals out, then no A.F. of L. city central body or state federation was permitted to cooperate with them.

INTERVIEWER: When the A.F. of L. and the C.I.O. got together again in '55, I believe it was, did this seem like a big change in any way to you?

LEVITAS: Oh, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me how things were different then?

LEVITAS: Well, you see, for a while there was a raiding of unions, you know. By 1955, many animosities had died down, and there was more cooperation. Take, for instance, some small town or city where they have two city central bodies, the

C.I.O., the A.F. of L., or the state federations, where they worked on legislation. It reached the point where the A.F. of L. and the C.I.O. at the top got together. Then it was up to the others. They were directed to do it, and if they didn't do it, they would be forced to do it. I know it took the Chicago Federation of Labor quite a while to go in with the South Chicago Trades and Labor Assembly. It took quite a long time because the officers there didn't want to give up their jurisdictions. The A.F. of L. had their city central body in those places and so did the C.I.O. And in some cases they just couldn't get together until the A.F. of L. would send representatives down. It took some time.

INTERVIEWER: Was it difficult for the personnel and the officers? Were any of them left out when the merger occurred?

LEVITAS: Well, they would accept some of them. You see, the Chicago Federation of Labor increased its vice-presidents and paid one of the C.I.O. officers, taken in as a paid vice-president. All those things had to be arranged on the basis of individual problems, you know. It took time, quite some time, for some of them to get together.

INTERVIEWER: To go back to the whole question of ethnics in unions, there are a couple of things I wanted to ask you about that. Were there other unions that seemed to be predominantly built on an ethnic base?

LEVITAS: Street cleaners were mostly all Italian. The Italian politicians, you know, would see that they got jobs. Those were city jobs. For instance, even in the A.F. of L. unions many years ago, there were ethnic groups by their own lodges. For instance, the painters would have a Jewish local, a German local, a Bohemian local, because they lived in those neighborhoods. And the carpenters--the Jewish local. There were other locals of their own ethnic groups, because of the fact that they lived in neighborhoods where they were practically all of the same ethnic background.

INTERVIEWER: Then the ethnic base really helps to create an organization.

LEVITAS: Take the Bakery Workers Union. There was the Jewish local that made bagels and things, you know, that Jewish people from the old country used to like. Now, of course, there're just three bakers' locals, and many of them are amalgamated. But there was a time when they had a number of them, and the same thing was true of the butchers and the meat cutters. You see, there's the kosher meat cutters who had supplied kosher butcher shops. They naturally had a local of their

own. Now, the Marble Slate and Stone Polishers, Tile and Marble Setters, and so on and so forth, a lot of those members were Italian. The Barbers Union usually had Italian officers because, I think, they had a lot of Italian members. Now the Meat Cutters, Local 485, kosher, that would be made up of Jewish members who work in kosher butcher shops, meat plants. They're the ones who slaughter the cattle in a kosher way. Now there are three locals right now in the Meat Cutters, the Amalgamated Meat Cutters, that are strictly Jewish, kosher. So, you see, that'd be for reasons of religion.

INTERVIEWER: Did the language make a difference, too?

LEVITAS: There are hod carriers, paving inspectors, paving laborers that are definitely mostly Italian. There was a time in the garment trades in the early days, when they were mostly Jewish immigrants, and then Italians went in. And now the Negroes. In the International Ladies Garment Workers, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, I think they have more Negro members than any other.

INTERVIEWER: So the ethnic base may be one thing to begin with, and change.

LEVITAS: Yes. But, you see, when it started it was due to the immigration waves. The Italians took the jobs of street pavers, street cleaners. Those of them who were skilled, barbers, did that. The needle trades got most of the Jewish people. And then, of course, the other trades, the skilled trades in the building trades, there was a time when they were ethnic in character because of their residential location.

INTERVIEWER: And I suppose the language barrier would have been a problem with that first group of immigrants who would have to conduct business.

LEVITAS: Yes, because they couldn't speak English.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about the first office workers' union.

LEVITAS: The first local union charter was issued in 1904 to a group in Indianapolis, Indiana. Recently I came across a copy of a publication, Life and Labor, which was issued in October, 1920. There was an article written by the officer of the New York local entitled, "When the Scab Class Breaks Up." The writer pointed out that white collar workers consider themselves superior to other workers and frequently acted as scabs when union craftsmen went out on strike. In the article, the writer said at that time, if two million white collar workers joined together in solidarity, the

millenium would be reached for white collar workers. And their sole organization, the American Federation of Labor, had issued only seventy charters, which were known as Federal Union Charters; that is, there were no internationals; they were just directly chartered by the A.F. of L. And they covered secretaries, stenographers, typists, bookkeepers, accountants, stenotype operators, court reporters, etcetera. In New York, activities to organize white collar workers were probably stronger than anywhere else, but they had very little money and no help from the American Federation of Labor. The American Federation of Labor was more interested in organizing the men in the craft unions because they felt that they were stable and so on. And they just didn't feel they wanted to do what they considered waste money on white collar workers who were not considered good union material.

INTERVIEWER: Were most of them women? Most of the white collar workers?

LEVITAS: No, they were not.

INTERVIEWER: Most of them were men?

LEVITAS: Yes. You might realize that bookkeepers, accountants, court recorders were probably more men than women. But they still considered themselves as professionals. And, in those days, there were no unions professionally superior to them, like the teachers. In all educational fields, elementary schools, high schools, colleges, nowadays they're all organized, but at that time they were not. Then again, of course, musicians were organized, but somehow or other, they were considered in a different class. In this day and age, you have actors, artists, top musicians, who are all in unions of their own. But years ago they were not. And the white collar workers considered themselves superior to blue collar workers. They also felt they were closer to their bosses, and for that reason they were really difficult to organize. They were poorly paid; they worked long hours, and had no way of correcting grievances. But it took them many years to get around to a change.

Now in Chicago, in 1926, when I came to work for the Chicago Federation of Labor (that was truly the beginning of the Depression years), a number of girls who were secretaries or stenographers came to see me, not all together, but a few of them would drift in now and then. Someone had told them, "Go to the Chicago Federation of Labor and see Mollie Levitas." And they would tell me they worked in offices; their pay was very low; they put in long hours, overtime

without being paid. During those years, I know there were some very fine legal secretaries that were getting $18.00 - $20.00 a week because jobs were hard to get and there was no one to get any standard for them. There was only one white-collar union in Chicago at the time, and that was a union that included employees of the city hall, white collar employees. And their problems were completely different from other offices because the city council decided when they were to be given raises. They had classifications and they would get increases according to the classification; and I suppose the finance committee of the city council would decide they could have increases. Well, that didn't apply to offices in outside business, outside of the city hall. And for that reason they really did not care to take in other people. As a matter of fact, the several officers who transacted the business of the union were employees of the city hall. They had a little office where they'd meet and discuss their business. They never had any membership meetings because they didn't seem to need it.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of functions did that union serve if they couldn't negotiate for wage increases?

LEVITAS: Well, they did. They would appear before the city council and make their demands. But they only represented the people who worked for the city hall. And, as I said, their problems were completely suited to their employer, which was the city of Chicago.

Now, there were people who worked with the offices of unions in Chicago who felt that they wanted to be union members. So, as a great favor, this union would take some of them in. They really had no representation, but at least they could use the union label, whatever their number was. They called themselves stenographers, typists, bookkeepers, and so on, local so and so. Well, these people who worked in offices and had no representation were very eager to be organized. And they just didn't know where to go. John Fitzpatrick, the president of the Chicago Federation of Labor, and Edward N. Nockels, the secretary (my bosses), were very helpful and sympathetic. As a matter of fact, John Fitzpatrick was the official representative of the American Federation of Labor in Chicago. They were very much interested when I talked to them about the need of getting a charter for an office workers' local union. And so, with their help, we managed to get a local union organization. After we got this charter and got some people organized in the union, I used to spend my vacations attending A.F. of L. conventions. Of course, I was eligible to go as a delegate

from my union. And generally, I would get a list of the delegates from other office workers' unions from the secretary of the American Federation of Labor whom I got to know through Mr. Nockels. He would give me a list of the delegates and where they were staying; and I'd round them up and we'd meet and discuss the future of organization of white collar workers.

As I said before, the American Federation of Labor was not interested to the extent that they would spend money. They felt that they needed it for other organizational activities. With the interest of local unions from other parts of the country, in 1942, the American Federation of Labor granted to office workers a national council charter. That was a great step forward. When the national council shows enough progress in organizing and in being able to pay their expenses, then they can apply for an international charter. The A.F. of L. gave some help to the national council; so, by 1945, we were granted an international charter.

INTERVIEWER: How did this affect your work?

LEVITAS: My own personal work?

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

LEVITAS: Well, as I said before, Mr. Fitzpatrick and Mr. Nockels were very cooperative. I could take my vacation and go to a convention. When the international charter was granted and I was made one of the vice-presidents, I would be able to get away for the week for a conference. As it happened, I put in a good deal of extra time anyway so they thought I was entitled to do it. They were very helpful and very cooperative, and that helped a great deal. I would say that predominantly women were members in the office workers' locals or the white collar local's unions, though there were quite a few men. As a matter of fact, the elected president and secretary-treasurer were men and still are. On the executive board, the vice-president and so on, there were a number of women.

INTERVIEWER: Have they ever had a woman president in the union?

LEVITAS: No. The same man has been reelected. The secretary-treasurer is from, I believe, Portland, Oregon. The president, Howard Coughlin, is from New York. And the present headquarters is in Washington. Right now, they have approximately 250 local unions and about 90,000 members. And that may not seem a great deal, but there are a number of internationals who have claimed office workers connected with

them as their jurisdiction, which really isn't fair, but it's been done. For instance, in Chicago, the Dairy Employees Union, which is part of the Teamsters, has insisted on claiming all the office people who work in the big dairies. And the same thing is true of some of the Teamsters in other fields. They're a pretty strong union and they resisted. Apparently the office employees have been satisfied because they benefit by any improvement that the Teamsters get in salaries and so on. They haven't made any complaints. But the International Office Employees [Union] do lose people like that. Then, also, under white collar workers are the Railway and Steamship Clerks Unions. They take in all the white collar workers who work for railroads and steamships, and in a way they have different standards. So they really are not trespassing on the Office and Professional Workers Union when they accept those people. Then the federal employees have an international of their own; and there, too, they have standards and rules that come within the government, like pensions and civil service. So, too, are white collar workers, but they are members of the Federal Employees Union.

INTERVIEWER: Where people like the Teamsters and other big unions have taken in white collar workers, did they mainly organize them themselves where there was no union or did they raid a lot?

LEVITAS: They didn't really raid; they simply took the people who worked for their employers.

INTERVIEWER: They weren't already organized by anybody?

LEVITAS: No, they were not.

INTERVIEWER: But they weren't available for you to organize?

LEVITAS: Yes, they really should have permitted them to belong to the Office and Professional Workers Union. And I believe that if these people did not receive proper recognition and benefits, they would. They'd probably object to being with them, but they are taken care of. I assume they are, and I'm pretty sure they are. So they're satisfied, you know. Now the Longshoremen's Association--they, too, have always claimed any of the white collar workers who worked for their employers. So, you see, there are a great many more white collar employees in the United States and Canada. Every international union includes Canada. So there are many more who are organized but are not in the Office and Professional Workers Union.

Then--I'll go back a little--when we organized our first local union, we immediately had applications from people who wanted to become members and we were glad to take them in. After we did, we had some of the troubles that the old established unions had. In Chicago, for instance, there were several women who worked for the Communist Party [Daily] Worker; and they were members in good standing. They were really Communist indoctrinated, and they used to like to bring in their ideas to the union meetings.

INTERVIEWER: What effect did this have on the union?

LEVITAS: Well, I'll just tell you. There were a number of white collar workers who were working for unions who had been expelled by the A.F. of L. and who belonged to the C.I.O.; and they, too, were having ideas that were contrary to what the A.F. of L. put forth. We had a great deal of difficulty with them because if our union had a speaker who may have been political, maybe someone running for Congress, then the several members who worked with the Daily Worker insisted that we ought to invite a Communist speaker, because many of them ran their names on the ballot. And then there were other problems. For instance, when some C.I.O. union was on strike and picketing plants, our members who worked for C.I.O. unions would refuse to cross the picket line although the A.F. of L. did not recognize this picket line. The interesting thing was that some of these members were the most active, ardent workers in the union. It was nothing for some of them to stay up half the night mimeographing sheets to hand out to some place that we wanted to organize. One of our most active workers was a young woman by the name of Elizabeth Cord. You know, in that period many young people believed in communism.

INTERVIEWER: This was during the Depression?

LEVITAS: Yes. She was our treasurer, and I think she was married, but she worked. She would go out on her lunch hour to collect dues. I mean, they were very good workers. Of course, Mr. Fitzpatrick represented the A.F. of L. and was supposed to keep an eye on these federally chartered unions. Where a union is chartered by an international, it's the international that has complete jurisdiction, but if the union is chartered directly by the A.F. of L., it's the A.F. of L. that has complete jurisdiction. And Mr. Fitzpatrick, in watching the activities, felt that the charter should be revoked. I hated to see them do it because there'd been so much work that had gone into it, and there were so many ardent workers. And I said, "I'll attend all executive

board meetings and if anything is done that shouldn't be done I'll report it to you." Well, sometimes they would meet three times a week, but eventually, he said he'd have to recommend that the charter be revoked.

INTERVIEWER: Was this the result of any particular incident or just an accumulation of incidents?

LEVITAS: Yes, their refusing to go through a picket line that the A.F. of L. had not recognized and also some of the members who were Communist inspired. So we had that charter revoked, and we had to start all over again.

INTERVIEWER: And what year was this?

LEVITAS: I really can't remember the exact year, but it was before we became a national council.

INTERVIEWER: It was early?

LEVITAS: Yes. It was out first federal charter, you see. And then, of course, after the International Union charter was granted, the organization had an increase. It increased because the International had some financial support from the A.F. of L., and they had their own organizers, some of them paid by the A.F. of L. And the climate for organization improved, especially for white collar workers, although there were always problems. I remember, before we received an international charter, I was a vice-president, and I went to a convention in St. Louis, the national council's convention. We had a great many delegates from southern states. And to us from the North it was really unbelievable, because on the floor of the convention, some of these southern delegates were practically fighting the Civil War all over again. The New York delegates were quite radical and liberal. Radical and very activist. They brought in resolutions like anti-lynching laws and laws to end discrimination against people on account of color. They were resolutions that often had come into the A.F. of L. convention. I remember at that time I was chairman of the resolutions committee, and I spoke for those resolutions. I recommended their adoption. And the southern delegates decided that I had to go. And they did; they defeated me. They had most of the votes. But I think that to us from the North it was very hard. Of course, things have changed since then. At that time, these delegates were workers, you know, from offices and so on; and they'd speak against these resolutions. Well, that's the way it was at that time.

INTERVIEWER: But they were able to carry the day then?

LEVITAS: Well, they had; since the convention was in St. Louis, for some reason or another, we had a great many delegates from the southern states.

INTERVIEWER: I see. It would really depend on where the convention was in a particular year?

LEVITAS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me if the climate has changed for organizing white collar workers?

LEVITAS: Yes, it has changed a great deal. White collar workers, like other professional workers, realize that their destiny lies in their own efforts through organization. They no longer feel that because they're close to their bosses that they can demand improvement in salaries and working conditions or that they can bring their grievances directly to their bosses. They now realize that the only way they can have conditions suited to them is through organization. And they also see that professional workers with much greater educational experience have also found it necessary to have organizations represent them. The climate has changed considerably.

INTERVIEWER: It's respectable now.

LEVITAS: It's respectable and it's also something they must have if they want to stay in their chosen field of work and be given the pay and the conditions they feel they're entitled to.

INTERVIEWER: What about the C.I.O.? How soon did they start organizing white collar workers? And what kind of effect did this have on the A.F. of L. white collar workers' unions?

LEVITAS: As a matter of fact, the C.I.O. organized everybody in a plant in one union. That did not always suit the white collar workers because in establishing wage standards and so on, they became part of the other workers, and they were not very well satisfied with it. You see, the C.I.O. did not go in for exclusive crafts, so that if white collar workers worked in the offices of, say, a big factory where there were all sorts of crafts involved they became part of the whole package deal.

INTERVIEWER: They lost their identity to a certain extent?

LEVITAS: Yes, and they lost their ability to set up standards of their own.

INTERVIEWER: How did they fare economically? Did they do better with the A.F. of L.? Or could you make any kind of judgment like that?

LEVITAS: Well, at the time that the C.I.O. was set up there weren't so many of the white collar workers organized by the A.F. of L.

INTERVIEWER: I'm a little curious about the strikes where the C.I.O. people in a plant were on strike and the office workers belonged to the A.F. of L. Were the officer workers organized before the C.I.O. went in there?

LEVITAS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: They were really organized first, then?

LEVITAS: They were really organized first, with our first federal union charter, and that's why the charter was revoked. There was one company, I think it was the National Tea Company, that was being struck by some C.I.O. union, and the girls who were our members refused to cross that picket line, which was not recognized by the A.F. of L. But, in fact, one of our presidents was the secretary to the head of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, which was C.I.O. And then one of the young men who worked for the Steelworkers Union, and later became an organizer for them, was a member of the executive board of the local union. See, they all wanted to belong to a union, and at that time that was the only one to join. The C.I.O. did not set up any white collar workers' union. I mean, as I said before, they included everybody in a plant in their organization.

INTERVIEWER: Did they do anything about organizing office workers who weren't involved in large plants, or did they leave all that to the A.F. of L.?

LEVITAS: They left that. They had enough to do of their own.

INTERVIEWER: What advantage did you get personally by belonging to the office workers' union? Did you ever negotiate a contract with your own boss?

LEVITAS: Well, as a matter of fact, in later years, after we had the International Union and had the Office Workers Union in Chicago, Local 28, they had members who worked for the

Automatic Electric Company and for various plants, and also employees of union offices. And the business agent who, to my regret, I put in the job in the belief that if she couldn't handle it she wouldn't stay. But I was wrong. She stayed. Like a political machine, she built up her supporters and so we were stuck with her. And when there were things to negotiate, after John Fitzpatrick and Nockels were gone, we couldn't look to her as the business representative because when she struck a snag, she'd call on some of the officers of the Federation to help her. So that when we needed to get a pension system, I had to do it, which is not a good way when you are in the office, I mean when you go out and have petitions signed and your boss feels you've done it over his head. That's why it's important for people to have an outside representative who will come in and hold talks and do whatever has to be done. As an employee, it isn't easy because in a great many cases, all the other employees will let George do it, you know. I know that my boss was peeved at the fact that I had. Of course, he knew that I was interested in it.

INTERVIEWER: You couldn't get the union to actually do it through other channels?

LEVITAS: If you have a business agent who is not capable and who doesn't have the respect of your employers, you feel she's not going to be able to do very much.

INTERVIEWER: Now this is a case of officers who don't really function?

LEVITAS: That's right, who are not capable of functioning.

INTERVIEWER: But you did get a pension plan through, then, in another fashion?

LEVITAS: Yes. As a matter of fact, a resolution had been adopted by the Chicago Federation of Labor some years previous. I used to talk to the president about it, that is, by the time it was not John Fitzpatrick anymore. And they never were ready. They needed the money for the radio station, or there was always something. And finally, we reached a point where I set up a petition and had the employees sign it and present it to the executive board as a whole, which the president of the Federation didn't exactly like. Then it took some time, but that's the only way we did it.

Now there were some of the unions--for instance, the Teachers Union had a pension plan set up which the business agent had really handed to her. You see, the Teachers

Union could not stall their office employees when they themselves were having a pension. So there were some unions that had it because the officers were willing to do it, without any pressure.

INTERVIEWER: There's one last question I'd like to ask you, Miss Levitas--that is, what effect mechanization is having on things like the white collar workers' union.

LEVITAS: I can only relate what I heard in a discussion on this subject. I'm not an expert on it. You know, it's some time since I've been in an office myself. But the opinions that I heard expressed are that as more banks and other large business institutions increase their office machinery, white collar workers will be working more like workers in a factory where there's mass production. And the office workers will no longer feel close to their boss and other officials in their plant. The work and the relationships will be more impersonal. Then, too, white collar workers will be required to learn special skills to handle computers and other electronic devices, so I believe they'll feel a greater need for the protection of unions.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you.

. . .

INTERVIEWER: Miss Levitas, I think today you were going to tell me a little about how the city Federation operated when management changed. Can you think back to the period when Nockels and Fitzpatrick left?

LEVITAS: Nockels died very suddenly in February 1937. He was a diabetic but he really had no history of a heart condition. But he died suddenly and apparently it was a heart condition. After his death in February, our elections were held in June and after his death, I acted as Secretary. At the elections, Joseph D. Keenan of the Electrical Workers Union was elected. He had the backing of all the building trades unions and he was sponsored for the job even though he had never really taken an active part in this city central body. While Mr. Nockels was not an electrician, in his day he belonged to the gas fitters union, so because of that they felt that office should stay with someone in the category of the building trades. Joseph D. Keenan of the electrical workers was elected secretary. He had been employed by the sanitary district.

INTERVIEWER: Of the city?

LEVITAS: Yes, and took a leave of absence when he was elected to this office in 1937. It was the beginning of the war in Europe and when the United States went in to help, Mr. Fitzpatrick was asked to work on the War Labor Board, which meant that he would travel around to the different factories and organizations that had war industry contracts and speed up the work that was so necessary for the United States to go into the war. Mr. Fitzpatrick was not physically able to do that sort of a job, but he recommended Joe Keenan. Mr. Keenan was accepted and then he traveled all over the country, going to the various factories and urging them to speed up the work and do whatever was necessary to help them speed up. So he really was out of the Federation. He was not on the payroll and he was not working there and I carried on the work of the Secretary without the title.

INTERVIEWER: You mean they didn't replace him at all, you just did his work?

LEVITAS: Yes. Then after the war was over he was selected to work with General Lucius Clay in Germany to help revive the labor movement, which Hitler had dissolved. In order to work with the General he had to have an army title. I don't know what you'd call it, but it was not a genuine army service title. I don't remember what it was, some sort of title which linked him to the military. And he worked in Germany. His wife went down with him then, and he helped to rebuild the labor movement. The American Federation of Labor contributed money to that and I'm sure our government helped. I can't recall now just how long he was there. Of course, he was always re-elected. They felt that he wanted to be re-elected. It was on an absentee basis. He was serving the government. After he was through in Germany, he was asked to take on the job of--I don't remember whether they called it C.O.P.E. then--but it was to establish an interest in politics in the labor movement and help the candidates whom the labor movement considered worthy of their support. So he was traveling around the country doing that.

INTERVIEWER: Who paid his salary then?

LEVITAS: He never was paid by the city Federation. Then it was the American Federation of Labor or whatever committee raised the funds for C.O.P.E. or the Political Action Committee. He was paid then but he always retained the office of Secretary to the Chicago Federation of Labor through those years. I suppose the people felt that in as much as he was doing work that was of interest to them and he wanted to hold on to the office, they re-elected him.

INTERVIEWER: Was there any consideration about the amount of work in that office that he was not able to do?

LEVITAS: No, I did it anyway, which is often the case with those offices.

INTERVIEWER: You mean whether the man was there or away the secretary did it?

LEVITAS: Usually. We used to have delegate meetings two Sunday afternoons a month until it was changed to one Tuesday night a month, and I would cover the meetings and take the proceedings. They would be published in the Federation News, and they were always signed with the name of the Secretary. It was the same with letters that went out. I had suggested that I sign as Assistant Secretary but he didn't really like that.

INTERVIEWER: So he trusted you in making the decision, in writing letters and everything else?

LEVITAS: Why not? I did them anyway. I wrote the letters and signed them Joseph D. Keenan, Secretary, all the time he was gone.

INTERVIEWER: How many years did that add up to?

LEVITAS: You know I just can't recall exactly the period when he was working for the War Production Board, the period that he went to Germany, and the period in which he worked for the A.F. of L. on the political angle. He gave up the office when he was made the Secretary-Treasurer of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and moved to Washington, D.C. Then another man from the electrical workers was elected. His name was William F. Cleary. He didn't know any more about the city central. He worked for the union and was a good union man, but as far as the city central body was concerned, he really didn't know very much about it. He also drank too much, so I was Secretary except in name.

INTERVIEWER: And pay?

LEVITAS: Like being a wife in name only. I was Secretary without the name. So then when I retired, William F. Cleary was the Secretary. Since then, he has passed away, and somebody else has been elected, but that came after my retirement.

INTERVIEWER: Did you work with him very long or just a few years?

LEVITAS: Just a few years before I retired. John Fitzpatrick died in 1945. He had had a stroke and was unable to work. He was out of the office for some months before we had an election; and William A. Lee, who was President of the Bakery Drivers Union and the Vice-President of the Brotherhood of the Teamsters' International, was elected President of the Chicago Federation of Labor. There, too, was a man who had been very active in the labor movement in his own field but had never given much time to the city central body. These men that I mentioned were delegates to the Chicago Federation of Labor. They couldn't be elected without being delegates, but they did not attend meetings regularly and they were not very interested.

INTERVIEWER: There weren't any rules about their past attendance or anything like that?

LEVITAS: Well, of course the rules were that if a delegate didn't attend a certain number of meetings his union would be notified, but usually they'd break the spell by coming to a few meetings. But he had the support of the Teamsters Union and the building trades. He was a great friend of William McFetridge. He was a very capable man and the Teamsters thought very highly of him. As a matter of fact, he was a very fine negotiator for the Bakery Drivers Union as president of the Chicago local. And of course, as I said before, he was also a member of the Teamsters International. He was an officer, a board member, some sort of officer. So he came in as President of the Chicago Federation of Labor after the death of John Fitzpatrick and I would say I worked for him probably about eleven years before I retired. He still is President. He's a very capable man and he also is chairman of the board of WCFL, the radio station which the Federation owns. The Federation has flourished, I would say, under him. Of course, since the C.I.O. became part of the A.F. of L., there are several new officers, vice-presidents, who were elected from the C.I.O. group. I would say that things are going along to some extent as they were while I was there. There were some changes and new officers.

INTERVIEWER: Could you see any basic changes in policy with the new group of leaders as contrasted with that old group?

LEVITAS: As far as policy was concerned, I would say there would not be any change, because after all, they were all part of the American Federation of Labor or the Congress of Industrial Organizations. They're a different breed of people.

INTERVIEWER: Now, what do you mean by that?

LEVITAS: You see, John Fitzpatrick and Edward Nockels were of the old breed. They fought their way up when they had to meet in basements and so on to organize, because the unions were very unpopular. And any man who tried to start a union or who was known to be actively engaged in union activities usually lost his job. The men who started the labor movement were men who sacrificed a great deal. For instance, I knew Jim Connors, who had been president of the switchmen's union. He had a family of about seven children. And when the railroads found out that he was organizing the switchmen he was not only fired, he was black-listed. Years later, his daughter was working as a switchboard operator for the radio station and she told me that there were days when there was just no food in the house because he couldn't get a job. That was the only work he knew. John Fitzpatrick had been a horseshoer and he became the business agent for the horseshoers. Of course, there were many more horses in those days, but it was never a big union. They never had much money and these men lived very simply. They didn't earn a great deal. Now, John Fitzpatrick and Ed Nockels never earned more than a hundred dollars a week and I've heard people who were positive that they received big salaries. I used to take care of their checking accounts, pay their bills, and balance their monthly statements so I knew there wasn't any money like that. When Ed Nockels would go to Washington when he was fighting for the independent radio stations, he would take about thirty-five dollars a week for expenses. There wasn't much money. You see, the Chicago Federation of Labor's per capita tax of the unions was two cents per member per month. Now a union that has a big membership, that is some of them, would cheat on their membership. If they had 5000 members, they might just say 3000. It meant they'd get a few less delegates.

INTERVIEWER: But more money for themselves?

LEVITAS: Yes, so the Chicago Federation never had money.

INTERVIEWER: They never had very much money then.

LEVITAS: They never had very much money in those days. And the radio station was new. There was always a struggle not to lose the radio station, because the expenses were very high and the money was very short. So there just wasn't, and no one received what you'd call a good salary. The people in the office were penalized by the shortage because there was a time when they cut salaries and increased our work hours because the station was in the red and they were having hard times. The labor movement is much more prosperous in general.

The Chicago Federation of Labor is much more prosperous. The radio station is making money. Salaries are much higher and there are all sorts of fringe benefits which the Federation pays for which they were never able to do before. And the men who are the officials of the organization today throughout the labor movement--there probably are exceptions, small cities or small locals--but in the larger unions, the men in the labor movement today are well paid. They have a high standard of living, and they're a completely different breed of people. Many of them don't even know the early history of the labor movement. They never had to struggle. Some of them are the sons of the original presidents or other officers who stepped in because of their family connections and are probably performing all right, but they came in the easy way and they're living much easier.

INTERVIEWER: One thing I'm curious about--you mention in the early days how much help the city Federation gave to struggling unions in one way or another.

LEVITAS: Well, if a union was in trouble or going on strike, the Federation did all they could to help raise money to help them and the radio station was available for them to tell their story as was the Federation News.

INTERVIEWER: Is that still the case? Is there as much zeal in helping the unorganized to organize?

LEVITAS: I believe there is.

INTERVIEWER: So this hasn't really changed.

LEVITAS: No, this has not changed. In fact they can do more because there's more money. I'm sure when I read the Federation News now and when I read the minutes of the Federation meetings. For instance, when the agricultural workers were on strike, they received a great deal of support from the Federation. They had speakers at the meetings, and the Federation News published articles urging people to boycott the grapes that came from the stricken ranches in California. So they are receiving all the support they can give them. That hasn't changed, I think.

INTERVIEWER: At what point did the salary scales change for the city Federation people? Was it during World War II?

LEVITAS: Oh, no, it came much later.

INTERVIEWER: About what time? Was that related to getting the radio station on its feet too?

LEVITAS: It was getting the radio station on its feet to a great extent, because you see the Federation always subsisted on the dues that unions paid, which was never a great deal--two cents per member per month. It may have been increased. And then you see the Federation had to pay per capita in tax to the A.F. of L., which wasn't a great deal, but the unions paid only two cents per member a month. But the radio station is much, much more prosperous now. I remember when they cut our salaries because the Furniture Mart where we were located was going to take over the radio station because the station owed them rent. They were in the red then. They were in trouble and it seemed they borrowed money from some of the unions. They cut expenses by cutting salaries.

INTERVIEWER: How long was this cut in effect?

LEVITAS: The cut lasted about four years until I brought it up in a board meeting and Mr. Fitzpatrick had the books brought in. They just forgot about it. And what they did was restore our salaries. By that time, we were really entitled to increased, but they just restored them to what they had been before the cut. At the present time, they are in a position to pay very good salaries and also to have health insurance. They belong to a clinic; they have Blue Cross. They have an eye care center. The earlier employees never had anything like that. They just didn't have the money.

INTERVIEWER: When did all these fringe benefits come about? Was it in the fifties?

LEVITAS: No, I retired in '57.

INTERVIEWER: They came after that, so it would be in the sixties, mostly.

LEVITAS: The late fifties and the sixties.

INTERVIEWER: But the white collar employees in the union finally caught up with the general affluence?

LEVITAS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Would you say that they are probably now paid as well as secretaries anywhere else?

LEVITAS: Oh, yes, now they are. And their pension has doubled to what it was before I left. So they have caught up.

INTERVIEWER: Now, what kind of relations did the newer men in the city Federation have with the other groups, for instance, with city officials. Was there cooperation of various kinds?

LEVITAS: Well, in Chicago especially with the Daley administration, particularly, their relations are very very good. The Chicago Federation of Labor and I would say most of the local unions have supported Mayor Daley and his administration and I think their relations are very good.

INTERVIEWER: What kinds of favors could or has the city administration done for the unions in return?

LEVITAS: Well, I don't know what you'd call them favors. I suppose that the city employees, the unions who have people working for the city, may get a better deal than they would with an administration that was not friendly.

INTERVIEWER: What about the problems with the Teamsters' Union? Didn't you say that Mr. Lee came from the Teamsters' Union?

LEVITAS: Well, when the Teamsters were put out of the A.F. of L., there were several board members who were Teamsters. They would not be eligible to serve in an A.F. of L. organization if they were members of the Teamsters. Mr. Lee, for instance, was a member and officer of the Teamsters Local 734, so he was given a membership card in the Chicago Flat Janitors Union, which made him eligible technically to remain in office in the Chicago Federation of Labor.

INTERVIEWER: He had never worked in that capacity?

LEVITAS: Oh, no.

INTERVIEWER: Just a kind of honorary membership you might say?

LEVITAS: Well, they gave him a regular membership, they gave him a membership card.

INTERVIEWER: Was this kind of thing common?

LEVITAS: Not common, but no too unusual.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of effect did it have locally when the Teamsters [Union] were thrown out of the A.F. of L. and yet people from that union remained?

LEVITAS: Well, the Chicago labor movement felt very friendly to the Chicago Teamsters Union and I would say in my personal experience with members and officers of the Teamsters Union, I found I always admired those that I knew. They were very fine men, very fine trade unionists, and the Chicago Federation of Labor never really became unfriendly to them even

though sometimes they ran the risk of being criticized. Some of the Teamsters' members were on the executive board, They were on committees. They were very active in the Chicago Federation of Labor, and when they were out of the A.F. of L., of course, some of them were no longer officers or board members. Well, it wasn't as important as it would be to Mr. Lee as president, so they just simply dropped out of their positions as board members. But the Chicago Federation of Labor and the Federation News remained very friendly to the Teamsters. They always did. They still do.

INTERVIEWER: So it didn't really cause a split of any kind, maybe just a little problem.

LEVITAS: Well, according to the rules they could not officially be connected, but there was a very friendly feeling and there still is, I know, between the Teamsters and the Chicago Federation of Labor and the Illinois State Federation of Labor.

MOLLIE LEVITAS

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