AAA 3316

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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

with

AH QUON McELRATH

International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union

by

Marion Roffman

Program on Women and Work

Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations

University of Michigan - Wayne State University

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VITAE

AH QUON McELRATH

Ah Quon McElrath's parents emigrated from China in the late 1800's. Her mother came as a picture bride, her father as an unskilled laborer. They settled in Honolulu, Hawaii where Ah Quon was born on December 15, 1915.

Her father died very young and the mother and seven children had to work to survive; Ah Quon began work at age fourteen.

Upon her college graduation, Ah Quon McElrath was hired as a case worker with the Board of Public Welfare in Honolulu. While working there she organized the social workers and the clerical staff into a group called the Department of Welfare Employees' Association.

McElrath first became associated with the International Longshoremen's Warehousemen's Union in Hawaii through volunteer activities as a social worker. In this capacity during the 1946 sugar strike and the 1949 longshore strike, she worked out relief policies for the families of the workers on strike, set up nutritious meals at soup kitchens, and contacted social service agencies for supplementary assistance for the strikers.

Following these strikes, the ILWU created the position of union social worker, and hired McElrath to fill the job. In it, she works closely with the education staff setting up classes and programs for union officers. McElrath also handles personal problems of the members, often referring them to private and public agencies that are equipped to deal with their needs. As a social worker, she becomes involved with immigration cases, and appeals for workers in unemployment and workers' compensation hearings.

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Oral History Interview

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August 4, 1976
Honolulu, Hawaii

By Marian Roffman

INTERVIEWER: Mrs. McElrath, where were you born?

McELRATH: I was born in Honolulu, Hawaii.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember your grandparents?

McELRATH: No, because I'm a child of immigrant parents, the first generation who came here. My grandparents remained in China.

INTERVIEWER: I see. Do you remember your mother talking about her parents?

McELRATH: A little bit. Not too much. I think she was so concerned with raising a family after my father died that there was really not much chance to just sit and chat about various things. And my brothers and sisters and I were so busy working and going to school, there wasn't much chance to sit down and discuss these things with my mother.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, I see. How old were you when your father died?

McELRATH: About five.

INTERVIEWER: So you would have very few memories of him.

McELRATH: Almost none.

INTERVIEWER: Did your mother tell you anything about her childhood?

McELRATH: Yes, I remember her talking about how difficult life was in China, especially since the same kind of difficulty met her when she came to Hawaii and having to raise a family of seven without a husband. I remember her telling us about the selling of girl children and even the committing of infanticide during periods of great drought and famine in China when it was impossible to raise a whole family. And because the attitude towards girls was that they couldn't work in the fields and go out and do any other work, why, it was useless to keep them around.

INTERVIEWER: And that would have been about at the end of the nineteenth century or even in the twentieth century did....

McELRATH: No. That was only...

INTERVIEWER: She came when she was a child?

McELRATH: No, she came here, I think, at the turn of the century. Or shortly before the turn of the century. So all of these things took place, oh, I would say in the 1860s, '70s, '80s, '90s. Just before she came here.

INTERVIEWER: So you wouldn't know then anything about your father's childhood?

McELRATH: No. Nothing except that I believe he had an older sister about whom we heard a lot of stories. A matriarchal type who never married and kept the family together. I believe he had several brothers, since we have a number of paternal cousins.

INTERVIEWER: When your mother came here, did she come as a bride? Or did she come as a child, or as an adult woman on her own?

McELRATH: My mother came as an adult woman and as a picture bride.

INTERVIEWER: She did?

McELRATH: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: So many Chinese women did, didn't they?

McELRATH: Yes. A lot came as picture brides, just as the Japanese came as picture brides.

INTERVIEWER: Do you know whether she was disappointed? Has she ever regretted doing this?

McELRATH: She never really revealed her inner feelings. As a matter of fact, I think she came as the wife of someone else who subsequently died and then she married my father. She did not speak of her former marraige and she never expressed any regret at having come as a picture bride. I think whatever regrets she might have had were probably engendered by the fact that our father worked only intermittently and raising a family was really very hard on her. That might be the only regret but I suspect, as with other immigrants who came to the United States, whatever they had here was much better than what they had at home.

INTERVIEWER: That is, it wasn't as hard as the old life was. I think that this is common in many things and I think it's very bad that many daughters know so little about their mothers; the mother's early life and about their mother's inner life. There is a certain reticence.

McELRATH: Well, I think this is especially true with Oriental families where, traditionally, women accepted their lot in life, did not question their lot in life. And for the proverbial Oriental, containment was not to make known one's feelings. And while there was no doubt that mother very often made known her feelings of disapproval about the way we behaved, she never really spoke about herself entirely. I think, generally, this is frowned upon in Oriental families, although, obviously, from reading many of the novels and the poems of the Oriental countries, you find that there is a group in society which did not suppress their feelings, nor their expressions of either happiness or dismay, or whichever. The kinds of things that we normally think about in Western society.

INTERVIEWER: You're talking about the writers, the novelists...

McELRATH: Yes. Yes. Mhm.

INTERVIEWER: ...and the poets? And this reticence applied to men as well as to women, I suppose?

McELRATH: Generally, although not as much. I rather suspect that men, having the kind of role that they did in Oriental society, gave vent more freely to their feelings than women did.

INTERVIEWER: So you mother had a hard life--what kind of work did your mother do? How did she support this family after your father died?

McELRATH: Well, my older brothers and sisters left school very early in order to work. I remember, even as a youngster, our going out to pick up dried bones and kiawe beans to sell to the fertilizer company. Oh, they paid us variously, from ten cents a bag to twenty-five cents a pound for bones. We would also go out and pick brass off the beach or any other place that we could get to and sell it to the scrapdealers. Just as we went out and picked up wood in order to fire our stove to cook our meals with. One of my brothers, for example, left school when he was barely sixteen, to work as a messenger for the fertilizer company. My sister went to what was known as Normal School and I think she graduated the year my father died. It was always her regret that he didn't live long enough to see her become a teacher. One of my brothers worked his way through high school and the rest of us worked in the cannery, the pineapple canneries, from the time we were fourteen or less--as you know, there were no child labor laws then in Hawaii--and earned our money in order to pay for our books and tuition when we entered school. So, I remember having worked all of our lives and mother used to do a little bit of laundry. But she never went out and worked for wages.

INTERVIEWER: Was it a big family then? Seems like you're referring to several brothers and sisters.

McELRATH: There were seven of us, four boys and three girls. The oldest being a girl and I was the second to the youngest with a brother as the youngest in the family.

INTERVIEWER: And what were--do you know what your mother's hopes were for her children? And for you, in particular?

McELRATH: I think that mother wanted us to grow up and become productive members of society. She wanted us to be honest individuals. I remember, as a child, her telling us that "If you ever borrowed anything from anyone, you should always pay back, and much more."

I remember her saying, "Even if you borrow a penny from someone to buy a piece of candy, make sure you return that." She also wanted us to become good students. Although she'd never learned to speak English--with the exception of a few phrases here and there--she was interested in the work that we did in school. I think because my brother and I were the youngest in the family, she hoped that we would be able to go through an institution

McELRATH: of higher learning and, I think, instilled in our older brothers and sisters the need for them to support us through school. As a result, my brother and I are the only ones who finished the university. The others went on through high school or less than high school. But always, the feeling that you needed to get an education was foremost in her mind. I don't think she ever really said, "Ah Quon, I want you to become a doctor," or "I want you to become a lawyer," or "I want you to become a nurse," or "I want you to become a teacher." I think what she wanted was for us to become good people in terms of the old virtues that we normally associate with goodness. Such as honesty, such as hard work, such as being kind to other people, such as helping other people.

INTERVIEWER: Would you say that those are typically Chinese values or not? Or more general than that?

McELRATH: No, I think these are values that can be generalized over all people who live on this earth. I think those values are probably denigrated because of the way our system has changed, the way the economic system has changed, the way it has enhanced some of those qualities which are highly competitive; the quality of getting-something-for-nothing which seems to plague many of us today. Well, I dare say that a lot of people living during the time that I did probably did those things, but they were not the general kinds of things that parents wanted for the children and did not reinforce those particular attitudes.

INTERVIEWER: Would you say that your mother was a strong personality?

McELRATH: Yes. I think she...

INTERVIEWER: She must have been to keep...

McELRATH: ...she was very...yes.

INTERVIEWER: ...the family together, hm?

McELRATH: Very much so.

INTERVIEWER: So, she must have been rather young when your father died?

McELRATH: No.

INTERVIEWER: No?

McELRATH: As a matter of fact, mother had me when she was forty-two years of age and her youngest when she was forty-four. As a matter of fact, I'm surprised I'm not an idiot.

INTERVIEWER: That's supposed to be the dangerous period of childbirth. Breaking a rule. I suppose your mother was, then, too busy to take part in the community, and politics and neighborhood affairs?

McELRATH: Oh, no doubt. And the fact that she did not speak English at all, and the fact that she did not speak English at all, and the fact that she had to keep the family together certainly made it impossible for her to participate in any of the community activities. This doesn't mean, however, that she was not able to go out and visit realtives, nor to talk with neighbors who were of a different ethnic background from hers. She got along very well with all of our neighbors, with whatever pidgin she could manage. A few words here and there, but, generally, mother kept to herself. One of the problems was that she, shortly after the birth of her youngest child--my younger brother--became blind. And, of course, this severely retarded her ability to go on out. Whenever she would go out there was always someone in the family who went out with her. I remember taking her to visit with other relatives on the old trolley cars that we had here. They were noisy, but they served as a wonderful way of promoting socialization with the open doors and the easy-going attitudes of the conductors and other men, and the shouting from one end of the trolley to the other whenever we saw a friend. I rather think that, if you were to study the history of transportation, you might find that the old trolley cars were a socializing influence, whereas the present modern day bus and automobiles, obviously, are not. [laughter]

INTERVIEWER: Maybe this explains the popularity of the San Francisco cable cars. [laughs]

McELRATH: Oh, I'm sure, I'm sure.

INTERVIEWER: I remember the streetcar, too, from when I was a little girl in Milwaukee. I always enjoyed riding them. Well, I didn't ride in the winter time. Must have been cold. In summer time, it was very pleasant with the windows open, you know, and...it was good.

McELRATH: Right. I remember one particular incident. We were visiting some relatives. We lived in Iwilei, which was the official red light district, and we'd walk up to the main drive, catch the trolley, and we were visiting these relatives who lived where McKinley High School is now. We took with us a package of oranges. Well, as we got on the streetcar and found our seats, the package fell on the floor and all the oranges rolled from one end of the trolley to the other. I scrambled down the aisle trying to pick 'em up. And mother scrambled after me. She wasn't very successful because mother had bound feet which impeded her locomotion considerably. As a matter of fact, one of the things I remember was washing my mother's feet, especially during the period when she became older, and having her wince in pain because the toes were curled almost completely under her instep. And being fascinated by it and wondering how in the world I would be able to clip her nails. But, in any event, she scrambled after me on the streetcar [laughs], and couldn't keep up with me because of her bound feet. Everybody else rolled over and tried to pick up the oranges for us. I don't know how many we ended with when we finally had arrived at our friends!

INTERVIEWER: I was under the impression that only people of the--you know, girls of the upper classes, the wealthy--bound their feet in China.

McELRATH: Well, generally, after that custom became effective it pretty much went down to the rest of the villages. Mother didn't come from a peasant family per se. She worked a lot, of course, in the compound where she lived in an extended family. Did all the chores that were considered women's chores. And, I suspect from some of the things that have occurred in the family, that mother did have some education. I remember she used to talk in aphorisms. She would have a moral saying for everything that we did wrong. This particularly indicated to me that mother must have had some education. And I recall that when her eyes were good, she did read the Chinese newspapers. So, while she may not have come from a very rich family, still, the custom of binding the feet filtered down to her particular village in Kwantung.

INTERVIEWER: When you were a child, who were your companions? Who were closest to you? Brothers and sisters? Friends?

McELRATH: Because our father died when we were very young, we became a very close-knit family. Each one of us had specific chores to do. I remember my brothers shining shoes and selling newspapers, working in the cannery and sharing what they had with the rest of us. We all ate together, whatever food we had, and my sister, who had gone to Normal School, was very careful about the diet which she worked up for us. In the earlier days, of course, we used to subsist on rice and lard and shoyu. But as the boys grew older and were able to work we were able to get other vegetables, pork, salt fish, and the cheaper cuts of meat such as kidney and liver. I think the fact that we all needed to pull together made us a very close-knit family, although, obviously, there were tensions within the family. You could see pairings of the different members of the family. For example, my youngest brother and I were very close because there was a five-year span between me and my sister--there was one child who had died between my sister and me--and although in later years we became somewhat close, my brother and I shared a lot more of our interests, desires, hopes, expectations. And this is fairly natural because we were the ones who went on to college and had a kind of community of interest, although this did not prevent us from getting close to other brothers and sisters. We lived our childhood in a very mixed ethnic group. There were Hawaiians, part Hawaiians, Puerto Ricans, other Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, and even a colony of Molokans.

INTERVIEWER: Of what?

McELRATH: Molokans. This was a group of Russians in a kind of obscure religious sect.

INTERVIEWER: How do you spell that?

McELRATH: M-O-L-O-K-A-N, I think. So, there was a problem in the beginning, certainly with having a childhood shared with other ethnic groups. I do recall, however, that some of the stereotypes about other racial groups continued even in this fairly close-knit community of Iwilei. I remember mother telling us, for example, when we came home from night sessions of quilting with a Hawaiian family, "Walk in the middle of the street and don't listen to any whistles of the Filipinos because they can do harm to you. And you must be careful with them because they 'poke knife'." This was a very popular saying, which is attached to the Filipino groups as being

McELRATH: a violent group who use knives whenever they become violent. I don't think mother ever really saw the inconsistency of that statement, in view of the fact that we grew up among the Filipinos, had many of them as our childhood friends. But I suspect that without the kind of influence of living in a broad community and going out to other community groups that this kind of understanding would have come easily. It was merely a repeating of the stereotypes that everybody was repeating at the time. It was similar to the stereotype of Portuguese being loud and noisy and the Japanese as being frugal and wily. That kind of thing. And the Hawaiians as being lazy--although I knew all of those Hawaiians with whom we lived and some of them worked very, very hard indeed. [laughter] But there's a kind of perversity, I guess, in human beings, which never sees the logic nor the reason, nor the truth. And their perceptions, obviously, of what is reality fit their own personal attitudes and prejudices.

INTERVIEWER: I think that the tendency is to keep the stereotype and then when exceptions are pointed out to you, you see them as exceptions.

McELRATH: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: The people that you do know who don't fit that stereotype. And you just don't associate those two.

McELRATH: I suspect that there is a method in the madness of those who want to continue the stereotypes anyway, in order to exercise power over people that know part of the history of our nation, as well as others.

INTERVIEWER: When you were at home--and you've been talking about how hard all of you had to work--I'd like to ask you, do you ever think that your brothers had an easier time than the girls? Or maybe, did you think they had more to do than the girls?

McELRATH: I don't think that they had an easier time. During the time in which I lived, I think, the sex roles were fairly well-defined. It was known that the men would do the hard work and would shy away from so-called women's work. However, our family never had that problem. I remember hauling bags of kiawe beans and bones, and picking firewood just as my brothers did. We all did the same thing. They washed dishes along with the rest of us, simply because we had to divide

McELRATH: up the chores in the house. I remember we had teams doing the cooking and the dishwashing. And I remember my mother being very, very annoyed because my youngest brother and I, who cleaned up as the dishwashing team during specific times of the month, would spend most of our time singing excerpts from operas or humming tunes from symphonies. She felt that we would never, ever get our dishes done. Whereas my two older brothers, who teamed up as another dishwashing team, would get their work done as quickly as possible so that they could go out on their dates or go to the movies. The oldest sister who did the cooking very seldom did the washing of the dishes. I think the saying then was, "He who cooks shall not wash."

My other sister, who teamed up with another older brother, used to have a difficult time. She used to complain bitterly about the fact that that brother was so lazy, he didn't want to go through the dishes. Mother would complain about that but she made some concessions to that brother because she felt that he was never quite as bright as the rest of us were. Whether or not that is true, I don't know. I do know that that brother's life apparently was conditioned by being, perhaps, a middle child and, therefore, ignored pretty much. But I don't recall our having any battles over the fact that his work was easier than my work, or my work was harder than his work.

We all did the same kinds of work. I think the only thing that they didn't do consistently was to wash and iron. My older sister and I did almost all of the washing and ironing but I remember my brother saying, "Do you recall how I used to iron my linen pants so that I could go to work looking nice and clean?" Which means that he did some of the ironing when I was a very small child. Obviously, I can't recall everything that happened when I was five, six, seven, or eight.

INTERVIEWER: It sounds like your mother had organized her family very well. Was this unusual among the community you lived in? In other families, too, did the boys often take time to work? Or maybe in different cultural groups it wasn't quite the same.

McELRATH: I don't recall that we had any problems in the little camp where we lived. Everybody seemed to be occupied with something. I do recall, however, that in the Japanese families, many of the boys didn't do what our brothers did by way of kitchen chores. But I know that everybody was poor and

McELRATH: everybody worked. [laughter] There were very few so-called rich people living in the camp. So, we came pretty much of that lot and second generation of immigrant parents, all of whom had to work very, very hard. Some made it. For example, we lived in this camp which was sponsored by the gas company--more or less a company camp. But they were benevolent capitalists. And they never bothered us. They provided all of the water, all of the gas which lighted up the camp at night. We used to sit under the gas light, I remember as a child, and read the newspapers to those individuals who couldn't read. And it was one way of building a kind of feeling of community which seems very much absent in these days.

INTERVIEWER: This was at Iwilei?

McELRATH: Yes, it was at Iwilei.

INTERVIEWER: I'm a little bit confused. I thought you had camps out in the country, and Iwilei, was it in town?

McELRATH: Iwilei?

INTERVIEWER: Why do you call it a camp?

McELRATH: Well, because the company had built all of these homes. I believe there were about thirty homes which the company had built for employees to live in. The only reason we had a chance to move into the camp was that one of my older brothers was working his way through high school and had a job with the gas company while he was working his way through high school. This was the first time, following my father's death, that we'd lived together more or less as a family. Previously, we had been scattered among relatives, among friends, because we could not afford to find a house on which we could pay the rent.

INTERVIEWER: When you were little, did you have any daydreams, or ideas, or hopes, or something that you wanted to do when you grew up? Do you remember?

McELRATH: I remember some of the daydreams I had when I was in intermediate school. I sang in church choirs, community choral groups, and school musicals.

INTERVIEWER: I was going to ask you about that before when you mentioned you and your brother and...singing songs and operas...ask you where did you get exposed to this type of music?

McELRATH: I have a very fortunate school experience, both in elementary and intermediate schools. I remember taking a class in music appreciation. There was a huge, buxom, part-Hawaiian teacher who loved music and who also trained all the cheerleaders in school. In this class in music appreciation, we heard chamber music, symphonies, operas, lieder, and all those things. It opened up a completely new world to me. At the same time, my sister, who was interested in the violin but who was never able to take it as a child because the lessons cost too much money, bought a phonograph for the family and started collecting records. One of the really significant things that happened in my childhood was my taking a record to school. It was an aria from "Tannhauser," sung by a baritone whose name probably doesn't mean a thing now to people who are in opera, and my making this contribution to our music appreciation class. And then, to suffer the extreme humiliation of stubbing my toe, falling and having the record break. At that time, those records cost $3.50 a piece. This was an extremely large amount to us--and my not knowing exactly how to break the news to my sister. But, basically, that was how we learned to appreciate music. Besides which, I think, I was the first one in my class who listened consistently to the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts. I remember on Saturdays, when these broadcasts took place and it was my job to either sweep the house, make the beds, or mop the house, I'd lean on the mopstick and listen. And mother would come and rap my knuckles because she thought I wasn't cleaning the house quickly enough. But those are some of the wonderful things about childhood that one remembers.

INTERVIEWER: At what age were you at this point?

McELRATH: Oh, I must have been eleven, twelve, thirteen. I don't recall precisely. But I was an early teenager, I believe, at the time.

INTERVIEWER: Mhm. Interestingly, this love of music has never left you, has it?

McELRATH: No. Never.

INTERVIEWER: In school...well, let me ask you, did you enjoy going to school?

McELRATH: I loved it.

INTERVIEWER: Did you enjoy everything about it?

McELRATH: I loved everything about school, because this was a whole new world to me. And just to be able to come into contact with the written word and to know the power that it had was one of the most fascinating, gratifying things that I got out of school. I sometimes think back on what a wonderful school experience that was and wonder why it is that children, students nowadays get so turned off by school. I don't quite know what it is. I think, perhaps, the love of teaching came through in all of the teachers whom I had during those earlier years. And when I think of all of the problems we now have on do you or do you not spank a child, is corporal punishment an incursion on a person's civil rights, I think back on those old days and...oh well, I remember getting rappings on the knuckles by a teacher who was a particularly hard taskmaster. I don't suppose I suffered any scars from that kind of rapping on the knuckles. But I think it's because those teachers were good teachers. They loved their students and they loved teaching. And it may very well be that the reason was that they didn't have to compete with so many things that teachers now need to compete with. Television, rock and roll concerts, radio. So that students become quite jaded and they have had almost a surfeit of all of the kinds of things that give them pleasure. And the pleasure is not in books per se nor what the written word can convey to a person by way of feeling, by way of having crystallized the experiences of all of humanity.

INTERVIEWER: That's undoubtedly true, but I have a feeling that you must have been particularly fortunate in your teachers because I heard some horror stories about some really bad teachers. Especially in the plantation schools and also on the Mainland. Not in my own memory, but my mother used to tell me that in her [classes] the teacher really used to maltreat the students and pull them by the hair and pull them by the ears and humiliate them in other ways. And there must have been some bad ones, too. It seems like you had very good teachers.

McELRATH: There's no doubt that some of the teachers in that particular era were extremely cruel. There's no doubt about that. And, obviously, from some of the novels that one reads and the biographies, and the autobiographies, there was this kind of cruelty. I want to make it very clear that I think I was particularly fortunate in having a group of teachers, many of whom I remember to this day, who were extremely good teachers. And among them, also, were the ones who probably discriminated against other students who might not have been as interested as I was in education.

INTERVIEWER: I think there was always the tendency in the teachers to be particularly nice and helpful to the bright...to the eager student. And what kind of school set-up did you have? Did you have several grades in one classroom, or were the classes big enough so that one teacher would have, like, all the, say, the third grade, all of the fourth grade?

McELRATH: Yes. In the elementary school, there were several grades of first graders. I remember there were about four or five first grade classes. So it was never a mixed class where you had grades from one to five. One particular class happened to be that group which was first given the intermediate school concept. In other words, you went to elementary school from the first to the sixth grade, then the intermediate school, or what was then called the junior high, was from the seventh through the ninth grade, and high school was from the sophomore to the senior year. We happened to have been of that generation when all of those kinds of changes were taking place in the school system, the division according to your age standing, according to the way the population was growing--these kinds of things affected the grading in the school system.

INTERVIEWER: Were your classmates from about the same background as yourself? That is, same background, same socio-economic background?

McELRATH: They were mostly from the same socio-economic background but with a very varied ethnic background. The area in which we lived, which is commonly known now as the Palama district, is a basically working class area. People who worked in the canneries and the little shops, maybe a little restaurant, they were the ones who fed into this particular school which was in the Palama area.

INTERVIEWER: What about the teachers?

McELRATH: At that time, most of the teachers who taught at that elementary level were graduates of the Normal School, and at that time, it, I think, consisted only of about eight full years of schooling, plus four years at what we would normally think of as a high school curriculum, except that the Normal School in those years was particularly geared to turning our teachers. My sister, my older sisters, went through that Normal School curriculum. Very few of them, so far as I know, ever went to college.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember, throughout and up to the high school level, did students ever talk much about the political events of the times? Was there much interest in political events?

McELRATH: At the time that I went to McKinley High School, there was a great deal in the philosophy of education that students should learn by doing things. Therefore, the period of student government became the order of the day where each class elected officers of the class. And then you had a student body government which had the regular officers and it had a council which met regularly. All of our social studies classes, for example, were tied into this process of government.

It had been said that at one time of our education, students knew very little of how politics was carried on the outside of the school system. It has also been said that the early years of the school system in Hawaii were designed mainly to turn out workers for the plantations. And that, in fact, this was why the owners of plantations were willing to support the school system. And, supposedly, this kind of philosophy managed to make itself known to the administrators of the school system. If that were their concerted campaign, the parents certainly fought against it because the early immigrant groups turned out growing numbers of doctors, teachers, lawyers, probably far beyond the numbers that they occupied in the population statistics in the territory of Hawaii. And, although politics in the state of Hawaii was controlled--at least during my growing-up period--by the Republican Party, you did have many Hawaiians who ran for office. You did have many Portuguese who ran for office. Part Hawaiians and a scattering of Orientals. So that if the school served as a kind of proving ground for politics, it was done through our social studies classes and through student government. I don't think many people, in retrospect, would consider that this was so.

However, partaking in student government did give some of us some skills that we could use when we were outside. How to organize committees, how to conduct meetings, how to make reports--those kinds of things which occur in everyday life--certainly in any corporation, in any union, in any community organization, and in the legislature. I remember that politics certainly was discussed, especially when a crisis occurred in the community. Such as, for example, when there was a murder committed where the lines in the community were drawn very, very tightly between the one who was killed--who might have been a Caucasian--as against the one who did the

McELRATH: killing--who might have been a member of a minority ethnic group. That propelled students into discussing politics. And while they may not have seen it as a Republican-Democratic thing per se, it was very obvious that those who controlled the political life of the community, who were Republicans at that time, were the ones who were usually on the side of power. And the person who was aggrieved was not. Those kinds of things were certainly not lost on us.

INTERVIEWER: Did you go to an English Standard school?

McELRATH: No. I went to a regular public school. The English Standard school was an attempt in the late twenties and early thirties, I believe, to give children of various ethnic groups the opportunity to enroll in a school where English was supposedly taught in a much better way than it was taught in the regular public schools, and where students were supposed to have shown a superior command of the English language. Eventually, obviously, this was a device which was designed to trap students into certain kinds of occupations, into receiving certain types of education which a student in the regular public school would not have. And as such, was really an instrument of discrimination although, I think, in the beginning it was not meant to be. It was a divisive instrument for the simple reason that children, students, could go around saying, "Well, I'm going to Roosevelt," or "I'm going to this school, and where are you? You're in another high school." I found that, in many instances, this gave a lot of students feelings of inferiority, although in conferences in which we participated, I would say that there was almost no difference in the way English was spoken or written between those who went to a regular public school and those who went to a so-called English Standard school.

INTERVIEWER: Interesting. You must have gone to a very good school then, or you must have had excellent teachers.

McELRATH: Well, I went to what was then called the Tokyo High School, which was McKinley High School. It was one of the very few high schools in the city at the time. And there's no doubt, I count myself fortunate to have had teachers who knew their subject well, who brought into the classroom other than what we were supposed to cover in a specific school year. I was fortunate in having teachers who were imaginative, who spent a lot of time with the students, and who demanded excellence from the students, teachers who were

McELRATH: not satisfied with mediocre performance on the part of the student. As a matter of fact, as I talk with some of my classmates who were not in my room, but who were in my class, their feeling is that, indeed, they received an education which was superior to the education which children are receiving these days. I went to a fortieth high school reunion a couple of years ago. It was amazing--the kind of verve that these people had. And the joy with which they recalled their experiences in high school and the good feelings that they had about their teachers. It was a fairly large high school at the time. I think we had, oh, something like two or three thousand students, which is large by today's standards when you might have a thousand or five hundred students in a high school.

INTERVIEWER: Well, was there anything special about any of your early schooling that may have contributed to your later union activities?

McELRATH: I remember in the seventh grade, I had a teacher who loved the band, but who also taught social sciences. That, I believe, was the year that the textbooks by Harold Rugg were used in our school system. Harold Rugg has since been tarred by some of the more conservative element in our nation and his textbooks were yanked out of most of the schools of our nation. But I remember one specific section on economics where Harold Rugg wrote about, I believe, the second five-year plan of the Soviet Union. What an impression that made on me! And I said to myself at the time, "How is it that a nation can plan its economy and give to and assure each one of its citizens a full consistent standard of living?" Now, mind you, I believe we were just then rolling into the Depression of the late twenties and the early thirties. So, the concept of planning an economy was fascinating to me. And I remember having had an everlasting interest then in the economic system and what it meant to people. And hearing some of the stories about the early organizing efforts of unions on the Mainland. At that time, I knew almost nothing about the organizing efforts of the various Filipino and Japanese groups in Hawaii. And certainly, it was not taught to us in our curriculum. But at least through the textbooks which we had, we had some feeling of what was happening on the Mainland. I might be slightly wrong on the date. It might have been perhaps the early thirties. I'm not exactly sure. And then, subsequently, of course, during the time that President Franklin Roosevelt was first elected to office in 1932, and having some of the excitement of the early NRA [National Recovery Act] and FERA [Federal Employment Recovery Act] days. That made a great impression on me.

INTERVIEWER: What degrees do you hold today?

McELRATH: I just have a Bachelor's. I did some work towards a Master's in social work at the University of Michigan. But I left after one year because I said this was not for me. I was considerably older when I returned to Michigan to the School of Social Work. However, that's all I had.

INTERVIEWER: Did you feel that in your work at Michigan, that the studies there, perhaps, were not relevant to the actual work that you would be doing?

McELRATH: No, it wasn't that it wasn't relevant. Much of it I had already had because I had done some graduate work in social work at the University of Hawaii. Much of it was extremely valuable. When I went to Michigan, my idea was really not primarily to get an advance degree but to find out in a disciplined way what were some of the new things in concept and theory that were going around in the field of social work. When you're on the job, generally, it's extremely difficult to find out what is happening in your field in a disciplined manner. And that one year-and-a-half at Michigan was extremely valuable because it brought me up-to-date on some of the more recent theoretical formulations in social work. I did not remain. I worked for about three months in an OEO [Office of Economic Opportunity] project as part of the field placement, in Alabama. I thought that the degree wouldn't mean very much to me. Prestige--I didn't need prestige. Nor money. At this stage of life, I didn't need more money. But I felt that my mind had been reserviced, had been recharged by having had the opportunity of spending one academic year at [the University of] Michigan. And, of course, since then it has pointed me in different directions, so far as my work with the union is concerned and so far as my work with community organizations is concerned.

INTERVIEWER: After the time you got your Bachelor's degree, was your schooling continued, or had you stopped to work for a while?

McELRATH: No, my schooling was continued. And the reason for it is that I worked all through the time that I was getting my baccalaureate, with the exception of one semester when I received a scholarship. But I worked as a maid. I worked in the school cafeteria. I taught English. I wrote for the school publicity bureau. I worked in a curio store. I remember when I was a senior, I think, I had five jobs going.

INTERVIEWER: When you were a child and also later as a young girl and later life, was religion important? Was it important to you, was it important to your family?

McELRATH: Religion was not important in terms of being organized theology and going to any one church consistently. When I was a child, religion was important because it was the only opportunity we had to go to Christmas parties and get a toy, or some candy, which the family couldn't afford. We went to the street meetings of the Salvation Army. I remember being entranced by a young lady--I guess she was either a captain or a lieutenant--who played the tambourine and had a split lip, but who had a very lovely mezzosoprano. I remember having gone to a Hawaiian church, a gloomy old building opposite our elementary school, but having wonderful times because we were always assured of a Christmas party. I remember having gone to a few catechism sessions because somebody said that it was good to have my soul saved by going to catechism. I remember having gone to a few Mormon services because some of the part-Hawaiian families in our camp went to the Mormon church, and they used to have very, very good picnics. I remember going to the Waianae-Nanakuli coast for church picnics and having a wonderful time. Then, when I was in high school, through a science teacher I joined a church choir of a Congregational church. Loving it because of the very wonderful music that we sang. John Steiner, Beethoven, Haydn, Mozart, and some of the old hymns which were written by the old early American churchgoers. And having kept with that until I was in college, and then feeling suddenly that it was unfair to the church because I never became a member. I went only because I could sing in the choir and because I could use the facilities of the church. The minister at that time was extremely interested in music and he bought for the church a very fine public address system. I had some friends who were interested in music who contributed their records to the church. There was a very fine Knobe baby grand [piano] which was used by some of my friends who were interested in music. The Chinese, of course, don't have religion in the normal sense.

[We didn't have] a diety as such. My family, as far as I know, were not Buddhists, so we never went to any organized church. As a child, I do remember going to temples, however, after my father died, in order for my mother to get

McELRATH: auspicious dates for visiting his grave or for doing something that was particularly important in the family, such as should you take a trip today or next week, those kinds of thing. But it was not within the genre of organized religion.

INTERVIEWER: And you and your brothers and sisters never went in for this type of thing, I assume.

McELRATH: No, except my older sister who seemed to have a need for it. She finally ended up with the Seventh Day Adventists group. But even that was not of a long period. Other than that, none of us really had any long experience with organized religion.

INTERVIEWER: And you've never felt a need?

McELRATH: Never.

INTERVIEWER: Now we'll get into your work experience. How did you get your first job?

McELRATH: Well, if you're talking about my first job following my university graduation, I got the first one by volunteering with the then Board of Public Welfare, in the research department. I remember doing statistical work for about three months before they hired me as a case worker in the field. And then only on a part-time basis for seventy-five dollars a month. As the department, which had not been organized for too long, began shaking down more or less to what its functions were according to state and federal law, it hired a number of us on as full-time investigators at $105 a month, I believe. That was how I got my first job. I would have wanted to go on to school to get an advanced degree but there was the matter of money. There was also a professor whom I admired a great deal on campus with whom I talked about the possibility of going on for more graduate work. And I remember his telling me, "Well, there are two problems. First of all, you're a woman, and there aren't too many possibilities for graduate work, at least now, in the field of sociology for women. And secondly, you're an Oriental."

INTERVIEWER: Was he Oriental?

McELRATH: No, he wasn't. He was white. And I think if I had had more gumption or if I were completely sold on an academic career, I might have told him to go to hell and gone on to graduate school. I know that another classmate of mine who graduated the same year I did went on and got her advanced degree, her doctorate in anthropology. Took her a number of years, but it may very well be that her needs were quite different than mine. And if I were to live those years over again, I probably would not do otherwise. I would probably have made the same decisions. And I think a good deal of it is because I felt an obligation to contribute to household expenses. By that time, I had my youngest brother, who was going on to college; and my sister, my older sister--through a great deal of sacrifice--was able to buy a piece of land and had a home built near the University [of Hawaii]. We left the two-bedroom house where all of us lived, with the exception of one brother. And for the first time in a long while, our entire family was able to live in a house all together. I think I must have felt an obligation to contribute towards the payment of that home. Might have been that I didn't have enough spunk. I don't know. I'm not quite sure.

INTERVIEWER: Well, in other words, you were not encouraged...

McELRATH: No, but I was discouraged.

INTERVIEWER: And encouragement is very important. Especially to young women. And I suppose even more so in that period.

McELRATH: Yes. Extremely more so in that period.

INTERVIEWER: This first job, did it last awhile or was that temporary for you?

McELRATH: It lasted through 1948 or [194]9, I believe, when I resigned from the department. And it was during that period that I got married, went through the war, and also tried to organize the first union of social workers on an industrial basis. I remember reading the magazine Social Work Today, and being completely impressed with what I felt was a well-rounded, very broad conception of social work and what social workers could do. It was also that period when I became acquainted with the works of Bertha Reynolds, who is a long-time social worker--one of the most progressive, obviously, among that old school of social workers--who had a much broader view of social work than what is generally taught in social work school. At that time, of course, with the CIO's broadening influence, the whole idea of organizing social workers on an industrial basis became an extremely fascinating thing to me. Of course, I had earlier become interested in unions, so it was a logical outcome of my work as a social worker with the Board of Public Welfare.

INTERVIEWER: I don't think I've asked you at what point did you become interested in unions? You mentioned this one teacher that you had and this certain textbook by Harold Rugg. Is that what got you interested or was there something specific later on?

McELRATH: There was a kind of glimmering at that time of unions. When I was in college, I belonged to an outside organization. I became interested in the Spanish Civil War and was catapulted into the discussion of subjects which were much broader than those on campus. And that was, I suppose, the real cementing of my interest in the labor movement. I recall, at that time, taking courses in economics with professors who seemed to have had this kind of broad outlook on society; and being members of campus organizations--the YWCA and others--which were interested in events which were occuring. And I remember, at one time when I was a sophomore, I believe, during the march of Hitler into--was it Czechoslovakia or something. I forget the details-- where we organized a picket line, a peace picket line. We marched from the gate at the beginning of the university on which is carved the legend, "Above all nations is humanity," to what is now the Student Union Building, giving a number of speeches under that lovely big tree, and being pelted by rotten eggs and tomatoes by students who were in their ROTC uniforms. And then of sponsoring a speaker on campus, who was a member of the International Typographical Union. And the Typographical Union isn't known for any really progressive or radical stands. It might have been early in the game, but certainly in that day, it was a staid, well-established union. And having the [university] administration tell us that we could not sponsor him on campus because he was a controversial speaker. We had to move him off campus to, I believe, a YWCA meeting room. Well, all of those kinds of things obviously highlighted the rather conservative stance of the university administration at the time. And having also studied a number--taken a number of courses--in economics, sociology, political science, Oriental literature, and history, which more or less congealed into a kind of attitude towards the world which I have continued to keep since that time. I think that's when the unions became extremely important to me.

Then, the other specific instance was the early strike of the Inland Boatman's Union. I believe that occurred in 1936, 1937, and going to the rallies of the unions in Aala Park. At that time, there was a place called the Dewdrop Inn, right on the corner where these strike rallies were

McELRATH: held, and my going through the magazine rack and picking up what was obviously left-wing literature, and having this kind of literature open my eyes even more to what was happening in the outside world on a national and international basis. And reading articles about the Civil War in Spain, meeting people who were interested in Spain, and even participating in some of the benefits which were conducted to collect money for the Spaniards who were fighting the cause of the Republic.

INTERVIEWER: How successful was this first attempt of yours to organize the social workers?

McELRATH: We were very successful. We organized all of the professional social workers, plus the clerical staff, into what was called the Department of Welfare Employees' Association. Very early in the game we learned that, as a practical matter, it was unwise to call it a union, simply because not everybody in the group was willing to countenance the organization of a union. We met on a number of topics with administration. These included job classification, wage rates, discrimination against public welfare clients on housing, and all of those kinds of problems. Finally, the organization died a natural death because we could not sustain the interest of the workers, even though it was organized on an industrial basis. Middle-class, white-collar workers, even then, seemed eminently unable to see an identity of interest between the so-called professional workers and the workers in the clerical area. I suppose the professionals were so well-programmed into thinking that their needs were different from those of the clerical workers that we could never then bridge the gap between those two groups of workers.

INTERVIEWER: Well, that's an attitude that persists today still, doesn't it?

McELRATH: Yes, yes. Oh yes. No doubt.

INTERVIEWER: Were most of these social workers women? Were they all women?

McELRATH: We had--I would say about 80 to 90 per cent were women and the rest were men. And there's no doubt that we played out the traditional roles that were assigned to social work. that is, it's "woman's work." And I suspect that many men did not enter it, as they didn't enter the teaching profession, because if they were the primary wage earners, the wage scales weren't enough for them to support a family. [chuckles]

McELRATH: Many of the women at the time were married. I suspect that what they did was to supplement their husband's wages. Those of us who were single certainly didn't find that the wages were outstandingly high. That was one of the reasons why we formed the union at that juncture. Being paid $125 for a forty-hour week and carrying case loads of 250, 300 cases isn't exactly a lark. And not getting paid overtime. And sometimes getting only compensatory time off. Those weren't good conditions under which to work. I suspect the men didn't come in simply because they couldn't live on a $125, $145, $150, whatever it was at that particular time.

INTERVIEWER: Now, you were not yet married at this point, is that right?

McELRATH: No.

INTERVIEWER: And did you stay on this job until you married?

McELRATH: Yes. I stayed on it even after I married. I had a couple of children. I took maternity leave. I was married in 1941. When I was on leave, I think I did some work at the Legislature after I had just resigned from my job. I met the department head at the Legislature and I said to him, "Well, Mr. Holcomb"--that was his name--"what are the chances of my getting back with the department?" He looked at me and said, "You aren't exactly crazy, are you?" And I laughed because that was the beginning of the Cold War, which had begun on the Mainland, United States, very shortly after the conclusion of World War II. We were working into the McCarthy period. And the union, for which I had done volunteer work, the [ILWU] International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union, was squaring off to conduct the most definitive strike in sugar and then later on in longshore. So already, from the kinds of propaganda that came out in the newspapers, over the air waves, as a result of that 1946 strike when I was on leave from the Department of Public Welfare, there was no possibility that I would be rehired by that department.

INTERVIEWER: And this was, again, 1947 would it be? '48? '47? '48? Yes, in that Truman period.

McELRATH: Yes. Yes.

INTERVIEWER: So at that point, what did you do then?

McELRATH: I went and took a crash course in legal stenography for about three weeks, three months rather, because...no, I'm sorry, I take that back. I volunteered my services with the ILWU. During the 1946 tidal wave, I did all the investigations of families who had been hit by the tidal wave. That took some time. Then the sugar strike began in September 1946, and I then volunteered my time as a social worker working out relief policies, discussing the kind of agencies in the territory that could be used to alleviate some of the worker's needs, and did a lot of other volunteer work, such as passing out leaflets and talking to people in groups about the strike issues. After the strike was over, I think I was unemployed for a while until the formation of the Committee for Maritime Unity, which occured on the West Coast and which was an attempt to unify all of the seagoing unions with the Longshoremen's Union, to promote protection of their working conditions and also to promote the survival of the United States Merchant Marine system.

At that time, there was a great deal of expansion in the work of the ILWU in Hawaii; in research, in statistics, because it was on the verge of going into organizing of other production workers. The union hired me, at that time, as a research assistant. We were doing a lot of work on the classification system of sugar workers. I also worked in the library putting together things that could be used by our research staff. After the demise of the Committee for Maritime Unity, the Hawaii ILWU also had to take a cut-back in its work and I was laid off. Following that, I believe I took the crash course in legal stenography because the law firm of Bouslog and Symonds, which was retained by the union, needed substitute stenographers to take the place of those who would go on vacation from time to time. However, even before I could put the stenography to work, the union--the ILWU-- had its 1949 waterfront strike. I volunteered my time then as a social worker to draw up relief policies to work out problems on nutritious meals for the soup kitchen, and in the event people could not come to the soup kitchen, what was absolutely needed as food rations for families to take home and meet the minimum requirements for so-called decency and health. This also involved the referral of individuals to social agencies for supplementary assistance, medical care, and the like. Of course, during that particular period, as with the sugar strike in 1946, all of the resources of the conservative elements in the community

McELRATH: were thrown against the strike. The newspapers, radio stations, community organizations, church groups, all of the employers, et cetera, mobilized in order to fight the union.

Those were very troublesome times. It required, for example, a great deal of the building of the morale among the strikers, the identity of interest among all working people, the mobilization of the wives and children of strikers to realize that their husbands and fathers went out on strike for just wages to close the gap between themselves and the West Coast individuals who worked the same cargo, the same ships, the same employers, but who were paid lower wages than their West Coast brothers. That strike, which lasted for about six months, was a true testing of the ability of workers in longshore, as it did in sugar three years previously, to stand together to withstand all of the attacks of employers and community groups. That, along with the sugar workers, was a turning point in the lives of the community in the strength of the workers to overthrow the kind of exploitation and oppression which they had suffered and which to some people was benign, but which, in terms of getting into the twentieth century, was not that benign. And I think that it solidified certainly my own thinking about the need to organize workers into unions and to bring their families into the whole process.

INTERVIEWER: I've read something about the Broom Brigade. What was that?

McELRATH: The Broom Brigade was a group of women which was formed with the blessing of the employers, to mobilize women in the community to form a counter-picket line against the longshoremen who were on strike in 1949. It's interesting that the employers let their secretaries, their nurses, their clerks take time off from work in order to march in this picket line. It was led by the more conservative elements of the community, and they held a lot of meetings hoping that they could turn the sentiment of the community against the union. This was not a difficult thing to do since there was no doubt that with the longshore strike, no ships sailed into the state of Hawaii. However, the union did allow relief ships to come in and did encourage the formation of an independent stevedoring company. So that these particular tactics which we engaged in did take away some of the steam that this Broom Brigade had generated in the community. I remember one meeting that was called at the McKinley High School, which was designed to mobilize

McELRATH: the community and to pass resolutions against the Longshoremen's Union. There were only a very few of us who went to the meeting, but through our superior parliamentary skill, we were able to maneuver the meeting so that they ended up not taking any action at all on some of the resolutions that they wanted passed.

INTERVIEWER: [Laugh] Wonderful. So this Broom Brigade then, was by no means a spontaneous thing?

McELRATH: No, it was not.

INTERVIEWER: It was organized by the employers?

McELRATH: Absolutely.

INTERVIEWER: And do you think that the women who were in it represented the feelings of most of the other non-union women in Honolulu? That is, you know, the general population or at least the women...

McELRATH: It's difficult to say for the simple reason that while they represented, certainly, the anti-union feelings of their husbands or their employers, there was no way of knowing whether the rest of the community felt this way. If the newspaper advertisements and the radio advertisements were any indication, you would think that the entire community was against us. However, that was not true. There was a church group which was completely sympathetic to the needs of the workers and the reason why they called a strike at that particular time. There were others in the community who said, "Yes, there should be arbitration of the issues." The employers had turned down that particular request for arbitration. There were a lot of working people who were for the unions. Now remember, this came on the wake of the 1946 sugar strike which gave people evidence of the fact that when working people organize, they can improve their wages, their hours, their working conditions many-fold than if they did not organize. So that working people, I am sure, were for us. Whether the women were entirely for us, I can't say. Certainly the wives of the striking workers were for us and some of the so-called liberal elements in the community were for us. But I think that women at that stage, as well as even now, are hampered by the fact that they are insulated against much of the kinds of things that occur in the community which affect them. I think many women, those who do not work, are so safely ensconced

McELRATH: in their homes and have so little opportunity to gain a degree of sophistication--and I'm speaking of it in the true sense of the word 'sophistication'--about issues in the community that, if they did not come out for the union, it's perfectly understandable. They need a good deal of education. They need to get into groups which discuss these issues. By and large, women have not really had that opportunity. But because some of them are wives of members or at least the ILWU, or older children, they at least gained some understanding. We had our own radio program. We had our own newspaper. We put out our own bulletins so that people could understand what the issues were. We also did a good deal of talking to community groups. We tried to give people in the community information about the issues in the longshore strike, just as we did in the sugar strike. And there's no doubt in my mind that the time that strikes were called, the coming back of the Japanese from the war in Europe, provided, perhaps, a much better climate in which to get at least some community sympathy, despite the fact that the lifeline to the territory of Hawaii was presumably cut off. The fact that we allowed relief ships to come in, I think, dulled what might have been a real sharp thrust to turning off, completely, community support for the ILWU at that time. We were successful, for example, in getting merchants, in getting the community to contribute money and food to our soup kitchen or to our food ration program, so that there are always working people in a community who realize where their basic sympathies lie because of their own exploitation.

That period of the 1949 strike saw the strengthening of the Hawaii Employers' Council, first organized in 1943. That association of large employers, as well as small, in the territory of Hawaii who felt that they needed to band together to curb what was the dangerous growth of labor unions in the basic industries, as well as to provide a methodical way of taking care of labor-management problems. Up to now, of course, such labor-management relationships were handled primarily by the individual employers. And I suspect that, as in any other area, organization appears to be the answer to some of the problems which individuals face on a corporate level as well. Presumably, this kind of self-interest on the part of employers brought about a stabilization of the way employers treated labor-management relationships. While it may have been easy to deal with a single association, many problems were compounded because of the subtleties which were brought into the labor-management field.

McELRATH: I rather suspect that the history of the Hawaii Employers' Council would be a very fascinating one in terms of the evolution of attitudes which have been displayed by the employers towards labor organizations in the state of Hawaii. This would be not only in terms of the managerial negotiating skills which they provide, but also in terms of the basic philosophy that executive directors, or presidents, whatever they call the head man, have brought to the association. We have seen this kind of change. There has been the rather benign relationship to unions, such as "Unions are here to stay." There is a federal law which encourages the growth of unions, the organization of workers into unions as against the more hard-nosed attitude of other executive directors or presidents of the employers' association where they feel that every negotiating session must be a combative one and that they won't give up anything unless they're pushed to the wall, and where they'll fight to keep any group of workers from organizing into a union. And every now and then, the class consciousness of workers in the state of Hawaii is manifested in the fact that they decide to take on the employer and conduct strikes as a last resort.

INTERVIEWER: What types of workers are represented in the ILWU today?

McELRATH: We have all of the longshoremen, all of the sugar workers, plus some of the clerical workers who work for plantation companies. All of the pineapple workers, plus some of the clerical workers who are engaged in timekeeping, computerized operations, the large bakeries, large automotive firms, a few ranches, the largest chain of supermarkets, many of the large hotels which are on the outside islands; plus egg examiners, papaya packers, employees of credit unions, and a whole mishmash of workers. We operate on the principle that any unorganized worker, regardless of where he is, should be organized into a union and should enjoy the benefits of union organization. Therefore, the world is our oyster as far as workers are concerned.

INTERVIEWER: Is this an unusual situation in labor? I'm thinking about the Mainland's union.

McELRATH: I think the jurisdictional lines are much more sharply drawn on the Mainland. With the influx of many of the unions into the state of Hawaii, however, we find that we have not been spared our share of jurisdictional battles. I think other unions, also, operate on pretty much the same principle. If it's not a matter of survival, then I think it's a matter of how we can make the

McELRATH: state of Hawaii a true union town, so that it would be impossible for employers to use one group of workers against another group of workers. And this becomes extremely obvious during the periods of high unemployment, such as we are now going through.

Of course, there are many other considerations as to why we may or may not be completely successful in organizing workers, although we want to organize them. I think that's because of the very effective political action program of the ILWU and other unions. As a matter of fact, a large section of the employer press, a blatant example of the employer press--perhaps I should say employer-oriented press--has said that we have literally cut our own throats in organizing because we have been so successful on the legislative level in passing much of the social legislation which is peculiar to the state of Hawaii, such as the pre-paid health plan, temporary disability insurance, wide improvements in the workman's compensation law, and until the last session of the legislature, a very liberal unemployment compensation law. Besides which, I think we were the first state in our union, because of political action on the part of the ILWU, which passed a "Little Wagner" act. It permitted the organization of agricultural workers into unions, not now permitted in the federal law and which was only recently enacted by the state of California to assist the organization of farm workers there, and to bring to a head the matter of elections between the United Farm Workers' Union and some of the other Teamster [union] locals. However, workers are still not paid enough money. Our state minimum wage law is $2.40 per hour, which is the highest of all of the states, as well as higher than the federal minimum. Nevertheless, given the high cost of living in the state of Hawaii, you find that many of our workers earning $2.40 an hour are actually living below the federal poverty line as applied to the state of Hawaii, which has a differential because we are a high cost living area, along with Alaska.

INTERVIEWER: Over the years, what has been the proportion of women members to male members in your union?

McELRATH: In the earlier years when our organizing was in longshore, which is a traditionally-man's industry, we had a very, very small percentage of women workers. Following those early attempts in 1936, '37, and thereafter up to the War, when almost all organizing was stopped, we have very few members in the women. However, following our major thrust in sugar in 1944, we found that there were a number of women who joined our union. We won those elctions by as high as 99 percent of the total work force in the bargaining unit. At every plantation there were women who worked in the fields and their job was to pick up the stalks of cane that fell off either the trucks or the railroad cars. They did some of the weeding. Not too much. I would say that, perhaps out of a work force then of about 26,000, we may have had about 2,000 women who were in the ILWU at that period. Later on, of course, as we went into organizing the pineapple workers in late 1945 or '46, we had a large contingency of women workers because almost all of the packers and trimmers of pineapple at that time were women. They worked usually only during the canning season, which was primarily tied to the summer months when the major part of the crop ripened. There were a few women workers in other areas, such as in the can plant, in the double seamer department where the canned fruit was boiled and where syrup was poured into the cans. When we organized the pineapple workers--and this was on all major islands except the island of Hawaii--I suspect that our total women membership might have been about 50 percent of the total work force.

INTERVIEWER: And now that some operations have been phased out with some plantations closing down or moving way out of the country, I suppose there are fewer women members, or possibly not? Because you are going into the fields which are also feminine, such as office work and banks.

McELRATH: Yes. We have won a number of elections of office workers on sugar plantations. However, because of the mechanization of sugar operations, we have found that with the retirement and the dying out of the earlier immigrant workers who came, let us say, in the 1890's, in the early 1900's, that there are fewer and fewer women workers in the fields. I daresay that even if there were not the mechanization and technical improvements that the modern women would be averse to working in the sugar fields. The work is particularly hard because these stalks of cane are picked up in the burning

McELRATH: sun. But, as I said, I don't think there will be very much room for many women workers in sugar for the simple reason that mechanization has altered the field operations very considerably since the time that immigrants were first brought over as contract laborers. In pineapple, we still have a number of women workers who work in the field picking pineapple. And, you know, it's a fascinating business. You pass either a sugar or pineapple field and women are hardly distinguishable from men for the simple reason that they must wear wide-brimmed hats to keep out the sun, and a kind of netting over the hat because of the prickly things on the leaves and fronds of the sugar cane and the pineapple. They also wear very long-sleeved shirts to the end of their wrists so that their skins would not be pricked by the sharp leaves and the eyes on the fruit. Likewise, the need to wear boots because they're working sometimes in fields that are somewhat muddy. And, obviously, they need to protect their legs from the prickling by the leaves and fruits. So that although in sugar we don't have as many women in the fields, in pineapple, we still have them during the summer picking season. They become very adept at picking pineapple. As a matter of fact, I've tried it and haven't been very successful at it. You pick up the crown of the pineapples in both hands. And with a slight twist of the wrist, you're able to put it on the side of the loading machine and the crown is broken off very easily. Of recent years, the pineapple industry has gone into the export of fresh fruits to the Mainland market, as well as to markets in the Far East and, I believe, also to some of the European countries. In that instance, the crowns are not flicked off. The fruit is picked whole. There are, no doubt, still a number of women who supplement their husband's income by working in the pineapple fields during the summer. After working so many hours, they do acquire a different status according to our collective bargaining agreement and they are given the benefits of the contract, such as coverage under the medical plan, access to severance pay, temporary disability, sick leave, and those kinds of things which a seasonal worker would generally not have because he would be working only during the season, which might be fourteen to sixteen weeks.

Also, I think women work in the fields because it breaks the monotony of home life. There is a kind of community spirit that is developed among the women as to which crew is able to pick more pineapple, and I believe there is

McELRATH: an incentive which is in the plan. Also, they have some long range benefits from this kind work, and that is the ability to send their children on to higher education and perhaps improve their standard of living. A lot of people would say, "Well, it's merely keeping up with the Joneses, and why do we clutter up our lives with all these material things." But for those who haven't had them, these things loom very large as important facets of full living. We have other women workers who form a preponderance of a particular unit of the local, and that is women in hotels, for example. And when...

INTERVIEWER: I wanted to ask you before you leave the plantation workers, are these seasonal women members of the union?

McELRATH: Seasonal workers cannot join the union. I believe there are certain regulations in the law which does not permit them to join a union. I believe they are ruled out of the bargaining unit. But when they become what is called an intermittent worker, a person who has worked 1400 hours per year, they're eligible to join the union and are subject to all of the benefits of the contract that we negotiate with the employers.

INTERVIEWER: You were going to say something about the hotel workers?

McELRATH: Yes. I was going to say that the number of women in the ILWU has increased as we have expanded the boundaries of our organization. For example, most of the women in the large supermarket chain work as cashiers. Some of them work as stock persons. But you will find that very few men will apply for jobs as cashiers. And, again, it is a matter of stereotyping women into certain kinds of positions in the supermarket. A good deal of it may have to do with the wage rate, but, I would say, 75, perhaps up to 90 per cent of our membership in the supermarkets are comprised of women. Likewise, in the hotels, a very large percentage of our membership are women, because they dominate all of the jobs in housekeeping; they dominate all of the jobs in food and beverage. The only place that they do not dominate are jobs in maintanence, whether it's out in the yard, the grounds or in refrigeration, electrical, carpentry work. And they don't dominate, obviously, in the area of the bellpersons, I guess they call them now. They're the ones who handle the bags for the hotel guests.

McELRATH: There are other industries which we have organized which are predominatly women and that's in areas which cover clerical work. In all of your timekeeping positions, your computer organizations, in your general secretarial work, in some of our federal credit unions which we have organized, we find that the preponderance of workers are female. And I think that's because the wages in those areas have been generally lower than wages in, let's say, the skilled trades. And because of the fact that men have traditionally been looked upon as wage earners, they generally do not apply for those jobs. I think a great deal of it also stems from the fact that a family expectations of a women are that she do a clean job and wear nice clothes, and that there is more prestige attached to a job which has some semblance of white collar work, just as, for example, here teachers have generally been women. Those kinds of things. Incidentally, we have also organized technicians in hospitals. There the field seems to be 50-50, so far as the sexes are concerned.

But more and more, as we branch into other areas of organization, we will find that the number of women will increase. We have made some forays into a bank. We lost that one. Nevertheless, we're not going to give up. The employers fought us tooth and nail on that campaign; and I understand that it attracted national attention because the banks, insurance companies have traditionally been almost the last strongholds against union organizations, although, at one time, we might have thought that government workers were. Actually, they had organization handed to them on a silver platter as it were, because of Kennedy's Executive Order; and in the state of Hawaii, a collective bargaining agreement law, which permits the organization of government workers into unions. But the retail stores in the state of Hawaii, the banking and insurance fields, are largely virgin territory for organization, and are largely dominated by women.

INTERVIEWER: And they really need it.

McELRATH: Absolutely!

INTERVIEWER: They need it because, especially these large institutions, the nature of the work is very much like factory work, except that they're sitting at desks instead of at machines.

McELRATH: Exactly.

INTERVIEWER: It isn't like the small two- to three-girl office where a really personal relationship can exist between the worker and the employer.

McELRATH: That's very true. As a matter of fact, we did a study, at the time we were trying to organize this bank, of the wage structure in the bank. We found that many of them would have been eligible for food stamps. The average teller, for example, without longevity, was making something like $2.78 an hour. But the resistance against union organization is great. In other words, the brainwashing that goes on in our education system, in our press, is so heavy that individuals don't realize that all of their attitudes are formed by the fact that they get almost no history of the labor movement in the public school system, and that, in fact, most of the press, generally, is unsympathetic to union organization. This is very true, even though the press may, on occasion, say that "We think workers have the right to join the union." So the subtlety of opposition, of course, is very different from the kind of blatant opposition in the earlier years. Therefore, you find that organization among white collar workers is extremely difficult. Some of them have told us, "Why, we didn't realize that any person has the right to join a union. We didn't know that unions go on out and help workers in all of these other areas, besides helping us negotiate a contract." And so many of these workers know very little about the glorious history of their forebearers who really laid the groundwork for union organization, the successful union organization of the ILWU and other unions, subsequently, in the state of Hawaii. Many of them are children of immigrant parents who walked the picket lines, who were beaten by the employers, who died in the flu epidemic, who were evicted from their homes. So few of them know that these things happened to their parents. And because no one communicated to them, either in their family circle or in the schools, they have no idea of the richness of their past, and that, in fact, their identity is really with workers. And I think this is the gap that needs to be filled in our educational system.

INTERVIEWER: I think there is now some advance in that direction, isn't there?

McELRATH: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: The DOE [Department of Education] is providing some instruction to students about the history of unions.

McELRATH: As a matter of fact, very early during the development of our program, we have found this to be a great lack in the school system, and we have agitated over many, many years that they establish curriculum which would take into consideration this kind of rich past of all of the ethnic groups who have come to Hawaii. Of more recent years, the AFL-CIO group has joined us in making this appeal to the school department. At every level, at the high school level as well as the university level, we have made the plea that this kind of curriculum should be worked out. As a matter of fact, we were successful this year in having the legislature pass a fairly generous appropriation for the establishment of a labor institute here at the University of Hawaii. It has been a long battle because those who are in power, generally, are unsympathetic. They fall for the line that you slant everything in labor's favor without realizing that all of our lives, all of our attitudes are slanted by the other side. And that if we really want an identity as, not only children of immigrant workers, but also as a distinct class in society, we need to have all of our past reinforced by information that is true, that is factual, and that is compassionate. Up to now there has been, with the exception of a few spots here and there, very little of that kind of attitude. I daresay that times have changed. But, really, not that much. A great deal, for example, of the confrontations, the demonstrations that have taken place of recent years by young workers, have been because they have not understood what their past is. Until someone points it out to them they are not about to delve in the history books nor in the archives, unless there is one teacher who is sympathetic and who would ask them, "Why did your parents do? Why is your past that gives birth to the kinds of attitudes that you now hold?" And I think for that reason, if for no other, we need to teach history in quite a different way from the way it has been treated; in terms of immigrant women, in terms of the struggles that workers have made in order that we live the lives that we live today, whether we agree it is a good life or a bad life.

INTERVIEWER: Absolutely, In the union meetings in the past, I'd like to know if the women members took active part. Did they speak up? If they spoke up, were they put down in any way by the men?

McELRATH: In all of the union meetings I have gone to--and this goes back to about 1937--I have found that up to the middle '40s--well, of course, there weren't very many women, but those who did come to meeting with their husbands--there was an eminent unwillingness to get up and talk. I think that many of the women, again, suffer from the traditional attitudes that women should not get up and say anything. That this was a man's role. A lot of the things that women did might have been done in the confines of the home, but never in a union meeting. As I look back to the early days of organizing, I can think of women who joined women's auxiliaries, for example, in the longshore section when we began the early organizing, and this was the only instance when women had the kind of courage to get up and speak.

Incidentally, I think that longshore workers were of a quite different genre than plantation workers. Longshore workers living in a metropolitan area, a seaport town, I think developed a great deal more freedom to speak and to organize into unions. They are subject to more kinds of sophistication that can be gained because of seamen coming in on ships, stopping to have a cup of coffee or a glass of beer with them. I think that this kind of sophistication probably carries on into the home because the early organizing days of the longshoremen did bring forth about a dozen or so women who were not afraid to come on out and say why their husbands should join unions. Because the longshore industry traditionally has been dominated by Hawaiian workers and a few citizen Japanese workers, and then, Filipino workers, you find that the original militancy in the longshore union was largely carried out by the Hawaii worker, by a few Filipinos workers, and a few Japanese workers. By and large, Japanese were discriminated against on the waterfront, especially during World War II when the whole idea of national security was brought to the front. We had one or two Japanese women, perhaps one Filipino woman in the early organizing days, but the rest of them were all Hawaiian or part-Hawaiian. And they were the ones who stuck with the union throughout the early, bitter days of organizing. When, for example, we had two or three elections before the National Labor Relations Board--won some, lost some.

McELRATH: They won a few pennies in increases. Then there was a ten-month strike on the Island of Kauai. Between 1940 and 1941, when all of the longshoremen were evicted by the employers, they lived in a huge skating-rink and men and women of every ethnic group together cooked their meals, developed a camaraderie and feeling of community that they probably never had before. In 1938, there was a massacre in the port of Hilo, Hawaii, where the National Guard shot children, women and men; hit them with their bare fists, with gun butts. It seems that in periods of intensive crisis, all people in the union--men, women, and children--are galvanized into action; they're welded into a solid group because they realize where their class interests lie. And this is the kind of thing so heartening about the working class. Despite the fact that many, many things have happened in recent years which have dulled their capacity for struggle, I think that when these period of crisis arise, they will be there--men, women, and children. And this is the kind of support that keeps the union going. It really makes them realize where their true interests lie because despite what they do, despite the wages that they receive, homes they may be able to buy, in essence they are still workers, subject to the vicissitudes of their employers and to the economic system.

INTERVIEWER: I know that you've been working for many years on a part-time basis as a social worker for the ILWU. Everybody who knows you, Ah Quon, says that you really carry a full work load, but you only take half a day to do it. Was this schedule voluntary on your part, you wouldn't want to work a 40-hour week?

McELRATH: I made that decision following the 1958 sugar strike, and it seemed then that there were many other things outside of the union work which I wanted to get into. In the first place, I feel intensely that if it were not for the union, I would not have that kind of status. It's the organization which has given me, if you want to call it that, prestige, status, and recognition for some of the kinds of ability that I have. And I also recognize that if it were not for workers paying dues to the union I probably would have ended up being a drudge for an agency. I value the opportunity that the union has given me to learn many, many things about which I knew nothing when I was first hired. For this reason, I felt, besides the personal need to do things outside of union work, I decided that I should work part time. That is, about four hours a day, get my work done, occasionally work a full day, when the work load demanded it. It means,

McELRATH: obviously, that I work at top speed. But I think the whole philosophy of the union, which is not to depend on one person, but to develop among our rank and file member the kind of knowledge and expertise that they would be able to help their members at their unit on their particular island with a good deal more effectiveness than one professional social worker, is a good one. Our whole union is geared to this kind of philosophy of operation.

INTERVIEWER: It seems to have worked out very well in your case, but I'd like to know how you feel about the whole idea of part time work as a solution for other women working in private industry, women who still have a great many responsibilities at home. I went to a conference on the Mainland this spring and there was a great deal of interest, and a great deal of controversy about this question of part time work for women. Some of them seeing it as the answer, especially in a period of scarce jobs. Others felt very strongly that it is a move by employers who get more out of workers by working them only four or five hours a day, having two fresh workers instead of one who gets tired at the end of the day; and also a way to escape paying them fringe benefits, letting them earn seniority and this type of thing, also keeping them at a job of lower prestige, lower pay, not enough to sustain these women.

McELRATH: Well, actually one can be both a saint and a devil. I think the answer is not either/or, as in so many problems which we face. I think women must be given the right to choose that which best meets their needs as a person, as wage-earners, and as individuals for whom there must be opportunities to move back and forth. Now, let's take the one about whether this is an exploitative situation. We have enacted the Hawaii State Prepaid Health Law. In that law there is a provision that any worker who works twenty or more hours per week for a certain period of time must be offered health plan coverage. Some of the contracts which we have negotiated offer a certain number of benefits to so-called part time workers. The prime example of that, obviously, is our pineapple contract, where intermittent workers--I think I've alluded to this before--who work 1400 hours a year are given health plan coverage, dental plan coverage, temporary disability coverage, severance pay, and other fringe benefits. I don't think that it's all black or all white. I do feel, however, that a women who works part time needs to get the protection of wages, hours, and working conditions. I think under those circumstances

McELRATH: there is more of a possibility of stabilization of a work force than if you were to have the woman subjected to poor working conditions, where she feels that in order to take care of her household chores, or to take care of young children, that this is not the part time job that she wants. Once you build in these kinds of protections for women workers, whether they be part time or full time, it seems to me you would have a happier women worker and a more stabilized work force. In my experience, I have found that, because of the traditional roles to which women have been confined, whether or not the work is part time or full time, she is the one who is expected to pick up her child from school if the child is ill, to take the child to the doctor when the child is ill, and thereby make inroads into, for example, her vacation pay or her sick pay, whichever.

I think that employers must recognize that until there is a massive change in attitudes towards women workers, that they must expect and must make certain kinds of concessions to a work force that is composed largely of women. I don't think that this should be an excuse for them to continue to exploit women workers. And as the nature of industry changes, and as we open up more job opportunities for women, it seems to me that we should make every allowance that we can to utilize abilities and skills they acquire in trade schools or in other schools. This will take a long time in coming, but I think women themselves should not take a devisive attitude and say, "No, we're not going to do this, and, no, we're not going to do that." That job is to say, "What can we do to offer the best opportunities to women, regardless of what she chooses--part time work or full time work" and therein, it seems to me, lies the solution to the problems of women workers, whether it be in the building of more day-care centers, whether it be to build in protection for part time worker in the collective bargaining agreement, or whatever. I don't think that sniping at one group or the other, because they happen to propose this as an answer, advances the cause of women workers. Rather, we should sit down and say, "What are the alternatives open to us, what are the ways in which we can improve the working conditions of those of us who must go to work because we are widows, because we are one-parent members of one-parent families, or whatever."

INTERVIEWER: In the course of your work, what kind of problems do you help union members with? Do they come to you with internal family problems, things not connected at all with the job?

McELRATH: Yes, this is done and the reason for it is this: our union--and I think I must go into the organization in order that you get the reason why I answer the question the way I shall be answering it--our union is considered one of the most democratic unions in the nation. Our constitution has been held up as a model of democracy. We provide recall of officers on a very small percentage of signed names to a petition submitted by the membership. We have, here in the state of Hawaii, a local union which has three officers, and under the local union are four divisions made up of the four counties of the State of Hawaii. Under each division are scores of individual units. For example, a plantation such as Mauna Kea Sugar Company would be one unit in the Hawaii Division, which is part of ILWU Local 142. At that Mauna Kea Sugar Unit level, officers are chosen by the membership and there are such committees as membership service, pension and welfare, sports, grievance, and any other committee which that particular unit feels is important to the function of that unit and to meet the needs of the member. There are over a hundred units of the ILWU Local 142 scattered on six major islands, each of which is an autonomous-functioning organization.

At the local level you have several departments: Education Department, Contract Administration and Membership Services. I happen to work for the Membership Services Department. However, we work very closely with the Education Department and one of the jobs that we have been doing over the years that the ILWU has been in existence is the formation of programs which are characterized by a very heavy educational series for our elected, as well as appointed officials at the local, division, and unit level.

For example, a few months ago we completed a series of classes on all of the islands, which took up such subjects as workmen's compensation, unemployment compensation, social agencies in your community and how you can use them to meet the problems of your membership. So that, in effect, what I am saying is that we try to train workers at the unit level to recognize problems and then to offer some solution to that problem. For example, if we had a worker at the Mauna Kea Sugar Company who has eight children in his family but who is in, let us say, Labor Grade 1 where the pay might be $3.87 an hour, there is no way in which he is going to provide adequate for that family, even though he pays only

McELRATH: a small amount for medical care, nothing for dental care, nothing towards the pension plan, and pays a very small rental each month to the plantation. In that instance, if he goes to the unit membership service committee and seeks help, we are in a position to refer that person to the Department of Social Services for food stamps; we can recommend that the family apply for the school lunch program. We can also, for example, suggest that he might be able to get supplementary medical care under Title XIX of the Social Security Act, for a condition which may not be covered under the medical plan that now covers him and his dependent wife and children. So those are the kinds of things which a unit membership service committeeman might be able to do.

We also handle a lot of immigration cases. We represent our members at hearings before the administrative law judges of the Social Security Program. We handle appeals for workers in unemployment compensation cases, just as we represent workers in workmen's compensation cases. We have a wide gamut of problems that are brought to the attention of our membership service committeemen. Just the other day, for example, I worked with an alcoholic whom the company wanted to fire, and because we have worked out an alcoholism program with some of the employers in the State of Hawaii, we were able to get the employer to rescind the firing of the worker on the basis that we would be working with the man and referring him to some of the agencies in the City and County of Honolulu, which offer services for a person with a drinking problem.

We refer a lot of our cases, for example, to private childrens' and family agencies which do long-term counseling with individuals who have marital and other problems. This is done especially if it looks as though the case requires more than a few office counseling sessions on my part. Obviously, I'm unable to do this kind of long-term counseling, not only because we have so many other kinds of different problems to deal with, but because I work part time. And it would be unfair for me to devote many hours of the week to just one family. Where we can use private agencies, we refer those families out to those private agencies. We do a lot of educational work, for example, in the use of tests which are meant to augment medical plan coverage. For example,

McELRATH: many of our medical plans do not include the preventive aspect of care. Therefore, we recommend to our families that they take advantage of cancer and diabetes detection programs, and high blood pressure tests, which are given at health fairs. All those kinds of things we do.

We try, in our educational sessions, to get our officers, in the matter of health care, for example, to think beyond just the benefit package and to see how important it is for them to control their work conditions. Lots of work is done with regard to OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration]. We try to get them, for example, to think of the effect of the environment over their health and, in the final analysis, as a long-range goal we certainly want our members to begin taking control over their own bodies, and not have to depend on the health care facilities, whether it's a hospital or professional manpower, which, after all, reinforce their own needs for high occupancy and high income levels. This is not where the answer lies in the cost of health care.

Although this is a long difficult row to hoe, we hope that through our continuing educational programs our members will begin to see health care in a different light from the one that they have been used to looking at which is: "Is this illness covered; how much will they pay?" but rather, "What can I do to take care of myself? What kinds of things can I do on the job so that I am not hurt? What kinds of things are there in the environment that I can control?" If, for example, 80 percent of the cancer is caused by things in the environment, we need to work on that, rather than on a program of cancer detection and cancer treatment. That's putting the cart before the horse and obviously costs us perhaps, in the long run, more dollars than if we were to do something about the environment. So those are some of the kinds of things we try to do in our union educational program. We aren't always sucessful; this is the kind of thing that you have to work at for many, many years, and I've been at it for twenty or more long years. While I see certain changes in attitudes taking place, this is perhaps not as readily measurable as the kinds of things you include as benefits in a medical plan. So the challenge is still there, it's still a fascinating business, and I wouldn't give it up for anything.

INTERVIEWER: It sounds like a really wonderful program. Is the ILWU unique in furnishing services of social workers to members? Is it unique in the islands?

McELRATH: For a long time, we were the only union that had hired a social worker. Subsequently, other unions have been so impressed by the range of services that we have provided and are providing, that they are modeling some of their membership service programs after our union. However, no other union that I know of has hired a social worker. As a matter of fact, many young social workers who graduate from the University of Hawaii School of Social Work come to see me and they ask me, "Are there jobs in unions that I can apply for?" Invariably, I tell them I know of no other at the moment and I don't think the ILWU will hire another social worker in addition to me, for the simple reason that our philosophy is not to hire a lot of professional people, but to build in a capability among our members to perform some of the kinds of things which I do. But I always tell them, "If you think that a union or a group of unions can use the skills that you as a trained social worker have, I recommend very highly to you that you sit down, work out a program that can be sold to a union on a contractual or a consulting basis, or a program where you will be the nub from which a lot of educational work is done so that you build in this kind of capability. Unfortunately, none of the social workers to whom I have made this recommendation has taken it up. I suspect some of them haven't because they are young, inexperienced workers, and I suspect others have felt that they need to find a job immediately and cannot afford the luxury of sitting down, spending a lot of time talking with people, and trying to build a program which they can sell to a single large union or a group of unions. But I think that if there are any social workers--men or women--who wish to be creative in the way their skills are used, and who do not wish to be locked in the humdrum of case work services or in supervision in a public agency, this is the area in which they can move.

Some social workers have set up shop as a private counseling organization, but even there the work is so confined and does not offer the challenge that union work does, which is carried on on many different fronts: in the legislature, the community organizations, the municipal government, with outside agencies, and lots of other governmental agencies. To me, this is the way in which a social worker can keep her mind fertile, every-growing. Otherwise, it's stultified by the nature of the organization for which she works,

McELRATH: and alack and alas, many of us have that kind of stultification going, and we don't realize that it has happened, for the simple reason that gradually you begin to owe your allegiance to a bureaucratic organization rather than to the people whom you are supposed to serve. And that is the area, if there are any women or men who are interested, they can move with a vigor and an aggressiveness that would really give meaning to their lives.

INTERVIEWER: This is really an exciting idea. I imagine that one of the reasons that nobody has done it yet is that it would take quite a high level of self-confidence, and particularly, I suppose, recent graduates wouldn't have developed that sort of confidence to go ahead and propose such a program to an organization.

McELRATH: Yes, it is true with young workers. But there are also some old, tired social workers who have been with an agency for lo, these many years, who are just waiting to retire, who would do justice to their own lives if they were to get out and say, "I am going to strike out on something new." And if they were to do that, perhaps their whole living would take on a completely different aspect. Alas, we are brainwashed by the same kind of desires as everybody else. We want the security, we don't want to rock the boat, and, therefore, anything new which is suggested might be somewhat threatening and frightening. There are very few people who are willing to work, five, ten years at a job and say, "This is no longer for me; my strength has stopped; my creativity has stopped; I am going to strike out and do something else and see whether I can't recharge myself."

INTERVIEWER: When you think about it, you have to have not only confidence, you have to have a certain reserve of income too, to tide you over until money begins to come in.

McELRATH: There's no doubt that those considerations probably are paramount in the minds of individuals, and I suspect that being raised as we have, maybe, just maybe, we have put too much emphasis on that, and that it really doesn't take that much to live a fairly happy, adequate life. I mean, I sometimes wonder about a person who says, "Well, I won't take that job because it doesn't pay as much as the one that I'm leaving." And, in many instances, the kind of challenges that you face more than makes up for the cut of two, three, four, five thousand dollars...and what can you do with it? You can't eat it anyway, or if you do eat with

McELRATH: it, you'll probably become obese, overweight, and put all kinds of pressures on yourself. Those are some of the kinds of ideas that I think are a little bit interesting to play with.

INTERVIEWER: Does the ILWU have any women organizers on the staff?

McELRATH: We don't have any permanent women organizers on the staff. We do hire women organizers from time to time. For example, when we organize in the areas where there is a preponderance of women, we will get a leave of absence for a particularly strong woman organizer from some of the plants which have already been organized. In our recent forays into the banking field, we hired, on a temporary basis, a woman who had worked in a bank and knew the operations of banking very, very well. From time to time, of course, we depend on the intermittent workers in the pineapple canneries to assist us in organizing. We work on the principle that every organized worker should be an organizer. We encourage people who have been members of the union to go out and talk with any of their friends and relatives who might be workers in a plant which we are trying to organize. We have used women hotel workers as organizers on a temporary basis when we have tried to organize additional hotels on the outside islands. Other than that, we have not had a permanent women organizer.

INTERVIEWER: These women--how have they done? Have they done well?

McELRATH: What we tried to do is put the women through a short training session; we attach them to a veteran organizer on the job. We give them leads as to how to promote the idea of joining a union. And, generally speaking, I would say that we have had 50-50 percent sucess with our women organizers. I remember, for example, organizing a few Chinese women in the earlier years by going to the Unemployment Compensation office and talking with potential members who were Chinese, speaking to them in Chinese, and telling them why it was important for them to join the union, what kinds of benefits they would have. In going over the membership lists as I sometimes do, I found that some of these women had indeed joined the union. That was in the earlier days. However, with certain maintenance of membership or agency shop clauses in our contracts, we have found that for an organized plant the matter of organizing a new worker is not that difficult. We do have new members' classes and those kinds of things to orient a new member into the union. But for an unorganized group, you have to contend

McELRATH: with a great many problems: the lack of knowledge and tradition of the trade union movement; the nature of the industry, which if it were white collar, would make it a little more difficult, not only because of lack of knowledge but the psychological bias of white collar workers joining a union. And in period of high unemployment, the fear that if he or she lost a job, he or she wouldn't be able to find anything, the less than adequate protection of the National Labor Relations Board--which is largely employer dominated and whose rules and regulations make it extremely difficult for us to have an election within a short while, and the increased sophistication of employers who are able to stall any election process by asking for a formal hearing. Consequently, organizing is very difficult, and if you have a woman organizer who is able to convince other women workers that they should join the union, this may not be enough; for the simple reason that there may be many other factors which affect the time the union can have an election before the NLRB. So I would say that we are hampered by a number of objective factors in organizing, and we are also hampered by the fact that, because of their background generally, women have less knowledge, less sophistication, less ease with which they can talk about why another person should join the union.

I think this is one of the things that labor unions need to do a great deal about. In a town where there isn't that kind of tradition, it's an extremely difficult proposition. Even men in our union get very discouraged because they find it is extremely difficult to organize workers. Men workers--working with men organizers--find it extremely difficult now.

INTERVIEWER: How about business agents? Does the ILWU have any women business agents, or if it doesn't, have they in the past?

McELRATH: If memory serves me correctly, I do not believe the ILWU has had any women business agents, nor any women who ran for office of business agent. And again, while we are a very democratic union, I think prejudices die hard. I also think that women have not run for office because they are themselves victims of the old attitudes about what the woman can do. It is interesting, for example, that with the building of hotels and the large influx of women into hotel work that, in fact, there has been--and I don't know if the trend has continued--there has been an increased incidence of divorce among our members, an increased incidence of juvenile delinquency.

McELRATH: For many women, work--whether in a hotel or in other areas--brings a kind of liberation. But if the man, along with the woman, is not liberated, then there's bound to be problems. He may not object to her bringing in extra money because they're sending a child to college or they're buying a home. But he will object if his wife comes home later than usual from work because she has stopped at a bar to have a few drinks with her other women friends. He may object because he feels that even though she works, she must be home to have dinner ready for him. This is not always possible because hotel work, as you know, is done in shifts. And, I think, therein lies one of the very big reasons why women may have been reluctant to run for office other than at a unit level. A business agent's work, for example, covers an entire day. He is called at different times of the night by workers on the night shift to handle a certain grievance or because there is a certain problem. And apparently, many of our women who are of business agent caliber probably feel that this is not the kind of sacrifice they can make, even though they are intensely interested in the work of the union.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that women union members, at least in your union, are less conservative in their politics and social attitudes than women who are not organized?

McELRATH: I think it is difficult to generalize except to say that because of our wide spectrum of activities, in membership services, in our education programs, in our political action program, and generally in the total kind of publicity that we conduct in our union, that this is true; women in unions generally are less conservative. However, I don't think we can discount the fact that we are a microcosm of the macrocosm. Consequently, while this may be generally true, you would probably find the same range of attitudes among our members--women members--as there is outside the community. And a great deal of it depends on, for example, the woman's religious background, whether she feels she should think the way her husband thinks or whether she should strike out on her own; whether or not what she learns in the union indeed has meaning for her.

I would say that, by and large, this general feeling that women in the union are less conservative than their contemporaries who are unorganized can be borne out by the fact that we have been largely successful in our political program. In other words, our endorsed candidates usually are elected to office. We haven't had anywhere near, oh let us say 90 percent success, but in a political campaign 75, 60

McELRATH: percent success is very good. Especially in light of the fact that, for many years, the newspapers, the businessmen, other media have been predicting the demise of the power of the ILWU in political action. So I would say from that point of view, certainly there is an indication that our women are a lot more sophisticated than women on the outside.

INTERVIEWER: Do your union women take part in political campaigns? Do you think they do this more than women who are just housewives, who aren't in any large organization?

McELRATH: In the earlier days, I think, organized women did take a very much larger part in political campaigns. But as the nature of candidates has changed, we find that more and more women enter political campaigns because more and more women have begun to run for office. This is, of course, another means by which women can get temporary jobs. For example, I am amazed at the new faces that have begun to appear in the State Legislature over recent years because new representatives and senators are picked--faces which I did not see five, ten, or fifteen years ago. But there is a completely different change in the kinds of people who run for office. Consequently, you have a younger group of people who have jobs in the Legislature, not just the old hacks who appear year after year after year. And I think this provides fine job opportunities for women. And, I think women generally are beginning to feel that they are important in politics. For example, a Patsy Mink has a very devoted following and women feel that she has found the good cause. A Lisa Naito, a [Kate] Stanley. I don't know about some of the others, but I suspect even on the Republican side, a Kinau Kamatii or a Faith Evans have their strong constituencies who work for them. A lot of the women who stand out on street corners and wave to the voters with a candidate's placard probably wouldn't have been there five years ago.

Union women have been doing this a very long time, and I remember working on street corners, going house to house, making speeches at trade union meeting and community gatherings as to why the ILWU was supporting such and such a candidate. And we have very good reason, because we knew that from the very beginning, political action has augmented some of the gains that we have made at the negotiating table. Of course, there is some feeling now that perhaps some of this in certain areas might have been a mistake, and this is being bruited about and I'm not certain, at this point, exactly what the stand of the union--that is our union and other unions--will be towards this whole matter of

McELRATH: how far do you push social legislation. To me, this is a very basic philosophical problem and it ties in with the whole problem. On the other hand, of can you or can you not organize workers into unions if, in fact, via legislation you give them what you say you can give them over the bargaining table. This is a very basic dilemma, I think, that is faced by unions that have made any kind of inroad into organization.

On the other hand, there are some states which are little troglodytes as far as social legislation is concerned; and they haven't been eminently succussful when you consider the fact that the organized work force in the United States is probably not more than twenty million out of a, what is it, a work force of 180 million--that's a drop in the bucket! And outside of the early halcyon days of the CIO. there hasn't really been that kind of big push in organization. Percentage-wise, we really haven't grown--the labor movement hasn't grown--and so I think we need to look into the reasons why we haven't been successful. Is it because we have shunned other groups of workers such as women workers, because it has been a tough job? Is it because we have not come up with any imaginative ways in which to organize them? Has it been because we have moved too far afield in the areas of social legislation? This may sound horrible, when you think that a lot of our workers are exploited. On the other hand, if you want to get them all into unions, as one way in which to stablize their income and give them the better things of life, then we need to look at that particular problem from every point of view. This is one of the difficulties that we face. But albiet, women, I think, will more and more increase their role in politics. Everything points to that. Some recent examples of women who have been very prominent; for example, Barbara Jordan, who apparently made quite a big hit at the Democratic Convention, which fired up the imagination of a lot of women. I'm not sure that I would go the same route as she, since all of us need to make our contribution in that area which is most meaningful and which is of benefit to a large number of individuals. But if women feel that politics is the arena where they can make a contribution, more power to them.

INTERVIEWER: Do you support the ERA [Equal Rights Amendment]?

McELRATH: Oh, absolutely. And I still don't know why people are so exorcised over it.

INTERVIEWER: Does your union support it?

McELRATH: Oh, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that organized labor generally is responding to women's needs?

McELRATH: I would say, generally, yes. We have a very interesting situation. For example, this is in the hotels and I bring this up because of what I feel must be part of the ridiculous nature of the right hand not knowing what the left is doing as far as equal opportunity and discrimination is concerned. In the hotels, the room maids-- as a matter of fact, I could be called to task for saying "room maids," I should say "room persons," I guess. I forget what the federal classification calls them because I'm not disturbed by semantics, I mean, I'm not a person to feel that if you don't call a person a "chairperson," you're a chauvinist. That doesn't bother me. But for the ease of the flow of this particular illustration, room maids in a hotel are given a certain number of rooms that they must clean. There are certain hotels which allow a carry-up bed to be put into the room in the event a family group comes. The San Francisco office of EEOC [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission] said that contract, as it was written, was discriminatory to women workers and that there should be a differential for the person who moved those movable beds into rooms. And, as a matter of fact, part of it is that they should change the classification "room maid" to some other name, I forget what it is.

Well, we agreed, fine, that there should be a differential. I think it was ten cents differential. The women workers who cleaned rooms weren't excited by this at all. Their argument was, "We don't <u>want</u> to go down to the fourth floor, stack these roll-away beds on a dolly, and move them up on an elevator, back to the rooms, because it's too heavy work for us. If, however, we think we can do it, we <u>will</u> do it." So, as I understand it, the case is now in the San Francisco office. No decision has been made. They raised a big fuss over the situation and said, "We're going to fine you, we're going to do this, we're going to do that." The workers didn't care. "It doesn't make any difference to us. If you want to give us a choice, fine, we will take that choice. If we don't want it, we'll work for ten cents less." But this is, you see, making a mountain out of a molehill. They could very quietly have said, "We would suggest that this be done in order that women not be

McELRATH: discriminated against." The interesting thing about this whole business is that most of the people who clean rooms in hotels are small, Oriental women who don't want to lug a dolly around with movable beds, which could weigh as much as five hundred pounds. And so they say, "We're very happy to give it to the men. You take the ten cents an hour over this." So one of the kinds of things was to, I think, devise a whole new classification with the ten cent business. It didn't seem to make very much sense.

INTERVIEWER: The whole issue, then, is the choice.

McELRATH: Yes. I think this is so. Obviously, we should not discriminate against women. We should offer them the choice, with the protective provisions in the contract, so that if a woman wants to apply for a job as an electrician and she is trained, she ought to have just as much a chance at it as the other workers who come to apply for it.

INTERVIEWER: I think that is the answer to all of these objections that are raised against the ERA.

McELRATH: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: They can all be settled on an individual basis.

McELRATH: Absolutely.

INTERVIEWER: On the matter of choice for the people involved.

McELRATH: On the other hand, we have some individuals who say, "What! A woman electrician? You know what she has to go through? She has to crawl through the mud, the muck, and the water, in a pineapple cannery that's awfully smelly, and one other thing, she may have to climb fifty feet up in the air and just hang on to the wires, and by golly, I wouldn't want to be the other one at the other end of the wire if she isn't that strong." So my answer to the person is, "Fine, if she feels that that isn't a job she can do, that is, hanging onto the wires, the employer doesn't assign her that job. He can assign her to another inside job. As to wading through muck and water, that's what she wants to do, let her do it!" And I think this kind of protection of choice is so foreign to this electrician that he just scratched his head, looked at me, and said, "You mean some woman would want to do that?" Yes, there are some women who would want to do it. (Laughs)

INTERVIEWER: How do you feel about quotas to ensure equal representation of both sexes in mixed groups, such as political party conventions, union conventions, committees, and this sort of thing?

McELRATH: Quotas might help, but I don't think that this is the answer. If you felt that quotas were a means by which you could ensure a certain amount of participation; the even more important job to be done, in my opinion, is in the area of attitudinal changes. Let's assume that you have a certain number of women who come to a union convention, and you freeze them out by hooting them down whenever they get up to make a speech or a motion. The quota isn't going to help. I think the problem is much more deep-rooted that that. If quotas will help, I'm all for it. It's similar to the 1954 Brown vs. the City of Topeka. Everybody said, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink." The old cliche. But the amount of discrimination and prejudice which was struck down by that law was immense. We now need to supplement the 1954 decision and the 1964 Civil Rights Act by working more and more in the area of attitudinal changes. This became very clear to me when I was working one summer in Alabama in 1966. For example, under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which said that you could not discriminate against Southern schools--and this followed the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court--we found that the black educators themselves said, "We got lots of money, and you know what we did? We went and bought a lot of microscopes for our high school classes, but I'll be darned, we didn't have a single person who could use the microscope or teach biology or chemistry." A similar situation exists in the idea of how do you make quotas really mean something? If you have the quota system as a kind of token concession to equalizing participation, that, in and of itself, will not come about. As a matter of fact, I think what we can do is look at the matter of quotas and think how, if you were the legislator, can it best be used as a means to change attitudes among individuals.

For example, let's take entrance into medical school. For years, you know, and even into the present, we know that medical schools have discriminated against women. At a conference in Ann Arbor several years ago, some of us suggested that medical schools should begin to alter their admission policies in order to admit 52 percent of the women applicants, simply because that was where they stood in proportion to men in the population. That's all fine and

McELRATH: we should certainly work toward it. However, we also, in the meantime, need to change other attitudes toward women in the areas of sciences--in the elementary schools, in the high schools, in the colleges--so that it can be a long-range goal toward which many short-range solutions are found until we realize that particular long-range goal. So that I don't think that the answer, as in other areas, can be either/or. Short of a complete revolution, we're not going to be able to do it. Not in our kind of society. The process, in other words, is much more laborious, is much more tortuous than it is in other countries such as China, where the whole economic system has been changed; such as in the Soviet Union, which is not a system based on profits, as in the United States; so that depending basically upon some of the kinds of things that have occurred, the nature of the economic system, the nature of politics, the superstructure, there are different solutions to the problem, I think, of discrimination against women. One of the ways, obviously, is by law. Constitutionally, we want to amend it so that we have the ERA. We have certain other kinds of decisions, rendered by the Supreme Court, which help us to bring about the needed attitudinal changes.

INTERVIEWER: Would you say that you believe that now it's up to the women in the union, In the ILWU specifically, to take further action to bring themselves up to a level of equality with men in the actual running of the union?

McELRATH: Yes. I think that this is very basic to women taking more prominent positions in the union than they have heretofore. It means that they must assess their own feelings, their own capabilities, as to what kind of contribution they can make. Obviously, it means that they must put on top of the agenda the change of attitudes on the parts of their husbands, if they are married, as to this kinds of participation. In addition, it is extremely important for the officials of the union, at every level, to give encouragement to women to participate in the work of the union and not just feel that, simply because she is a woman, can type or write in a neat hand, that all she should be elected to is secretary of the unit. It means that union officials must provide the kind of education so that the attitudes of men can be changed. The changing of attitudes that would encompass wider participation of women in positions of leadership and not have themselves threatened by this kind of participation.

At the moment, the highest office that is held by a women in the ILWU is as a member of the International Executive Board, which is a policy-making board which carries on

McELRATH: between conventions. Here, at the state level, we do have some women who act as chairmen of their units. They are doing a very good job; they come regularly to educational classes, which are designed to equip them to perform this job well. But there has never been, as I indicated before, any kind of encouragement, nor any kind of interest shown, for a woman to run as business agent. I think that basically the men in the union can still not visualize a woman being a business agent or a high-level officer. This is so much outside of their experience that getting them to change their attitudes involves a great deal of work. But as women begin to show that they are just as capable as men in running an organization, I think perforce the men's attitudes will be changed, whether or not they like it. And they would have to doff their hats to women who can run an organization, and perhaps even better than they can.

INTERVIEWER: Is this resistance of the men to seeing women in these unusual positions--is this, do you think, due to ethnic differences? For instance, I have the impression that Hawaiian women and Portuguese women are traditionally more aggressive and much more able and likely to stand up and speak, and speak very forcefully, whereas Oriental women are more retiring, low-voiced, quiet.

McELRATH: It's very interesting that in my dealings in work with community action programs, under the Office of Economic Opportunity [OEO], and with Headstart classes, that this generally seems to be true. I also recall going to meetings of women's auxiliaries, where the Hawaiian and Portuguese women have been much more willing to get up and speak than a Filipino, Japanese or Chinese woman, although we don't have very many Chinese women at that production level. Of course, our culture has been such that the Oriental woman, as I indicated earlier, is supposed to be seen but not heard. I think also a lot of Hawaiian women, at least in my experience with the OEO program, have been single-parent women, and they really need to be very aggressive in order to get from some social agency that to which they have a right. Even in your welfare rights organizations, with which I have worked for a number of years, we find that the Oriental women are certainly not as aggressive as are Hawaiian and Portuguese women. I don't know whether it is ethnicity so much as experience and circumstance. I think these

McELRATH: are all variables which enter into the situation. I'm not so sure that ethnicity has the strongest pull in this situation, although, obviously, we have always made the assumption that Oriental women are very retiring. And this is probably, to a large extent, true, except that if we say that Oriental children have been raised with the whole idea of seeking security, of seeking education, of getting a high paying job; and that these represent the touchstone to security, then obviously what happens is that we grow up with the feeling that we should not rock the boat, otherwise our security, our prestige, our status will be destroyed. So that, in many instances, it would appear as though the Oriental children, and women in particular if you wish to extend it to that extent, have grown up with a kind of tunnel vision, and our peripheral vision has atrophied.

And if you look at individuals in organizations, you will find that many of the workers in government service, particularly the Oriental workers who have made it in recent years in government service, are the ones who are least willing to put forward a new idea which might possibly rock the boat. And I think that the stamping out, the stunting of our creativity, has been the result of our parents' insistence that we become professionals, that we work for security, and that, in effect, this has meant that we don't rock the board. Because if you rock the boat there are some problems involved in your security. Now this is a rather interesting concept, and I don't know whether it can be attributed only to the Oriental immigrant group, or whether each immigrant group which has come to the United States has had the same kind of problem. I know that one of my anthropologist friends is very concerned about this problem, and it is his feeling that the drive for security has resulted in this kind of stunting of imagination, of flamboyance of thought and of creativity among a lot of our Oriental young people who are well-educated but who don't allow themselves the soaring of their imagination.

INTERVIEWER: I am just trying to understand why this would be limited only to immigrant people, because Caucasians are just as strongly motivated toward material success and security.

McELRATH: That is true, except that you will find, for example, that they are not as unwilling to come forward with a new idea.

INTERVIEWER: Were you talking about a specific generation, age group? Were you thinking mostly about older people? You did say those in Civil Service who have "made it," and that would imply mature people.

McELRATH: Yes. I think this is basically the second generation. And I don't know whether, in the programming of the human mind that the attitudes of the second generation get passed on to succeeding generations. Although obviously, on high school campuses and on the university campuses here in the State of Hawaii, a lot of the things which Oriental students have done would seem to indicate that the programming is not as successful in the third generation as it was in the second. And, of course, these are different times. So perhaps it would be wrong to generalize.

I think perhaps a good deal of whether or not you're willing to take risks depends upon what's happening in the economic field and depends upon the political climate. For example, a lot of Oriental students took part in the protest against the Vietnam War; a lot of Oriental students here on campus are concerned with tuition increases, so that it may very well be that while we may say this generally, there are many other factors, many other variables that affect the willingness of young people, specifically Oriental young people, to take the kinds of risk that their parents might not have been willing to take. And it may very well be that their taking the risk at this point is that they do have the security of their families who have made it. I don't know. I suppose a statement such as this requires a good deal of verification and research and yet, at the same time, we can just begin to see the kinds of trends that have worked out in our society. For example, the whole ability of the Japanese after World War II to take their place in the social, political and financial life of the community is a fascinating experience. The whole ability of the Chinese to become a rather staid, stable part of the community--and this because I think they had their chance because they were the first immigrant group to be imported, to leave the plantation and go out to take advantage of other opportunities for them in the economic are. So while we may say that these kinds of things may be generally true, there are exceptions. It's kind of a fascinating hypothesis to work with anyway.

AH QUON McELRATH INDEX