

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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

with

ALICE PEURALA

United Steelworkers of America

by

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Program on Women and Work

Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations

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VITAE

ALICE PEURALA

Alice Peurala was born in St. Louis, Missouri on March 29, 1928. Her family's Armenian background had a strong influence over her and helped shape her later political views.

Peurala's early work experience was varied. She held various factory and cashier positions. While working at a clothing store, she joined the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Employees Union. Her activities with the union were as part of the negotiating committee, and as a member of the St. Louis Board of the Labor Health Institute.

In 1948 Peurala moved to Chicago, where she continued her activism in the Retail Union, and also worked with the International Union of Electrical Workers. In 1953 it was discovered that she was a union organizer and she was fired from her job at Jay's Potato Chip Factory.

Peurala then went to work at United States Steel as an observer in the metallurgical department. In 1967, she sued United States Steel on sex discrimination charges after her repeated attempts for promotion failed and she was passed over by less experienced males.

Peurala won her case and became more active with the United Steelworkers. In 1976 she was elected to the Grievance Committee, and was the first woman elected to this position in the United Steelworkers of America.

Peurala has been active in the Women's Movement and was at the founding convention of the Coalition of Labor Union Women. She has also been active in the Civil Rights movement and was a member of the Committee on Racial Equality.

Oral History Interview

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ALICE PEURALA

September 30, 1977
Chicago, Illinois

by Elizabeth Balanoff

INTERVIEWER: Could you tell me first a little bit about your early life? Where were you born and when and what was your family like? How many children?

PEURALA: I was born in St. Louis on March 29, 1928--St. Louis, Missouri. I have an older brother and a younger brother and a younger sister. My mother and father came to this country from--where, what can I say? They're both Armenian. My father was in the Turkish Army and he escaped from the army and hid. He got a fake passport and all of that and came over here. I can't remember the year.

INTERVIEWER: Did he meet your mother here?

PEURALA: Yes, he met my mother here. My mother was placed in a French missionary school in Marash I think it was. She was put there when she was about five or six years old. Her mother and father left her there because the Armenians were being persecuted and a lot of people left their kids in that school for safety. She had a little brother who was an infant and they were going to come back for but they never did. So she stayed in that French missionary school until she was about fifteen or sixteen. Then the authorities there started looking for relatives and they finally traced an uncle who had come to this country. She never saw or heard from her mother and father again. They never came back. They may have been killed or her mother may have been captured by the Turks because the Turks sometimes took Armenian women into their homes. She thinks her father was killed because he was like an assistant minister of a church. They would take the Armenian women into their homes as sort of domestics and if the woman was lucky that's what happened to her. But she never heard from her mother. They finally located

PEURALA INTERVIEW

PEURALA: an uncle in this country and I guess he sent the money and that, but then it took her a couple of years to get here. She was in Marseilles, France staying with friends of relatives, an elderly couple, for about six to eight months and then came here.

She came to St. Louis and stayed with her uncle and that's where she met my dad. He was already here. My dad had come here, I guess it must have been during the Balkan Wars when the Turkish Army--I think they were going to be part of the attack on the Armenians. There were a lot of Armenian fellows in the Turkish Army, they were drafted. He told them that he wasn't going to be part of that. He was first to go on leave and they told him that he couldn't go on leave because the war had started and they were revoking all leaves, but he and his buddies said they were going to go anyway. They said don't go because you'll be captured and brought back. But he took off anyway and spent about three months hiding.

They had a lot of Turkish friends. He wrote a sort of autobiography a few years before he died. He wrote it all in Armenian and I'm anxious to have it translated because he tells the story of everything that happened from that time on, like the story of the time the Armenian fellows who were drafted into the Turkish Army had their religious holiday on Sunday and I think the Turks' was on Saturday and all the Turkish soldiers had Saturday free because that was their religious holiday and the Armenians couldn't have theirs. The Turks wouldn't recognize their Christianity. He was a tailor and he had a good job. He had his own shop.

INTERVIEWER: Was this before he was drafted?

PEURALA: No, in the army. I don't know where he learned it, but he must have known it before he was drafted, but he made the officers' uniforms. When the Armenian fellows decided they wanted to negotiate for their holiday they chose him as the spokesman. So he went in and he saw the commandant or whatever it was there. And they told him, "Look, it looks like you want to go out and do some soldiering. You've got it kind of made. You're a tailor here and you've got pretty good conditions; you're not out in the woods marching and doing all that other stuff. Maybe you should just keep your mouth shut and stay where you are." And he told them, "You can have it." In other words they stuck to their guns and they eventually gave the Armenians their day.

INTERVIEWER: So they did get their Sunday off?

PEURALA: Yeah, they got their Sunday. Then he ran off and they were looking for them, but I guess they hid and they were housed even by a lot of Turkish families who got along with the Armenians as far as the people were concerned. It was just the powers that be, I guess, that didn't. Anyway he eventually came here and he went first to Worchester, Massachusetts as a tailor for a few years. He had a couple of brothers that were already there, half-brothers. Eventually he made his way to St. Louis and he went to work in a foundry as a hand molder and he worked there for forty some years. Finally the place closed down, shut down, went bankrupt or something. I guess he was there just a few years and he helped organize the Steelworkers Union there and he was the shop steward. But they never got pensions; this was the years before they had pensions, in the early days of it. And there was no severance pay or anything like that. That was just the end, so he went on Social Security.

INTERVIEWER: Did your mother work when you were children?

PEURALA: No. I think before she was married she worked in a hat factory or a glove factory or something like that. But after she got married I don't believe she worked anymore.

INTERVIEWER: Did they speak Armenian at home?

PEURALA: Oh yes.

INTERVIEWER: You can speak Armenian?

PEURALA: Oh yes.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me a little bit about the neighborhood. Were your neighbors Armenian, or was it mixed?

PEURALA: No. A lot of the Armenians lived in all-Armenian communities. I mean we associated with Armenians. My mother and father had contact socially with Armenians. There were Armenian organizations that they belonged to, social affairs and that, but we didn't live in an Armenian community. I think it was kind of a German, English, Irish--it was a mixed working class neighborhood about two blocks from the Anheiser Busch Brewery in St. Louis. We never lived among the Armenians. I don't know why my family didn't. I remember asking about it a few times and it seemed like they were against that kind of clannishness but at the same time they were very nationalistic in terms of believing even that their kids should marry Armenians and associate socially with Armenians and all that kind of thing.

INTERVIEWER: Did you go to the public schools?

PEURALA INTERVIEW

PEURALA: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Did you live in a house or an apartment?

PEURALA: My father owned a four-flat and we lived in one of the apartments on the ground floor. And I know one of the other men who lived there with his family was a man who worked with my dad. I don't personally remember, but I know that there were times when people couldn't pay the rent and I know that they stayed there without paying rent until they could. But it was a four-family apartment and we lived there until I got out of grade school and then he bought a house in a better residential neighborhood in South St. Louis. I remember it was a \$5,000 house. My mother still lives in it.

INTERVIEWER: That was big money then.

PEURALA: Yes. She still lives there. That was when I was about fourteen, I guess, when I first started high school.

INTERVIEWER: That's when you moved to the house?

PEURALA: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Did you go to an Armenian church? Or did you go to any church?

PEURALA: No, no church.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do for fun when you were a little kid? And what did you do in the way of chores in the family? Did you have any special job you had to do?

PEURALA: Yeah, I remember every Saturday we had to scrub the kitchen floor.

INTERVIEWER: Who's we?

PEURALA: My brother and I. We took turns washing and drying dishes.

INTERVIEWER: The brothers as well as the sister?

PEURALA: My brothers. My older brother and I. I don't remember my younger brother doing anything because he was born later. But I remember having to dust the furniture and sweeping and vacuuming.

INTERVIEWER: What about recreation? What games did you play? Did you play mostly with your brothers and sister?

PEURALA INTERVIEW

PEURALA: No, neighborhood kids, I think mostly. Outdoor kind of things--jump rope and hop scotch and jacks, things like that.

INTERVIEWER: Would you consider yourself a tomboy?

PEURALA: Sometimes, probably.

INTERVIEWER: Did you like to play with dolls, too?

PEURALA: Yeah, we did that sometimes, but I remember playing ball a lot with my brother and his friends.

INTERVIEWER: You liked sports?

PEURALA: Yeah, football, soft ball, basketball, volley ball mostly, I guess. And we used to have shows in the back yard, the neighborhood kids. We used to do things like sell tickets for a nickel or a dime and get the neighborhood people to come. We'd set up a stage in our back yard and the kids would sing or dance or do something and we'd make like a quarter or thirty cents. Sometimes the parents would come to humor us, I think. But I remember doing that.

INTERVIEWER: What was your relationship with your mother like? Were you close or not?

PEURALA: I don't know. I can't remember the early years, I think I was to a degree. I think I was closer to my father.

INTERVIEWER: Were you closer to him than the other children? Or were all of you closer to him?

PEURALA: I don't know really. I kind of think I might have been. I kind of feel like he liked me a lot. I guess I recall going to my dad frequently to get permission from him when my mother would be a little stern.

INTERVIEWER: She was stricter than he was?

PEURALA: She was stricter. She was the one that doled out the disciplines. He was the one you went to, to try to get them modified, as I recall.

INTERVIEWER: Ok, so you were kind of your father's pet in way?

PEURALA: In a way, I guess.

INTERVIEWER: What kinds of things would they differ about when mother would say no and father would say yes?

PEURALA INTERVIEW

- PEURALA: It depends on what years. I think when you're younger it's like what time you're coming in or going out; can you do this or can you do that? My mother was the kind of person--you know you think about this when you're older and you have a child and you want to give them freedom to try to do things. My mother was the kind of person that was always afraid of your being hurt. "Don't do this; don't do that, you're going to hurt yourself." And I would get around my dad to get permission to do things I didn't think my mother would let me do because of her great protectiveness or something, because of her fears.
- INTERVIEWER: Did you have any problems about starting dating? Was she reluctant to let you date?
- PEURALA: Oh yeah.
- INTERVIEWER: What about your father?
- PEURALA: I don't remember him having much to say about it. I don't remember him really saying anything.
- INTERVIEWER: About how old were you when you started going out with boys?
- PEURALA: Well, I think I was way in high school, probably 17 or 18 before I ever really went on what might be called a date. I used to just go do what I wanted to do with groups. Sometimes if nobody wanted to go I'd go myself.
- INTERVIEWER: What kind of things did you like to do?
- PEURALA: I used to love to ice skate and none of my friends wanted to go ice skating, so I went alone.
- INTERVIEWER: When did you get your first job?
- PEURALA: I think probably when I was at the end of the eighth grade, when I was about 14. I started working as a cashier in a movie house. And then I worked summers in little two by four factories. I remember working when I was about fifteen or sixteen the whole summer. One was a place where they made soles for shoes. And it was a messy job, you did everything by hand. You had all these things that you cut out and you soaked them in different solutions. Your hands would get messy and the solutions would smell terrible. I used to think in later years it was probably dangerous to your health. I didn't think it then because we were making money. It was only young people working there. There was a place where they made small tool parts and that. And then I worked in a venetian blind factory after school. That's when I was in high school. I went

PEURALA INTERVIEW

PEURALA: at four and worked until ten everyday. And then I worked all day on Saturday. They really ended at about twelve, but because I was a high school student they let me go home at ten.

INTERVIEWER: So you really put in a full week's work.

PEURALA: Yes, I did.

INTERVIEWER: Can you remember what they paid you? Did they pay the young people less than the older people?

PEURALA: I don't really know. I don't think so. I remember I got to be inspector. I started as an assembler assembling venetian blinds and then they made me an inspector on the afternoon shift, inspecting blinds that had been assembled. There I got a little bit more money but I don't remember what it was.

INTERVIEWER: How did you have time to do your homework?

PEURALA: I don't know, unless I did it when I got home or during school at study period. Probably during study period.

INTERVIEWER: Did most of the kids you know work that much?

PEURALA: I think some of them did and I think some of them didn't.

INTERVIEWER: Did your brothers and sister?

PEURALA: My older brother, I think. The younger brother and sister were in school. I remember my younger brother selling papers and doing things like that. I left when I was about twenty and came to Chicago. I was just fourteen, fifteen, sixteen then, so my younger sister was only about eight or nine. She was just out of high school I think when I left.

INTERVIEWER: You finished high school and worked for a time then?

PEURALA: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: How did your parents feel about your going to Chicago?

PEURALA: Well, they didn't like it; they didn't think I should go. I remember my parents being very upset about my leaving but I left, I believe, in 1950. I guess I was just twenty years old. You know Armenian girls stayed home until they got married and you were looked at kind of funny if you left before you got married. It just wasn't right, you know.

INTERVIEWER: So you went right into the union immediately.

PEURALA INTERVIEW

PEURALA: Yes, and one of the women who worked for the Retail, Wholesale Department Store Employees Union. And shortly after I came in that branch split from the International Union and became an independent union. They called themselves the Distributive Workers or something like that. Then after a couple of years they affiliated with a Teamster's local, and after they affiliated a number of people, including the woman friend that I met, whose name was Bernice Fisher and who I got to be very friendly with, a staff person, an organizer, who was also involved in the Civil Rights Movement. In fact, she was one of the originators of CORE when CORE was formed in Chicago, with Bayard Rustin and Jane and Bernice. They were the people who formed CORE. She was involved in CORE activities and I joined CORE through her and we got to know each other pretty well. After they went into the Teamsters she had some conflicts with the Teamsters' policies in the Local. They were doing some raiding at that time, at least she thought they were. I don't know what the internal thing was, but she resigned as a result of it.

INTERVIEWER: She was a staff person?

PEURALA: Yes, she was an organizer for the Retail Wholesale, then for the United Distributors, all the way to the Teamsters. Then she resigned and came to Chicago and went back to work for that old original union, the Retail, Wholesale Department Store Employees Union in Chicago, who had not disaffiliated from the International.

INTERVIEWER: What were you doing all this time?

PEURALA: I was working in this clothing store and had joined the union, where they had just organized, and was active in the Civil Rights movement.

INTERVIEWER: And which union were you in?

PEURALA: First I was in the original Retail, Wholesale Union.

INTERVIEWER: And you stayed in that union?

PEURALA: No, they took all the locals that were part of that St. Louis Chapter. Harold Gibbons took them all. They became independent and for about a year they looked for affiliation and they finally found it with the Teamster's Local 688.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have an office in the union at any level? Or were you still too young?

PEURALA: No, I wasn't too young. I was on a negotiating committee. I think it was an amalgamated local, and I think I was on the Board of the Labor Health Institute, which was a pretty good health-care kind of program that the union had negotiated with all the plants that they organized in St. Louis. They had this Labor Health Institute where they had doctors of every specialty in this Health building. These doctors all worked for various hospitals or else they had their own practices and they came to that Labor Health Institute one day a week. When you joined the union, if you were part of the union the employer paid I think it was 5% of his payroll into that LHI. They had employee members of that LHI Board at the time. They had some people from each area. They had the shoe factories organized, clothing stores, etc. So they nominated me and put me on that--big deal!

INTERVIEWER: What did you have to do?

PEURALA: Once a month they would meet and talk about the problems in the place or the finances or if they were going to get a new doctor. I think that's all.

INTERVIEWER: What were the working conditions like on that job?

PEURALA: They were pretty good. I was the cashier. I remember the hours were 9 to 5 with a half-hour for lunch. I was one of the few women there because all the men were salesmen. It was a men's clothing store. There were a couple of women who worked there as clerks. The working conditions were pretty good and the bosses were pretty nice.

INTERVIEWER: How did you feel the union treated its women members? Did they give them as good a deal as they did the men? Did they include them in office?

PEURALA: I think that in that set-up, now that you mention it, there was a lot of attention given to the women in the plants. I remember being encouraged by the officers of that union and the staff people of that union to become active. And there were a number of other women that were chosen from the factories that were sent to labor schools and were encouraged to come to classes at the union hall and to write articles for the paper. I remember getting a lot of attention, not only myself but a lot of other women.

INTERVIEWER: Did you go to any of the labor schools?

PEURALA: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Where were they held? What were they like?

PEURALA INTERVIEW

- PEURALA: Well, first they had a woman, her name was Maggie something, she came to the local union hall once a week and taught labor classes. Then they had a summer camp place that the Teamsters have where they sent somebody from each shop for one week. It was like a vacation and school at the same time. You'd go to school part of the day and the other half was for recreation. I think they were pretty good in recognizing women, much more than the people I'm involved with now are.
- INTERVIEWER: That's what I'd like to know--a kind of comparison of different unions and their attitudes toward women.
- PEURALA: I think the leadership in that union were really concerned about building workers participation, you know, the strength of the union was as strong as the people who were in it. I think they really believed it and so they tried to develop people and they practiced a great deal of democracy. I really didn't feel that those people felt threatened by people that they organized coming into the union. I think they recognized the need to make the union strong and to have people know what was going on and what their rights were.
- INTERVIEWER: Do you think they were typical or better than the average union?
- PEURALA: They were probably were not typical. I haven't had a lot of experience. From what experience I have had I think they were extremely unusual people.
- INTERVIEWER: Can you account for this in any particular way?
- PEURALA: Yes, I think Harold Gibbons in his early days was probably a socialist. I think Dick Kavener, who I got to be very close to, claimed he was a Marxist, a socialist.
- INTERVIEWER: So you think it was ideological--that they just believed that this was the right thing to do?
- PEURALA: Yes, I think so. They were the kind of people who really devoted their lives to the labor movement. And the idea of making more money--they spent what money they had freely on workers around them. They didn't live extravagantly. I mean their homes or the way they dressed. They were pretty regular people.
- INTERVIEWERS: So the leaders lived pretty close to the same level as the workers.
- PEURALA: Yes.

PEURALA INTERVIEW

- INTERVIEWER: What was the highest position that a woman held in that union? Did they have International Representatives or Executive Board Members?
- PEURALA: Bernice Fisher was an International Representative, carried over from the Retail Wholesale Department Store Employees Union.
- INTERVIEWER: What about local presidents?
- PEURALA: I really can't say for sure because I know there were amalgamated locals and I think some of the plants were predominantly women so they probably did. Yeah, I think there were some. I have some of the material, I could probably go through it and give some of it to you. I do recall women officers and I remember them being part of the negotiating committees and I remember that every time there was a contract to be negotiated there was always a negotiating committee elected in the plant that went with the staff man to negotiate with the company. He never went in and negotiated alone, the negotiating committee was always there. We'd always bring it back and talk about it. There was leadership by the staff guy but there was not dominance. Maybe in a way his will prevailed, but it was always done in a pretty democratic way.
- INTERVIEWER: How long did you work in this particular situation? You came when you were twenty, that's when you started.
- PEURALA: Let's see--also during that period I became very active in the Civil Rights Movement.
- INTERVIEWER: Do you want to tell me a little bit about that? I know you joined CORE. What did you actually do?
- PEURALA: CORE was involved in breaking down the barriers in public places and they had chosen a number of department store lunch counters to sit in.
- INTERVIEWER: Did you participate in that?
- PEURALA: Yes. Styx, Baer and Fuller and Famous Bar lunch counters. We would go every Saturday early in the morning and every other seat would have black person, empty seat, white person, black, empty seat, so that if you came in and sat down you would have to sit next to a black person. We were trying through non-violent peaceful means so that people came and would sit and eat next to a black.
- INTERVIEWER: Were these places that normally didn't serve black people?

PEURALA INTERVIEW

- PEURALA: Oh they barred them in all, absolutely they would not serve black people.
- INTERVIEWER: What was their reaction when they first appeared? Can you remember?
- PEURALA: I think they were startled, and there were some nasty comments by waitresses, and managers were kind of nasty, but I don't think we were really hassled physically at all. Pushing, bumping accidents and all, but people did sit down and eat.
- INTERVIEWER: The general public reacted less?
- PEURALA: Yes, less than the management and the waitresses and that. They would sit down and order and eat. There they sat down and ate and eventually we did succeed in getting that opened up-- Styx, Baer and Fuller, and Famous. I think we also worked on a cafeteria in St. Louis downtown--Pope's Cafeteria.
- Before I came to Chicago I quit my job in the men's clothing store because they wanted to participate in doing some organizing so they sent me to a woman's clothing store. I think it was Three Sisters store in St. Louis. They wanted to organize some more clothing stores.
- INTERVIEWER: Did they hire you full time?
- PEURALA: They're not hiring me.
- INTERVIEWER: They're sending you in to get a job as a volunteer organizer?
- PEURALA: Yes, I was what you called the "plant." I was in that place only a short time. I'm trying to remember what the heck happened there, it's been so darn long. I think I got fired very shortly.
- INTERVIEWER: They noticed what you were up to.
- PEURALA: Yeah, it didn't last very long and we got fired. I remember the one group we had really well organized. They put me in as a cashier in the shoe department and the shoe department was all male salesmen. I remember, although I was going to try to organize the women salespeople--it was a women's clothing store--that they had men selling the shoes. That was the group I got organized.
- INTERVIEWER: You got the men organized?
- PEURALA: The men salesmen.

PEURALA INTERVIEW

- INTERVIEWER: Were they easier to organize than the women?
- PEURALA: I guess it was because I was there. I got to know a number of the women, like the window trimmer and I got to be very good friends. She was a black woman who was extremely talented and was very low-paid. I mean she was doing very highly skilled work, a highly talented woman who dressed their windows. They were absolutely beautiful and she got maybe \$35 a week. I remember when I worked at the Hilton Company they had a male window trimmer, really regarded very highly and was paid very well and always walked around with his chest out. Over here it was a black woman who did as well in a cheaper clothing store, and I remember you really had to be a genius in order to put that stuff in the window in such a way that it was beautiful, that it was well done, because they put so much stuff out there. In a men's clothing store you put a suit and a sports coat and that's it, it's sparse. There's carpeting and background and all that kind of stuff. But she had to put all the merchandise in the window and make it look good. And she did it. We got to be very good friends and I still see her occasionally.
- INTERVIEWER: What ever became of her? Did she continue in that job?
- PEURALA: She stayed there for a long time and then she quit and she went to work as an accountant in a hospital; then she went to work in a restaurant as a manager. I really haven't seen her for about four or five years.
- INTERVIEWER: Back to you--you got fired, then what happened?
- PEURALA: Bernice had left and resigned and came to Chicago. I remember we talked about my coming after she found a place to live, so when she did I joined her.
- INTERVIEWER: What was she doing then? She went back to her original union?
- PEURALA: Yes, I don't know the exact years. Eventually she went to New York and worked for the Teacher's Union.
- INTERVIEWER: So what happens to you? You moved in with her?
- PEURALA: I moved in with her and I went to work. She was organizing a chain of women's clothing stores. It was the New York stores in Chicago in different shopping centers. They had the big stores downtown. So I went in there because they were organizing them, and I worked with the union. That's another story.
- INTERVIEWER: Go ahead.

PEURALA INTERVIEW

- PEURALA: We signed up a lot of people and petitioned for an election. It was the kind of place, you know, where the boss is right there every day. It was a male manager who was a kind of handsome, suave, nice personality kind of guy who really would put his arm around the salesgirls and talk nice to them and they really felt like--you know. Everything was great except their wages and hours.
- INTERVIEWER: Did they forget that while his arm was around them?
- PEURALA: They didn't too much because we got them organized. What happened was that when we got to the Labor Board and petitioned for the election they came in and claimed that it was one unit, the stores were one unit. We hadn't worked on the other stores and they wanted all of them to be part of the election as one unit. We had one central management, one central hiring place, which was the downtown store.
- INTERVIEWER: So did you get the election or did you pull out?
- PEURALA: We had hearings. Frances Heisler, who is a very famous labor attorney, was the lawyer for that union, the Retail Wholesale Union, and we had hearings at the Board for about a week. I had gotten fired in the mean time. They fired me for incompetence, inefficiency.
- INTERVIEWER: Meaning union activities?
- PEURALA: Right. And the Labor Board hearing was on unfair labor practices for firing me and the petition for the election. They were forced to put me back to work but only on condition. In other words there was a slight concession to them that I would have to prove that I was a competent employee. They claimed that I was just not selling enough so then they put me in the hosiery department which is the lowest selling department in the store. And because it was the lowest selling one it used to be right in the front of the store. As soon as you walked in the door there was hosiery. When they put me back to work on the order from the Department of Labor they took the hosiery department and they put it smack dab in the the back of the store, and every display that they used to have on the counter with different shades of stockings hanging there so that when they'd come up to the counter to buy stockings and want to know what you had and you'd show them and they'd say, "I want this shade," then you'd grab it and bring it down. One of the conditions of putting me back to work was that I would maintain a certain percentage of sales. So I'd have to bring all the boxes down and show them everything. They used to hide stock from me and they used to keep it in the back room. They wouldn't open it up and bring it to me. I used to have to go get it, you know. But I had all the other women working with

PEURALA INTERVIEW

PEURALA:

me and every time they'd have a customer they'd bring them over to hosiery. All the signs that said that hosiery was on sale, they'd tell them about hosiery. There was nothing to lure them to the hosiery department and yet every week I had terrific sales.

INTERVIEWER:

So they had to keep you. And what about the other part of the case, the organizing?

PEURALA:

Alright, what happened was very interesting. They kept maintaining that the up-town store was the central hiring place. One of the provisions that they said made them a central place, although they had a lot of other stores, was that it was all one unit because management came from here and hiring came from here and firing came from here and everything else. Well they had two stores downtown. One of them was on State and Adams and the other one was on a little side street like Randolph, west of State street. One morning I was going to the Labor Department. That evening after we had the hearings I got it in my head that I'm going to go over there and see if they'll hire me. So I went into this little dinky branch. I think there was a help wanted sign on the window, but I don't recall for sure. I went in and I said, "I want to see the manager," and she came. I said, "I'm interested in working, I'm interested in a job." She asked me a lot of questions and she hired me. She took my name and phone number and I was suppose to go to work on Saturday morning. This was like Wednesday or Thursday. She wanted to know if I wanted part-time or full-time and I said part-time. She said, "Okay, come in Saturday." So she hired me and I got her name and she had my name.

The next morning when I went to the Labor Board, I got Francis Heisler on the side and I said, "By the way, I proved that they don't hire from a central place." When I told him what happened he was thrilled to death. So he's absolutely brilliant. It was just beautiful! All the union people knew what he was going to do but they didn't. They had this big-shot manager there who patted all the women on the butt and thought he was really something. His girl friend was really the assistant manager of the store. Our lawyer started asking him questions and reiterating all this stuff. "When you hire, what do you do?" "We put an ad in the paper and maybe we put signs in the stores to apply at such and such a place." So he says, "Yes." Then the lawyer said, "Well, have you needed any help in the last week or two weeks--any salespeople?" And he says, "No." And he says, "Have you sent out anything to the other stores, put an ad in the paper?" And he says, "No, we haven't needed anybody." And he said, "But if you did, you would do the hiring for all the other stores in the city." "Yes." Then he said, "Mr. Heller, did you know that Alice Melickian was hired yesterday afternoon

PEURALA INTERVIEW

PEURALA: at your Randolph Street store?" He goes, "Recess, recess!" So they called a recess and they had the afternoon session and they brought this woman in. She said, yes, she had seen me. Had she hired me? And she said yes she told me to come back, and it just blew their case.

INTERVIEWER: So you won!

PEURALA: We won the election in the one store. We had our election and we lost.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, how sad!

PEURALA: It was terrible because those women were then taken out and wined and dined and treated just fantastically there for about three weeks.

INTERVIEWER: How badly did you lose?

PEURALA: Not too badly. As I recall it was close. It wasn't real close but it wasn't too bad. We had a number of women that stuck and we had a number of other women who really would without that catering they were getting. I mean the women who was manager--he was a married man but everybody knew he was going with this woman. And they would take them out, one at a time, invite them to their homes and make them feel like they were part of management really. And it worked! It turned a lot of women around.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that sort of thing works better with women than with men? Or do you think it just works with a lot of people?

PEURALA: Probably. I can't see how it possibly works more with women. There were women there and those were the jobs that women work in and I think probably the fear of losing their jobs or being fired. They saw me harassed a lot so . . .

INTERVIEWER: What happened to you after you lost the election?

PEURALA: I quit. Eventually I just left.

INTERVIEWER: Now before we go on to your next line of employment you said you forgot to tell me something that you did while you were still in St. Louis. Do you want to fill that in?

PEURALA: Yes, I guess a little background to that is that I also belonged to the Armenian Youth of America, which was an Armenian youth organization, and it was sort of the Armenian progressive wing which our parents belonged to, which had to do really with supporting Soviet Armenia. There was a group that was Armenian who were against and there was a group who was for, and my parents and a lot of the parents of the youth who belonged to the Armenian

PEURALA: Youth League and the elder parents group had to do with trying to get the lands that Turkey had taken during the wars that was part of Turkish Armenia back to Armenia. I mean Turkey had taken over part of Armenia and the other part was Russian. This elder group was trying to petition. They had a World Armenian Congress in New York about that time that I also attended where they were saying Woodrow Wilson had promised the Armenians their land and they had divided things up and the Armenians were still trying to get their land away from Turkey. Being a sort of progressive group, I and a couple of other Armenians and some other people that I had run into, I don't remember how but a bunch of us went to a Progressive Party convention in, I think it was '48. It was '47 or '48. Henry Wallace was nominated and I remember only that they put the names of all the people that had gone from Missouri in the St. Louis Post Dispatch on the front page during the time we were there and I remember when I got back the guys in the union were really a little upset about my going because the paper had us as delegates from Missouri. We weren't delegates, we were just observers. And they were a little upset because it was supposedly such a left-wing grouping. Since I was a member of the Board of the LHI they didn't like the association.

INTERVIEWER: Did they do anything except complain?

PEURALA: No.

INTERVIEWER: I'm glad you remembered that.

PEURALA: I forget things.

INTERVIEWER: That's alright, we can skip back and forth. Now let's get back to Chicago and you have just quit your job in disgust after the union organizing didn't succeed in that store. Now, what happens?

PEURALA: I went to work. I had met some people from the International Union of Electrical Workers, which was an organization which came into being after the parent CIO body had expelled a number of unions and the International Union of Electrical Workers was a new international union for electrical workers. They were interested in organizing some of the plants that had been sort of disenfranchised, that had the UE in them. The Stewart Warner plant in Chicago had been a UE plant and they had lost it to the IBEW, I know that the IBEW is a union for contractor electricians. In that sense I guess they get pretty good conditions for electricians as craftsmen but in the plant they were mostly thought of, I think, as a company union. They were in the Stewart Warner plant and the IUE to organize the Stewart Warner plants.

PEURALA INTERVIEW

PEURALA:

I had met an IUE organizer who was in Chicago and that was going to be one of his jobs. He asked me if I would help him by going to work in the Stewart Warner plant. I went and got a job in the Stewart Warner plant and I guess I was there for a couple of years during the whole organizing campaign. I was part of the rank and file organizing committee that we formed. We had gotten enough cards signed through our rank and file committee and this organizer. We had some help from some other rank and file people who were in IUE shops that were already organized. It was really kind of a rank and file effort. We had rented a storefront and we had regular rank and file weekly meetings.

At one point this guy who was the organizer was transferred someplace else. He left Chicago and the International Union had sent in another organizer who was really pretty bad because actually at that point the international union and the local union, the district of the IUE was battling the international union. The local district of the IUE and the city were trying to maintain control of the organizing committee and the international union was trying to send in people who would take over, try to predominate the local. Actually had Stewart Warner been organized in the IUE it would have been a big plum. There were five or six thousand people there. There was something about the balance of power would have been swung had the local--the guy who was trying to challenge the international would have been pretty at that plant.

What happened is they sent this guy in who was strictly no good and was not really that serious about getting the plant organized because the international knew that the local people and the rank and file committee there had control of the thing and they were trying to take it over. One of the things that happened just before we petitioned for the election, was that the company fired me. And they fired me for allegedly being a Communist Party organizer.

First, I was working at my machine one day and two security guards came up and said the W.W. Miller, who was the chief personnel guy, wanted to see me so I went down in his office. And he said that they had information leading them to believe that I was a Communist Party organizer from St. Louis and they wanted to know if there was any truth to it. I said, "No, of course not." "Well, ok, we just wanted to know because that's what we have been told." So they let me go back to work and then about a week later they came again and took me down and said, "Our informant claims that they're right. Are you Alice Melickian from St. Louis?" I said yes and they said, "Well, they insist that you are a Communist Party organizer and we would like to know if you would sign this affidavit or not." I looked at the thing and

PEURALA INTERVIEW

PEURALA: I said, "I'm not a Communist Party organizer. Yeah, I'll sign that." So I signed it and gave it to them and I went back to work.

Three days later they called me down again and they said, "You know, we really have to trust our information." I said, "Well, who's telling you this?" And they said, "We can't divulge that but we would like you to take a lie detector test to validate your affidavit." I remember what the affidavit said. It said, "I'm not a member of the Communist Party and I don't believe in any of its programs and policies, etc." So I just scratched out everything else in the affidavit except the part that said I'm not a member of the Communist Party and signed it.

INTERVIEWER: So now your Armenian connection may have been involved?

PEURALA: I don't know what the hell it was. Probably going to the Progressive Party convention or something like that.

INTERVIEWER: You never found it?

PEURALA: I never found out, no, except when they asked me to take a lie detector test I talked it over with some of my friends, and they said you know they're just out to get you and there's just a limit to what you can compromise yourself about. So I refused to take the lie detector test. Then they gave me a letter which I still have which says that it is the policy of the corporation to give lie detector tests and I had refused so that was the end of my employment with the corporation. So they fired me! I went immediately down to the NLRB and filed an unfair labor practice charge.

But I went to the union first, you know, the official IUE organizer, and he went down with me and we made it an unfair labor practice charge that was signed by the International as well as myself. In other words the International union charged an unfair labor practice charge and I was the evidence. We went on organizing during this time. We filed our petitions for the election, we leafletted the plant and had demonstrations there. We had all kinds of help from the other plants who were already organized.

I remember the Foot-Gear guys used to come out at three or four o'clock in the morning and play poker until it was time to put out leaflets. And one time we had this guy who was in here as an organizer, supposedly to help us, from the International who tried at that point to get rid of me. I was the secretary, there was a guy who was chairman of the rank and file committee. He tried to get me out of there but the rank and file committee

PEURALA INTERVIEW

PEURALA:

stood behind me and they knew what he was doing. His name was Stanly Stabno and he had our cards that we had filled out for union representation election and they were mysteriously getting lost so that we couldn't get them to the Labor Board. We were having to get more cards signed because he wouldn't give them. The ones we were getting we were keeping and we were constantly in conflict with him.

He, at one point, changed the lock on our headquarters. I remember going down to the CIO Council and making a speech appealing to them to help us with this Stewart Warner organizing because of what the International was doing and what the company was doing. This W.W. Miller was supposed to be the real communist fighter in the city and he had named me in newspaper articles as being one. They tried to take advantage of this UE-IUE conflict and tried to say the IUE was really the UE and confused the whole thing. But we got a lot of help from UAW people. I remember Pat Greathouse was out there from the UAW. We had a big demonstration with a lot of other unions there helping us and we finally were able to petition for the election. We just completely discredited this IUE organizer. He was just like wandering around at that point because we had control of the organization.

When we petitioned for the election, I guess the law is that as long as you have standing any unfair labor practices you can't have an election until those are settled. What we tried to get him to do was withdraw my case. Actually what happened was he told us that and knowing that, I went down to the Labor Board early one morning before the doors were open, went in and withdrew my own unfair labor practice charge.

INTERVIEWER:

You could do it by yourself?

PEURALA:

I could do it.

INTERVIEWER:

You didn't have to have the union involved?

PEURALA:

I could do it. The first thing I did was make it an individual charge. Then when we found out that the setting of the date of the election depended on whether that charge was settled I withdrew it. A couple of hearings we had it didn't look like the Board was going to rule in our favor. They were taking a lot of hearings and things from me and we really didn't think we were going to win that, and we weren't going to have the election so I just withdrew it. When the International Union found out I withdrew it he went crazy because they really were blocking the election. They didn't want an election if they weren't going to control it. We finally realized that and we wanted the election.

PEURALA:

We finally had a date set for the election and as soon as we got the date set for the election the union sent in about six organizers from Pittsburgh or Philadelphia. I don't know where they were from. This was Jim Carey's union. They sent in about six organizers who were suppose to help us win the election three or four weeks hence. And they just didn't, they just did nothing. A couple of them worked, a couple of them were pretty decent guys who had just become organizers out of the shop. They were pretty good guys and they worked with us. They were kind of disgusted because they could see what was going on, too. They supposed they had a job to do, but they didn't do a job on us like some of the others did.

So we had the election and it was between the International Association of Machinists, the IBEW and IUE. No one got a clear majority so we had to have a second election between the IBEW and the IUE. It was a month between elections and those guys came in and didn't do anything. We couldn't get any funds. I mean we really needed to put on a big campaign and we lost the second election.

INTERVIEWER:

So they would rather give it to the other union than have this local group that strong?

PEURALA:

Yes, right. That's what happened so we lost it and the IBEW is still in there today. I know there's been a lot of other groups trying to organize it but I don't think they ever did. In the meantime they also threw in another plant. We had organized the main plant and they also had a television or a radio plant and they threw that in. So between the time we got the date of the election we had to go over and organize over there, too, and it was pretty difficult because it was very very hard in just a few weeks to try and organize another branch. It was like within three weeks, but I think we did pretty well, considering what we had. And there were a lot of really good people in that plant who worked really hard and stuck their necks out, you know, who really had problems afterwards because the IBEW did win and it was like a company union so they got no protection from harrassment afterwards, but it was pretty courageous of them to stick it out.

INTERVIEWER:

How were you living now once you were out of a job?

PEURALA:

Unemployment compensation. And the guy who was assistant director was a guy by the name of Allen Palmer who used to use his expense money to give me carfare and buy me lunches and dinner and that. There were a couple of staff guys there who took care of my day to day expenses. And I was living with another gal so the rent wasn't so bad.

PEURALA INTERVIEW

INTERVIEWER: So now you're out in the cold again. Another failure.

PEURALA: Yeah. Then another friend of mine who was working with this other friend of mine, Bernice Fischer, and who had been organizing this York store with me, I had met her here in Chicago-- Dorothy McConnell was her name at the time. She also quit her staff job with Retail-Wholesale, because she became a little upset because she used to negotiate contracts and the International union would send in people to either negotiate or wind up negotiations. Frequently she felt that they were--I hate to use the word sell-out, you know--going against what she would accomplish up to a certain point. We had rank and file negotiating committees and votes and that, and when they would come in and sort of strong-armedly sell...And there were strikes where the International union would come in and sort of settle. So she became disillusioned with working in that area because she felt that she was part of the betrayal of the membership and she didn't want to be part of that. She and I, at one point, went to work.

Well, first I went to work in one of the shops that was under contract with Retail-Wholesale, to try to get into that union and make that union better through belonging to one of the locals by working in one of the shops. I was there like three weeks when some of the staff people from that union came in to negotiate something with management and saw me in the plant and the next day I was fired. I was only there a couple of weeks. Then we went to Jays Potato Chip factory on 43rd Street somewhere. I remember we used to have to get up at three o'clock in the morning and be there at five. We worked till one o'clock, I guess. But that was a non-union plant that we went in to try to organize. We were doing pretty well. It was all women, and really low wages. Terrible working conditions. We were doing real well on the job and we were doing real well organizing when they realized that that was what was going on. You know it doesn't take them long to find out who the leadership is, so before we could really get that thing going we were both fired.

INTERVIEWER: Well, easy come, easy go.

PEURALA: Yeah, all the jobs we had! From there I think I came to the steel mill. That was '53.

INTERVIEWER: Before we start on the steel mill, which will be the rest of your life, can you comment on the working conditions in some of those places like the potato chip factory, anything about wages, anything you can recall about just general working conditions?

PEURALA: Well, I remember the three or four weeks that I was in the candy factory, which was an organized shop.

PEURALA INTERVIEW

INTERVIEWER: Was that mostly women workers?

PEURALA: Yes, all women workers. The men ran some of the machinery but the women did all the packing and processing. Leaf Brands was the name of the company. I remember it was around Easter time because we were packing chocolate covered Easter bunnies. Because I was a new employee, I was put on the end of the line. This was a belt, sort of. It came out of the room where the candy was made and the belt carried rows and rows of these little chocolate Easter bunnies. If you were at the head of the line you could pack a lot of candy. These boxes were up on one shelf and when we got through packing we put them on another shelf.

It was piece work and the older women who had the seniority were at the head of the line. They were the first, second, third and fourth in line, and I was like about the eighth near the end of the line. They were standing on both sides of this belt and you picked up the candy and threw it in boxes. I'll never forget being amazed at how these women, you know, between the thumb and the first finger, the way they picked up the candy was like a machine and dropped them in the box.

INTERVIEWER: You mean ten pieces at once, or eight?

PEURALA: Eight, I guess. They never missed. They just went like this. Rolled their hands and then dropped them right into the box. They had to be packed perfectly in the paper and then another row and then the box went up there.

INTERVIEWER: How long did it take you to be able to do that?

PEURALA: Well, that's it. When it got to me there was one bunny left. There weren't that many of them, so it was very hard for me to make any money piece work. But the packing that I did, it was all bending over this thing, because you had to reach over. The ones that they got were the ones that were right here, and the next ones got the ones that were here. I had to reach to the last ones right here and I remember after a couple of weeks my back was absolutely breaking. I remember during the five and ten minute breaks we'd have I'd try to stretch and exercise a little because it was so sore. And I remember looking up at the head of the line and those women that had been there like for fifteen years, every one of them were hunched over. They were permanently hunch backed.

INTERVIEWER: When they were working? They were always hunch backed?

PEURALA: Yeah, and I thought, God, I guess it's a good thing for me to get out of here.

- INTERVIEWER: How did the potato chip factory compare with the candy?
- PEURALA: The potato chip was pretty bad, too. Actually, if you were in the area where you worked where you packed them into the bags, where you weighed them and threw them into the bags, that wasn't too bad. But if you worked in the back room where it was all wet, where the potatoes came in, where the potatoes were washed and they had a woman standing on either side when the potatoes came in. Before they were peeled they were washed and before they went into this peeler you had to reach in and pull out the rotten ones, the bad ones, and throw them away. It was all wet and cold and you just constantly did that. You had an apron on and the floor was wet and it was damp back there. Then the potatoes were peeled and after they were peeled they went through a slicer. When they hit the table they went right into an oven. They were fried and then they sort of went into an oven to dry off or something. Then you stood at the other end and you picked out the ones that were too thick because they would be old soaked and they weren't dry, they weren't like potato chips. They were thick and soggy. You had to pick those up and throw them out before they hit the bucket. And they were hot. That was the worst assignment in the place. People hated to go back there.
- INTERVIEWER: How was the pay there? Did you do piece work there?
- PEURALA: It was about fifty cents an hour, a dollar an hour, something like that.
- INTERVIEWER: Was it mostly women working there?
- PEURALA: That was all women, almost all women. There may have been a few men in there that kept the ovens going and took care of the machinery.
- INTERVIEWER: Was that place unionized?
- PEURALA: No, we were in there to organize the place. And that's the place that we got fired out of the same day, both of us. And they had just promoted my girl friend to go upstairs and work on the hot sealer, the crimper. She got promoted upstairs and the next day she was fired.
- INTERVIEWER: They could see you coming in, they knew you were up to something.
- PEURALA: Yeah, so we were both fired at the same time.
- INTERVIEWER: One thing I want to ask you now because you seem to be persevering so much in the face of so many failures, were you organ-

PEURALA INTERVIEW

INTERVIEWER: izing under the auspices of some political group, some left-wing group? Or was this simply an individual commitment you had, to try and do something with the union?

PEURALA: Well, I think that my feelings about the union started with my father, who probably was a socialist, because he did believe very strongly in what happened in the Soviet Union because he was Armenian and the Soviet Union did give the Armenians a home, he was very sympathetic to the cause of the Soviet Union. I think a great deal of his dedication to working people and his consciousness about the needs of the working people--you know, I grew up in that atmosphere and as a result when I was in the union in St. Louis I met people who I learned, by being close to them socially and personally, were socialists of one kind or another.

INTERVIEWER: But not one particular group?

PEURALA: No, not any particular group. I know that some of them were very anti-Communist Party as far as the politics of the Communist Party went. Some of them were anti-something else. But most of them were dedicated unionists who really believed that the working people's answer was in a strong labor movement. I agreed with that because my whole working experience was the fact that workers need unions. I found everywhere I worked that conditions were bad and the few places that I had worked earlier when I was younger I knew that things were better where there were unions and I became very interested in organizing, getting workers into unions. I thought that was really the answer. Meeting people who either were officially staff people in the union in St. Louis or very active, I learned a great deal from them, I think, about what socialism was. I sat around and listened a lot to discussions, and I found that when I came to Chicago I met other people in CORE--which I also joined when I came here.

My friend, Bernice Fischer, had been one of the organizers of it, and I met a lot of people who were doing work in the field of Civil Rights and who also seemed to have socialist tendencies. I don't think any of them belonged to any group but I know that they had socialist philosophy and I found that I could buy a lot of their thinking. They really seemed to be the kind of people I liked to be around to work with because they were doing something for working people. I don't know how to put that.

INTERVIEWER: Well, you would say that the group that you moved with was broader than a particular Socialist Party or anything like that?

PEURALA: Right.

INTERVIEWER: They were progressive to socialist-leaning people who were interested in Civil Rights? And in your case a lot of it was family tradition with your father's early involvement. So you weren't organizing as part of a political group?

PEURALA: Right.

INTERVIEWER: Now, you went next to the steel mills?

PEURALA: Right.

INTERVIEWER: And this was in the early fifties?

PEURALA: '53.

INTERVIEWER: Did you go to U.S. Steel first?

PEURALA: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Alright, do you want to go ahead and tell me about this? When did you get married?

PEURALA: I got married in '54.

INTERVIEWER: After you were working in the steel mills.

PEURALA: Yes. Yes, I went to work at U.S. Steel in 1953 and I guess I got married some time in '54. I was there about a year and then in January 1955 my daughter was born. So I think I worked for five months during my pregnancy and had four months when I was off. I remember wanting to work, but the rule then was that you couldn't work any longer than four months. And, of course, I didn't tell them I was pregnant until I was pregnant already a month.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of job were you doing? Heavy?

PEURALA: I was a metallurgical observer. No it was not. It was an observer's job in the metallurgical department. It was a lot of walking.

INTERVIEWER: But no physical lifting or anything like that?

PEURALA: No.

INTERVIEWER: How long did you stay home after the baby was born?

PEURALA: Let's see, I stayed at home about two months. I went to work when she was about two months old.

PEURALA INTERVIEW

INTERVIEWER: Tell me a little bit about your husband or your marriage.

PEURALA: Well, it was very brief.

INTERVIEWER: Was he a steel worker too?

PEURALA: No, he was an ex-seaman actually who had been blacklisted. I don't know too much about it except that he quit sailing. He was a merchant seaman and I remember he was part of a whole group of men who got black-listed at one point because of the internal problems. He became a carpenter and I met him in Chicago through friends. We were married only--I guess my daughter was a year old when we separated. I went back to work, like I said, when she was a couple of months old.

INTERVIEWER: So you were self-supporting through most of the marriage?

PEURALA: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Going into the steel mill was a completely different kind of thing, because most of these other jobs had either been places where the majority of the workers were women, or there were a lot of women, at least. Now you're going into a place where women are really a minority. Did this seem to you to be very much of a change?

PEURALA: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: How did it affect your feelings about your job?

PEURALA: I found the steel mill very interesting when I first went in it, very unique. I guess it was a challenge in a way. I didn't think too much about the female-male ratio, about my being in a plant that was mostly men except that there were men on the job who still, even though women had been hired in the steel industry during the war and there were some left (many of them had gone). There were two other women on the job that I was on and I know when they hired me they told me that in that particular occupation in the steel mill they had hired women during the war and there were a number of women still left on that occupation. It seemed to be one that women stuck with. So the other women that were in the mill at that time were not on the occupation I was on. They were either pit recorders ingot buggy operators or oilers. A lot of them were oilers. They had stayed since the war.

There were men around who still felt that women didn't belong in the steel mill and said so. But most of the men on the whole were ok. I remember when I was new there and it was very strange, you really need help to get along and to make it in the beginning. I had the kind of job where I had to sort of keep logs on

PEURALA INTERVIEW

PEURALA: steel that came into the rolling mill. I worked in the Beam Mill and you really had to get along with the men in order to do your job effectively.

INTERVIEWER: So, on the whole, they weren't too bad.

PEURALA: No.

INTERVIEWER: How about your boss?

PEURALA: Real good bosses. I was fortunate. I really had some marvelous bosses. The metallurgical foremen that I had were really very good and the pit foremen who were not my boss directly were pretty good guys on the whole.

INTERVIEWER: Was this a better paying job than the others were?

PEURALA: Oh yeah, much better.

INTERVIEWER: And did you get involved in the union right away?

PEURALA: No, I didn't.

INTERVIEWER: When did you begin to?

PEURALA: I think I began getting involved in our local, attending meetings, actually it was while they still had the local headquarters on Commercial above the store on 89th. It was upstairs. I guess it was a few years before Eddie (Sadlowski) ran for president of our local. It was a few years before that, that was '64. I would attend meetings sporadically. I was working a swing shift and I had a daughter.

INTERVIEWER: That's what I was just about to ask.

PEURALA: That made it almost impossible.

INTERVIEWER: How did you manage working a swing shift with a small child?

PEURALA: Well, at first it was kind of hard because my daughter was two months old and my husband happened to be alcoholic and I really didn't trust to leave my baby at home alone with him. I mean I had tried it and I would leave for work at eleven o'clock and he thought it was safe to go down to the corner bar. I would call home sometimes and there was no answer and I would be frantic wondering if he was going to come or if he'd gotten home or if my baby was safe. So I finally hired a baby sitter. I remember the first lady I had was a German war bride who lived a few blocks away. I would just bundle her up in the car bed and put her in there and take her over to the baby sitter in the afternoon, then

PEURALA INTERVIEW

PEURALA: go to work and pick her up in the morning.

INTERVIEWER: Then how much sleep did you get when you were home?

PEURALA: Well, I would pick her up and she'd be wide awake after that. I'd have to wait for her nap until I could go to bed.

INTERVIEWER: Suppose you worked the night shift after she was sleeping well at night. How much sleep would you get?

PEURALA: When she was that small it wasn't too hard because babies sleep a lot, they nap a lot. And I went to sleep when she would nap. When they're that little and they can't crawl around you can sleep even when they're laying in their beds awake. But eventually I ran into a woman who had been a high school teacher and she had a home in Hyde Park and she used to come to my house which made it very nice. She would come before I went to work and she'd be there.

INTERVIEWER: And she'd come for any shift you were working?

PEURALA: Yeah. Actually we got to be pretty good friends and before long my daughter was--you know, if I worked nights she'd just keep Jamie there until one or two o'clock in the afternoon and then I would wake up and go get her.

INTERVIEWER: She was more like a friend or a relative?

PEURALA: Yeah, she was like a friend. She really thought of Jamie eventually as her granddaughter. They were very close, so that really helped. Myra's home became Jamie's second home. I was really very fortunate, she was really a grand person.

INTERVIEWER: Did your husband have any kind of negative reactions about your hiring a baby sitter? Or was he just glad to be rid of the responsibility?

PEURALA: He didn't care.

INTERVIEWER: How big a chunk of your salary went for baby sitters? Did it take much of it?

PEURALA: Well, I paid her \$22.50 a week and we were getting paid every two weeks. I would take the \$45 out of my pay and it was about a third of it.

INTERVIEWER: And then you had to pay all the rest of your expenses?

PEURALA: Yeah.

PEURALA INTERVIEW

INTERVIEWER: Did you share an apartment with anyone else after that or was it just you and your daughter?

PEURALA: No, just my daughter and I.

INTERVIEWER: And what about your job? Did you remain on that same job?

PEURALA: Yeah, I stayed on that job until 1967 when I sued U.S. Steel for sex discrimination.

INTERVIEWER: In '67? Well, tell us about that.

PEURALA: Well, I had been trying from the time my daughter got to be school age to get a steady day job. And I had heard that in the Metallurgical Division in one of the labs there were steady day jobs. I had been asking my boss for consideration for one of those jobs. They kept telling me that there weren't any--when there were jobs like that I was told that they had other people in mind for them. They never posted any of these jobs; you could never bid on them. You just didn't know about them. All of a sudden somebody you were working with was moved up. When you inquired you just got pretty vague answers.

Then the Civil Rights Act was passed and I thought well, here's my chance. This was in the fall of '67 near the end of the year and a guy that I had broke in, had about four years of service, was going to move up into the main lab. He was going up there the first of the year. I asked my boss about it and he said he didn't know anything about it. He finally admitted yes, it was true he was going to go up there. Before the guy went on the job I called the man who was in charge of hiring the people for that job and I asked him if I could be considered. He said, "No, we don't want any women on these jobs." And I said, "But it's against the law, you can't keep me from any job because I'm a woman. Would you put that in writing?" And he said, "No, I don't think so, I'll have to think about that."

A few days later the boss came over and told me that officially the reason I was not selected for that job was that I did not have the educational background and that I couldn't work overtime and that there was heavy lifting on the job that I couldn't handle. That's the reason I was being rejected for the job. So then I went down to the Federal Building and filed sex discrimination charges under the federal law. They proceeded to investigate my charges and I guess about six months later they wrote out a thing that said they felt that there had been discrimination. They had gone into U.S. Steel and investigated and then they called me later and told me what their findings were and their decisions

PEURALA:

which said that they found the amount of overtime worked for a two year period for the product testers, which was the job that I wanted, was about two hours total overtime. And the educational level of the seven or eight product testers was all the way from grade school to two years of college. And the heaviest piece of test steel that they had to lift weighed five pounds. So they felt there was something to my charges and they asked U.S. Steel to have a conciliation meeting. U.S. Steel refused.

So they called me and said now it's up to you to sue them. I was supposed to get a lawyer and file the suit. I told them, "How am I going to get a lawyer?" So there's something in the law that says they will supply you with a lawyer if in their judgement under such circumstances they can. The Federal Attorney General that's appointed there was the guy that was supposed to supply me with an attorney according to the law. The guy who was the head of this three-state area, he finally went to them. That was the period when the whole Civil Rights Movement was on the wane and there was some political thing about them not pushing these things, but this guy, his name was McLaine and he went to work and called Washington. He didn't tell me exactly how he did it but he gave me enough information. He had called his superiors in Washington. Somehow or other they had called here and when we went in to see the guy who was the federal law enforcement officer for the state of Illinois he finally gave me the name of a lawyer which I called. The number they had given me, the guy wasn't there. I had to call back down there and they finally found another phone number for the guy.

Before that I remember they sent me to a court appointed group of lawyers that are there to defend people who need them. They sent me to one of these guys. For some reason or other they were really mixed up about what I needed. They thought I needed a lawyer to defend myself; they couldn't understand that I needed a lawyer to file an action. And I remember meeting lawyers for about a week, while I was still working. They finally understood what I wanted and I remember one of them saying I had a terrific case, he really wanted to get into it. It would cost me like \$25 an hour. He ended up telling me what it would cost me to hire him in his practice. This was just his day down there but I could go to his office and hire him. I said no I could not afford that, it's not what I want. So that's when I went back to him and they finally supplied me with a lawyer and I remember finally getting hold of him and he had thirty days between the time of this refusal to conciliate to file the action, to file a civil suit. And it was on a Friday when I finally got the guy's right phone number and left a message there. His name was Patrick Murphy. I remember he called me in the mill on a Monday and just took my name, just took enough information and ran down to the federal court without even meeting me, just getting the stuff on the phone, and filed the suit. Because like Saturday the thirty days was up and he filed it on Monday.

INTERVIEWER:

The Monday after the Saturday?

PEURALA:

I think so because after he filed it then U.S. Steel went through about six months of challenging technically because of the tardiness of the filing. So we had to meet and justify, file all kinds of motions to justify it. And I had to tell them who I went to see every day and what shift I was working and where they sent me and what lawyers I talked to, you know, that whole schmeer, to show that for thirty days I had beat my brains against the wall trying to make somebody understand what I was trying to do. Finally the judge, it was Judge Hubert Will, he finally agreed that he would hear the case and that it was valid, overruled the rest of those technicalities. Then it took like another six months to get it on the docket for hearing.

Finally in March of '69 we had two days of trial before the judge on whether or not I was actually discriminated against because of my sex. And that was really great! One of the other women came down and the guy who was acting as my lawyer then, Patrick Murphy--he's really in juvenile law, he's a defender of young people and that. He had that court thing in Sheridan where they were drugging youth and that. Anyway that was his field. And he said to me his expertise in Civil Rights was really limited but he'd do his best, and he was terrific.

INTERVIEWER:

I assume you won.

PEURALA:

I won in the sense that the boss had told me they didn't want any women on the job. When he got on the witness stand he was asked a lot of questions. My lawyer asked did he interview me for the job. And he said, no, he had nothing to do with it. "Well, then how did you know anything about her educational background? Did you know that she had taken courses at Roosevelt? Did you know that she had taken this course?" No, he didn't know any of these things. "Well, who did you interview for that job?" And he said, "Oh, a few people." "Who were the people you interviewed? Were they women, were they black, were they white?" "Yes, they were white." Three white males. And he made the point that that was what they wanted and they just deliberately didn't even consider me. They tried to say that they wanted people that had a certain educational background to move from this job to other jobs.

Then he questioned them about the people that were in that job. I knew about five of them that had gone out of the metallurgical division, some had quit the mill. In fact, the guy that had taken my job instead of me had quit before I got up there, had quit during the time it was going to trial. The judge finally told them that he believed there was a case and he really didn't want to rule on it. He really wished the parties would come to some kind of understanding. So my lawyer met with them and came out and said that this was what they agreed to. The next time that the job of product tester was available they'd put me on it, excluding them even putting people on it in the summer. If they need people for the summer I will go before they hire summer people. I told them I didn't like that because I just figured they'll never ever need

PEURALA:

another product tester if they have to put me up there. He said, "I don't like it either but if we force a ruling it could go either way." He agreed if there was any fussing around with his agreement that we could come into court and reopen the case within a two year period, that he would hold it right there whatever the technical legal words are I don't know.

So I went back to work a little saddened but a little glad that we had won some kind of a concession. But I really felt uncomfortable. But one good thing happened. During the time that I was working as an observer there was a...my boss had some research that he wanted to do on the logs that we were keeping in the mill. We were doing research on steel yield and he wanted me to go through a whole pile of logs that had been worked over by the observers for a period of a whole year. So he asked me if I would work for a week up in the lab in the conference room and go through those logs. I said sure, it was steady days. I went up there and I sat in this conference room which was up in the Met. lab building. I didn't know anybody up there, you know, except one of the women came and showed me where the coffee pot was and introduced herself. We talked for awhile and I got to know her. So every day that week we talked and eventually we talked about my case. I kept in touch with her after I went back to my job and she knew what the results of the court thing was. So she called me one day and she said, "Listen, the steel analysts are down there doing product tester work. They're supervisors or bosses. They've got them doing the product tester's job." So I called my lawyer and I said, "Listen, I told you this was going to happen. They need another product tester right now and they're having the bosses do the work rather than put me up there."

He went into court then. He called U.S. Steel's lawyer and he went back to Judge Will. I remember him telling me that Judge Will got very mad at him and called him all kinds of names but also acted like he was really persecuting U.S. Steel. I don't remember exactly but finally, I guess, U.S. Steel's lawyer was called into court by the judge and I think the judge just told him if you keep futzing around there's going to be an order issued here. I know what happened is that he'd been called over there. And I think it was May 5, 1969, they called me up and told me to come to work Monday morning in the lab.

INTERVIEWER:

So you really finally got there.

PEURALA:

Yeah, but it was a good thing I had met that woman because she was also a fighter up there. She would never let them pull anything, any shit on her. And we got to be very good friends.

INTERVIEWER:

Let me ask you something. Was the union never involved in this? Did you go to them as a grievance?

PEURALA:

Yeah, I went to the union and I remember I think Cass Thomas and I think it was Eddie Hoyacki then who was the griever. The local

PEURALA: seniority agreement was written in such a way that seniority units were such that my job of observer was a seniority unit. It was the only job in the seniority unit. All the other jobs in metallurgical work were separate seniority units and you couldn't go from one seniority unit to another seniority unit, but management could hand-pick.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, what a rip-off!

PEURALA: Now they could hand-pick. And my claim was if they could hand-pick a male they could hand-pick a female. I wanted the jobs posted and Cass said, "Morally you have the right, you should have the job. But legally, contractually, there is nothing we can do because they're not violating the contract."

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

PEURALA: But he did have a meeting with them and told them this and they said, do what you want but we're not violating the contract. It was very interesting though. This was after the word sex had come into the contract, so the union lawyer told them in court that there was a way and that was to file under our contract for sex discrimination.

INTERVIEWER: So there was another clause somewhere where sex discrimination was prohibited?

PEURALA: In the beginning there where it says there shall be no discrimination because of race, etc. Then they added the word sex. After the Civil Rights Act went in they added sex in there.

INTERVIEWER: That could have been a catch-all to cover all kinds of things.

PEURALA: They could have done it that way. Actually I guess they either didn't think about it or didn't care about it. Nor were they interested in coming to court at all.

INTERVIEWER: They didn't come?

PEURALA: No, they didn't come. They were not in the least bit interested. But it was my case that forced the Metallurgical Division to combine some of these seniority units so that after I went up there they combined the units and they began posting the job of product tester so that other people were able, other women--other women came into it after I did. I felt the union was really very shabby.

INTERVIEWER: How involved were you with the union? I know you said you'd been going to union meetings. Did you have any union offices before you filed this case?

PEURALA: No.

INTERVIEWER: You hadn't run for any union offices?

PEURALA: No, I hadn't.

INTERVIEWER: But you had been going to meetings.

PEURALA: Yeah, I was going to meetings and after my case was decided I had, in fact, an interview by this woman Carole Kleiman that writes in the Tribune. She had done an article. And I had written an article about my whole case for our local union paper and made a report to the local union membership about my case. They agreed that they would put it in the paper and every month the paper would come out and they wouldn't put it in there. I kept talking to the editor and I kept talking to people and they'd say, oh, it's going to go in next month, and they just wouldn't put it in there. Finally I brought it up on the floor and I said that I understood that there had been an agreement at the membership meeting where I gave my report that that would go in the paper. "It's been months and I would like to make a motion that it go in the next issue." And they said, "You don't have to make a motion on that. There's already a motion. And the editor said it's going to go into the next issue." And I said, "I know but he's been saying that." "Well, it's going to go into the next issue; he said it's going to go into the next issue." Well, it went into the next issue. It was on the second to the last page. It was just part of it and it looked like that was the end of it but if you thought about turning to the very back page it was continued there.

INTERVIEWER: What was the response of other women in the mill? Did you get much response from other people?

PEURALA: Yeah, the first response was: they're going to fire you for filing suit. You know you can't beat city hall. It's too big a corporation, they're going to fire you, you can't sue them. And I did get, probably for the first six months after I filed my suit, I did have a little harassment from my boss in the sense of him trying to find something wrong with my work. But I mean when you're on the job for fifteen years you can do it with your eyes shut. I finally told him to quit trying to find fault with my logs because he just wasn't going to find anything. And he kind of smiled and said okay and I was really left alone. But I think it encouraged women to fight back.

INTERVIEWER: What about when you won? Did you get a big response then?

PEURALA: Yeah, yeah, it was really good. The sad thing is that I left the area that I was in. I'd been working with a lot of people for a lot of years and went up to the complete other end of the mill. I was on that job for about four or five years and then I went on the job I'm on now which has taken me back out into the mill. I get to see a lot of the people that I used to work with when I was observing.

INTERVIEWER: How old was your daughter when you finally got the job?

PEURALA: Well, I didn't need to be on steady days anymore.

INTERVIEWER: She didn't need you at home in the evenings anymore?

PEURALA: I think she was about fifteen, I guess, when I finally got a steady day job. Actually I had started her into a sort of a private school when she was about six because my baby-sitter had gotten ill. Well, she had to start school and there was--I can't think now. They had semi-boarding facilities for a few kids. It was like in a house, St. George School it was called. It was not a religious school. It was a private school in Kenwood. I think it was \$600 a year plus so much per night if she stayed over.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, so she could stay when she needed to, but other times come home?

PEURALA: Yeah. I would pick her up after school and bring her home for dinner and then about eight o'clock take her back to school. And they had three or four little kids Jamie's age. She was five or six. And they had some older kids who were ten, eleven, and twelve who would stay. They had about eight kids who would stay.

INTERVIEWER: Were they mostly kids whose mothers worked?

PEURALA: One of them was a girl that this woman who ran the school had sort of adopted and they took care of the little ones.

INTERVIEWER: That worked out well. You were pretty lucky in finding good situations for your daughter.

PEURALA: Yeah. Except it cost money.

INTERVIEWER: What about the other women you worked with?

PEURALA: Most of the other women I worked with were married and had husbands.

INTERVIEWER: Did they just take turns with their husbands?

PEURALA: Well, that and I think they had parents, enough relatives. My problem was all my family was in St. Louis. I think my daughter was about a year and a half when this lady was taking care of my daughter and I suppose she was diabetic and she had a bad episode where she had to be put in the hospital. And I did take my daughter to St. Louis for about three months while this lady was hospitalized. She stayed with my mother and I went and brought her back when Myra came out of the hospital. Then she was going to school and week-ends she would stay with Myra. And when she got a little bit older and she didn't go to the school anymore she would just stay at Myra's.

INTERVIEWER: So Myra was really available off and on all through her growing-up period?

PEURALA: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: How did you and your daughter get along? Were you very close?

PEURALA: Yes, I'd say so.

INTERVIEWER: What does she do? She's grown up now isn't she?

PEURALA: Yeah, she's twenty-two and she's very much interested in modern dance. She's part of the Joel Hall Dance Company. She's teaching beginner students three days a week at the studio where the company is based. And she really loves it.

INTERVIEWER: That sounds nice. And she has her own apartment?

PEURALA: She has an apartment with another girl. She comes and goes.

INTERVIEWER: You and she are still--is it big sister and little sister or mother and daughter?

PEURALA: I think mother and daughter. Yeah, we get along pretty good.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me when you began to get active in the union in the sense of running for office and actively involved in union politics? Was it soon after your suit?

PEURALA: Yes. Let's see, that was '69 that I went to work up there. I first ran for recording secretary in '70.

INTERVIEWER: Did you win?

PEURALA: And I ran for Griever. No.

INTERVIEWER: You didn't win for either one?

PEURALA: No.

INTERVIEWER: Did you run with a caucus or did you run on your own?

PEURALA: I ran with a group, a small group.

INTERVIEWER: A slate.

PEURALA: Yeah, no, we didn't even have a full slate. We only had three positions I think, three or four.

INTERVIEWER: Did you run again for the same offices in '73?

PEURALA: In '73 I ran for president.

INTERVIEWER: And you didn't win that.

PEURALA: No, I didn't win.

INTERVIEWER: Then what?

PEURALA: Then in '76 I ran for Grievance Committee. That's when I won.

INTERVIEWER: And what's your position now?

PEURALA: I'm griever for division five. There's ten divisions and my division is the Mason Department, the Metallurgical Department and a large portion of the Yards and Transportation area.

INTERVIEWER: Were the majority of the people men that you represented?

PEURALA: Oh yes.

INTERVIEWER: It's only nine percent women I think in steel.

PEURALA: Right now I think there's about 300, between 300 and 350 women out there among between 7 and 8,000 men.

INTERVIEWER: So it's a small number.

PEURALA: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: But you feel at this point that you're very well accepted by the men in the mill, obviously if they elect you?

PEURALA: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: What about the union officials? I gather that you feel they haven't exactly been on the ball where women are concerned. What about in general?

PEURALA: You mean in relationship to women? I don't believe in all the years that I was running for office that there was ever any encouragement.

INTERVIEWER: None at all?

PEURALA: None at all. In fact, there was deliberate discouragement. I was constantly being told I couldn't possibly win an election in a plant with men when you're a woman. Quit trying, you're dreaming, you're being Alice in Wonderland. It's just not possible that men are going to vote for a woman. You got to go to a plant where there are a lot of women.

INTERVIEWER: What did they say when you won?

PEURALA: It was an accident. Well I had the incumbent plus another male, three of us running for the job. I mean I beat them both two to one so I guess there was something going for me.

INTERVIEWER: Or against them. Is there any kind of women's caucus or anything like that in your plant?

PEURALA: We began to develop a women's caucus shortly after I was elected, a number of women. Roberta Wood, who is the first woman on the executive board, and I began talking about really the need to get into it now and we began working with some women. I mean we'd been working with women anyway, and I guess Roberta and I both were at the founding conference of CLUW in Chicago. And I was somewhat active around the abortion rights movement and some of the women's rights movements of the city.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me a little bit about that? How active were you? Was that in the Chicago area?

PEURALA: Yeah, it was in Chicago. It was all in Chicago.

INTERVIEWER: Did you belong to NOW or anything like that?

PEURALA: No, I didn't belong to NOW.

INTERVIEWER: Did you belong to any other women's groups besides CLUW?

PEURALA: I don't even think I became an official member of CLUW. I was at the founding conference and then I went to some of the meetings here in Chicago. There was some confusion about joining, how you did it. I guess eventually they got some membership. I had gone to a number of meetings but I became so really involved in Eddie Sadlowski's campaign in the early days and my own campaigns and then I became involved in the fight against the No-Strike Agreement in the steel industry, so it really consumed a lot of my time. I participated in some actions on abortion rights.

INTERVIEWER: What kind? You mean demonstrations?

PEURALA: Yeah, they had demonstrations and things. And the anti-war movement was in there somewhere.

INTERVIEWER: You were involved in that?

PEURALA: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: With any particular group, or just going to general public demonstrations?

PEURALA: Not with any particular group, no.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, so the last few years you've really been more involved in union politics with a group rather than as a woman. Are you part of a regular caucus? Or is there a regular caucus?

PEURALA: Well, I've tried to organize caucuses from the days when I first ran for office in '73 and we began organizing a sort of a caucus. It was a small group of maybe a dozen people. Actually, I don't think I did too badly there. I ran for recording secretary and I think I got about 500 or 600 votes. My opponent got about 1,100.

- PEURALA: It wasn't bad for a first try. We sort of put out a program. I have copies of a lot of that stuff if you want it.
- INTERVIEWER: Yes, I do. Did the caucus last after the election or was it just for the election?
- PEURALA: Not very long, it didn't last very long.
- INTERVIEWER: Now what about this movement within the union not to give up the strike? What group was that?
- PEURALA: That was in '73 and that was just before our local union election when the ENA* was negotiated. It was just before our local union elections and it was right after Eddie's first election for director. I remember a group of us being very, very concerned about the No-Strike agreement and concerned about things that were going on within our own local. There was a division in our local of those who supported the official candidate of the international union and others who supported Eddie Sadlowski. The Executive Board was split.
- INTERVIEWER: What was it that attracted you to that Sadlowski group? Was it the opposition to ENA* or was it other things in your local?
- PEURALA: Well, actually they never came out publicly on ENA.
- INTERVIEWER: No, they didn't, although the majority of people in there were, I think, opposed to the ENA.
- PEURALA: Probably, but we couldn't get any official position from them.
- INTERVIEWER: So what was it that made you support him?
- PEURALA: Well, Eddie was from our local and it was an opportunity to try to get more democracy. Eddie was talking about union democracy and the rank and file running the union. And there had been really very little of that kind of activity in the district. And I got involved because I thought that that was the answer, to try to have more democracy and the right to vote on contracts and the right to vote on dues increase more voice for the membership. I thought that's what that movement represented. I really felt it was important that the membership have the right to nominate and select their candidates for the district office rather than have the international union tell us who it was going to be, which is how it had been done in the past. So I became involved in that to a degree. But also it was the No-Strike Agreement, I think it was signed right after Ed's election. His election was over in February of '73 and it was signed in '73 and Eddie was fighting the election at that time in court, with the Labor Board, or what have

*ENA stands for Experimental Negotiating Agreement, which is the same as the No-Strike Agreement.

PEURALA: you. We were organizing a district-wide organization to see what we could do about the No-Strike Agreement.

INTERVIEWER: What became of that? How did that work? Were the people from a number of mills?

PEURALA: Yeah, there were representatives from most of the big mills here. It was the District 31 Committee--I can't remember what we called ourselves exactly.

INTERVIEWER: We can fill that in later. How did it work?

PEURALA: Yeah, there were people from Bethlehem and the others.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of things did you do?

PEURALA: Well, we put out a newsletter and we tried to make contact with other steelworkers around the country. We had contact with RAFT* and a few people from the West Coast and a few people from the South. We had a conference once in Ohio, I think in Cleveland. And we had conferences here. There were a couple of lawyers. One of them was Dave Scribner. I guess he was from the National Lawyers Guild who took an interest in the No-Strike Agreement, in the legality of it.

INTERVIEWER: How far did you pursue it?

PEURALA: We went all the way to court. We lost. We filed the suit, about fifteen of us signed the suit against our International Union officers for signing the agreement without the consent of the membership. I've got the briefs here somewhere. There was a trial, I guess it lasted three days. A bunch of us went to Pittsburgh. That was in March of '74. We went to court in Pittsburgh in federal court. It was really a beautiful trial. I don't know if I've got the whole transcript of it but I've got some of it. I've got the judges decision.

INTERVIEWER: What was beautiful about it?

PEURALA: Putting I.W. Abel on the witness stand and Bernie Kleiman on the witness stand and having them explain how they negotiated this agreement, how it came about, how it was top secret and how they had deliberately not spread it around because they were afraid it wouldn't pass if people knew about it. It was amazing the stuff that I.W. Abel couldn't answer on the witness stand and referred to the lawyer. There were a lot of steelworkers in the court room and it was kind of exciting.

INTERVIEWER: Too bad it wasn't in Chicago.

*RAFT is Rank and File Team, a national organization of members of a number of unions.

PEURALA INTERVIEW

- PEURALA: Yeah.
- INTERVIEWER: But you had plenty in Pittsburgh.
- PEURALA: Oh yeah, people came from all around and we had a lot of lawyers who donated a lot of time taking depositions. We tried to take collections to at least pay for some of the expenses. We were not paying them any salary, you know. Briefs and stuff like that cost money. So he ruled that it was not against our constitution.
- INTERVIEWER: So you're stuck with that.
- PEURALA: Yeah.
- INTERVIEWER: Now, what's your current major interest as far as the union is concerned? What do you hope to accomplish now in the union? There is a women's caucus, right? Is it a district caucus or what is it?
- PEURALA: Well, I have not--there's been a district caucus organized which Roberta has been much more active in.
- INTERVIEWER: You're not involved in it?
- PEURALA: I've gone to a couple of its meetings, but they seem to conflict, the times. I've found one thing, being griever is very time consuming and it's very exhausting because what you're doing is almost every day. You're working also. When you're not working you're fighting grievances for people that are getting fired and suspended and you become really very much involved in those human beings who are being fired and need their jobs. You rack your brain to do your best in representing them and it takes a lot out of you. And you're also with in your union trying to make your Grievance Committee more effective.
- INTERVIEWER: That's your major effort.
- PEURALA: Yeah, that's one of the things I'm involved in along with some of my other colleagues on the Grievance Committee, really to have our local union officers and executive committee make this union the best local in terms of protecting and defending the rights of the membership.
- INTERVIEWER: What do you think are the most serious problems in your union? You talk about discrimination against women as though it lasted very long and is probably still going on, but you also talk about a lot of other problems that seem to affect men as well. Do you think that the women are in worse shape in the union than the men are?
- PEURALA: Yeah.
- INTERVIEWER: They are. Is anything done about it?

PEURALA INTERVIEW

- PEURALA: Well, yeah. I think one of the things that happened after I took office was between Roberta and I and some other women, we began meeting periodically and talking about forming a Women's Committee.
- INTERVIEWER: In your local?
- PEURALA: Yeah, in our local. We eventually, through pressure on the executive board, our president did appoint a Women's Committee. And we had hoped to have the women who were meeting select some chairman or something. But he appointed three women.
- INTERVIEWER: Were they women who had been active?
- PEURALA: One of them had been active in the group that was meeting. The other two had not been, but they're good women. There was some resentment on the part of some of the women who had been meeting for months and hoping they could elect. We were talking about democracy and here they were appointed, but you know tradition is that the president of our local union appoints the committees. But we have been able to work to a degree with the women. And one of the projects is the women want to try to improve the sanitary facilities, the locker rooms and the toilets for the women in the plant which are really in pretty bad shape. There hadn't been women there for so many years but there was an influx of women after the Consent Decree where they had to hire a certain quota of women, a certain quota of blacks in certain areas, into the apprenticeships and that. A lot of young women came in and many of them are militant young women, which is good. We made lists of conditions in the wash rooms and gave it to the President of the Local Union, the Chairman of the Safety Committee and it was turned over to the Grievance Committee. A week ago on a Tuesday--actually on the Grievance Committee we had asked, well actually going back to the Local Plant Issues we had asked, as a local issue, to have plant management recognize the Women's Committee as an official committee of the union, to meet with the Women's Committee to discuss women's problems, but they had turned that down.
- At the third-step meeting the Assistant Superintendent of the Plant, who sits in on third-step meetings, after one of the men grievors really raised a storm about it and the fact that the Grievance Committee was being held responsible by the women and when in the hell were they going to do something about it. I said I still felt it was really important they meet with those women and it was really important for the union to feel that women had a place to bring their grievances and to deal directly and to put directly on their lap what their problems were. He finally agreed to have a meeting with three of the women.
- INTERVIEWER: Have they met yet?

PEURALA: Yeah, we met last Tuesday.

INTERVIEWER: How did it go?

PEURALA: He said Monday or Tuesday and we met Tuesday. Four of us met Tuesday. It went very well. They had the Company Safety Committee men there, two of the, the Assistant Superintendent of the Plant and the head of Personal Services. They listened and took a list of all the areas and complaints and said that they would get back to us. They said they would look into a lot of them that really needed to be taken care of right away.

I think, that he hadn't really heard what some of the conditions were and I had a feeling maybe they were going to seriously begin doing something. Then they had agreed to tour all the women's wash room facilities. Before we adjourned that meeting I again asked if a woman could be part of that tour, because they had said no earlier. And he said he didn't want to do anything that would conflict with the union, that if the Chairman of the Union Safety Committee would agree and would request it, he wouldn't object to a woman being part of that tour and if the company co-chairman of the Safety Committee wouldn't object to a woman being part of the tour. The guy was sitting there and he said, "No, I wouldn't mind. They're welcome." So they agreed that with an official request from the Chairman of our Safety Committee, that he would agree to a woman.

INTERVIEWER: Will you get that, then?

PEURALA: Oh, we got it.

INTERVIEWER: So you are making progress.

PEURALA: Yeah, so when I talked to him he said they had already made that request and they had rejected it. So when we left his office we agreed that one of the women from the Women's Committee who's an apprentice will go when they go to tour. And he also agreed that if we prepared an agenda and sent it to him that he would meet with the women when they had particular problems. He wanted just a hand written agenda that he could see beforehand. So I think that's real progress. But again, being part of these, the Grievance Committee and the Executive Board, I think it takes women to make it go.

INTERVIEWER: Are you the only woman on the Grievance Committee?

PEURALA: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: That doesn't put you on the Executive Board, does it?

PEURALA: No, Roberta's on the Executive Board. She's a trustee.

INTERVIEWER: So there are only two of you. Are there any other women officers in your local union?

PEURALA INTERVIEW

PEURALA: No.

INTERVIEWER: Had there been women on the Executive Board before Roberta?

PEURALA: No.

INTERVIEWER: Even in that war time period?

PEURALA: No, never.

INTERVIEWER: That's amazing. Well, I'd say you've made progress.

PEURALA: Yeah, and they have appointed for the first time a woman to the Civil Rights Committee. They usually have three members there, a chairman and two other people. So they have a young black woman on the Civil Rights Committee.

INTERVIEWER: So it's quite a bit of change if you add it all up.

PEURALA: Yeah, plus the fact that the union has agreed that there will be a Women's Committee. And that Women's Committee is three women that John Chico has appointed, but they meet periodically and everybody who comes to the meeting considers themselves part of it.

INTERVIEWER: How do you feel about some of the other women's activities, like ERA? How crucial do you think that is at this point, compared to all the other various issues?

PEURALA: Well, I have always believed it was necessary to pass ERA. There was a time when I was not for it. There was a time when I believed it would really take away some rights the women had, you know that so-called protective legislation would be wiped out.

INTERVIEWER: It's wiped out by other events anyway.

PEURALA: Right and I found that by my own case the provisions of the so-called protective laws were used against me--you know the lifting and the overtime, which really didn't exist. But they used it, saying there's a law that says we can't work a woman more than eight hours or nine hours a day and on that job sometime we need people to work twelve hours. Since we couldn't work her we couldn't work her we couldn't really put her on that job. And then there are lifting restrictions and we don't want her lifting fifty pounds. None of it was true but they did use it.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. The excuse is not there if there's no protective legislation.

PEURALA: Right.

INTERVIEWER: If you had to rate all the various things that women might work for what would you think is most important--the ERA, the abortion issue, equal pay for equal work and all the rest of it.

PEURALA: I guess equality of opportunity on the job is the main one. Equality of opportunity on the job and the union being effective and stopping the harassment that still exists for women that come in that mill by male bosses.

INTERVIEWER: It's still pretty bad?

PEURALA: Yeah, it's still out there. Many women are becoming much more aggressive and militant and speaking up, but women are still terminated before their probation period is up. We had a case here of a woman, she was 52 and she didn't get through her probationary period because they assigned her to a job that she couldn't do. I mean she did then other jobs, maybe. But they put her on the one that they figured she couldn't do and she tried to do it. That was just a rotten foreman who really had no business putting her on that job. There are many people who can't do that job, including men who really have a rough time doing the job.

INTERVIEWER: Since it was a probationary period the union couldn't do anything about it, or could they?

PEURALA: Yeah, the union supposedly couldn't file a grievance. There is something that says if you're a probationary employee and it's a discriminatory termination, then there's something they can do. I think this was age discrimination and female discrimination.

INTERVIEWER: Did the union do something?

PEURALA: No, because it was strange. First of all, it was not in my area, she was in another griever's area and the other griever would have to follow-up. It's not that he wouldn't, it's just that we waited, and in talking to everybody else that she worked for besides this one foreman, and talking to Personnel at the main office, they agreed that what happened was too bad, it wasn't fair, kind of off-the-record. The time that she was terminated was also just about the time that a hell of a lot of probationary employees were being laid off anyway. There was sort of a concensus of opinion that maybe we should wait. If there was a grievance filed it would destroy any chance of her being rehired. It looked like maybe they would rehire her someplace else in the main office.

INTERVIEWER: Since you'd raised the issue.

PEURALA INTERVIEW

- PEURALA: Yeah and because she'd gotten good recommendations from the other people she'd worked for. They had no problems, she was a good worker. Not to spoil her chances of getting back, that's sort of where it was left. At one point I kind of felt like it should be done anyway because I think it was age discrimination. And I don't know if there's any statute of limitations but I kind of expressed the thought that if she isn't rehired then the union should file a grievance. But we have a Chairman of our Grievance Committee who really doesn't believe you can prove any of these things. There were male probationary employees who were let go also. There's a little bit of a conflict there about how aggressive you should be about filing grievances for probationary employees and they just have a tendency not to do it.
- INTERVIEWER: Save it all for the ones who've gotten past the probationary period.
- PEURALA: Yeah, but I do know that that is happening to women. They are getting let go before their probationary period is over. And then you still hear stories from some of the men, who tell you how some of the women are being harassed. New women are being harassed by bosses so they'll quit.
- INTERVIEWER: Well, are your hopes still high after all these years of struggling?
- PEURALA: Yes.
- INTERVIEWER: You're still in good form?
- PEURALA: Hopefully.
- INTERVIEWER: What would you like to see happen in the next few years? What would you like to see for your daughter in the way of a happy life? What do you think would be a good life for her at this stage in this country?
- PEURALA: That's something to think about a little bit, because all she wants to do is dance.
- INTERVIEWER: Well, at least she's happy in her profession.
- PEURALA: Yeah, I guess she's really struggling now. She had worked as a waitress a couple of nights a week till the wee hours, earning enough money to pay carfare and rent and eat so she could be independent, so she could live in her own apartment. And you know to think about all the money the government spends, where you have up and coming artistic groups, cultural, whether its dancing or art or whatever it is, you'd think there would be some kind of support for people who have talent and go

- PEURALA: into these fields to not have to a struggle so financially in order to get by. Really they want to do so desperately. This dance company is really good and they're really struggling. Maybe she's reaching the point now where teaching two classes a week is going to pay enough to help pay her bills. It's not only true of her but it's true of other dancers.
- INTERVIEWER: When you look back over all those things you've told me about what do you feel most pleased with yourself about? What do you think was the best thing you did or what gave you the greatest sense of having done the right thing?
- PEURALA: I think the culmination was the night I won that election. I really felt strongly that I would win but you don't really know till you do. And I really felt that a lot of what I'd done and stood for and fought for in the union throughout the years-- and I have spent a lot of years in that union fighting for certain things on the floor. We passed a lot of resolutions against the war, probably one of the few steelworker unions that did. Because of what I've done, I kind of feel a lot of that went into my ability to win that election. And I really felt pretty good about that.
- INTERVIEWER: That vindicated you for all of your efforts?
- PEURALA: Yeah, because so many of the people that I personally liked and thought a lot of, really didn't believe it could be done.
- INTERVIEWER: You stuck it out and you did it! Is there anything else you'd like to say before we call it a night?
- PEURALA: I can't think of anything.
- INTERVIEWER: Alright, thank you very much.

ALICE PEURALA INTERVIEW INDEX

Armenian Youth of America,16-17
Soviet Armenia and,16
Turkey and,17
Progressive Party and,17
St.Louis Post Dispatch and,17
Peurala and,17

Armenians

Turkish persecution of,1-3
St. Louis and,3,17
sex roles and,7
Turkey and,17
World Armenian Congress,17
Soviet Union and,24

Chicago

Peurala and,7
Labor Board in,14

Children

work and,24a , 26-27,34
Peurala's daughter,34-35,45

CLUW, See: Women's Movement; Coalition of Labor Union Women

Committee on Racial Equality,8

Fisher, Bernice and,8,24
Chicago and,8
Rustin, Bayard and,8
Peurala and,8,11,24
activities of,11
Civil Rights Movement and,11
Socialism and,24

Communist Party

Peurala and,18-18a.

CORE, See: Committee on Racial Equality

Early influences

family background,1,3-4
religious influence,4
education,4,7
father and,5-6
mother and,5-6
work experience,6-7
political background,24

ENA, See: Steelworkers Union; Experimental Negotiating Agreement

ERA, See: Women's Movement; Equal Rights Amendment

Fisher, Bernice,8,13

Committee on Racial Equality and,8,24
Retail,Wholesale Department Store Employees Union and,8
Teacher's Union and,13

ALICE PEURALA CONTINUED

Gibbons, Harold, 10

IBEW, See Unions, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers

International Union of Electrical Workers

 founding of, 17

 factionalism in, 17, 19

 United Auto Workers, 19

 Congress of Industrial Organizations Council and, 19

 United Electrical Workers and, 19

International Union of Electrical Workers

 Stewart Warner Plant organizing drive, Chicago, Illinois, 17, 18a

 Peurala and, 18-18a.

 rank and file organizing committee, 18

 union factionalism and, 18, 19-20

 Stabno, Stanly and, 19

 Congress of Industrial Organizations Council and, 19

 United Auto Workers and, 19

 election, 19-20

 International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and, 20

 International Association of Machinists

Kavener, Dick, 10

Kleiman, Carol, 33

Legislation

 Civil Rights Act, 28

 Equal Rights Amendment, 43

 protective legislation, 43

Mc Connell, Dorothy, 21

Marriage

 Peurala and, 24a.-25, 26

National Labor Relations Board

 Peurala and, 18a., 19

No-Strike Agreement, See: Steelworkers Union, Experimental Negotiating Agreement

NOW, See: Women's Movement, National Organization For Women

Organizing and Organizing Drives

 Peurala and, 12, 18

 Retail, Wholesale Department Store Employees Union, Three Sisters Store,
 St. Louis, Missouri, 12

 Retail, Wholesale Department Store Employees, women's clothing stores,
 Chicago, 13-16

 Retail, Wholesale Department Store Employees Union, Jays Potato Chip
 Factory, Chicago, Illinois, 21, 23

ALICE PEURALA INDEX CONTINUED

Peurala vs. United States Steel, 29-34
Steelworkers Union and, 32-33
Tribune and, 33
women and, 33

RAFT, See: Unions, Rank and File Team

Retail, Wholesale Department Store Employees Union
Distributive Workers and, 8
division of, 8
Gibbons, Harold, 10
Heisler, Frances and, 14
Kavener, Dick and, 10
McConnell, Dorothy and, 21
negotiation committees of, 11, 21
Peurala and, 8, 9, 13-14, 21
Teamsters' Union and, 8
women and, 9-10, 11

Sadlowski, Eddie, 26, 37-39

St. Louis
Armenians in, 3, 17
Civil Rights Movement and, 12
Labor Health Institute in, 9, 17

Sex roles
Peurala and, 5
Peurala's family and, 4

Steelworkers Union, 3
Abel, I.W. and, 39
age discrimination, 45
Chico, John and, 43
Civil Rights Committee, 43
District 31 Committee, 39
Executive Board, 38, 42
Experimental Negotiation Agreement and, 37, 38-40
Grievance Committee, Division Five, 36, 40, 42, 45
Hoyacki, Eddie and, 31
Peurala's positions in, 26, 32, 35, 37, 40, 42, 46
Sadlowski, Eddie and, 26, 37-39
Safety Committee, 42
seniority agreement, 32
sexual discrimination and, 31-34, 44-45
women and, 36-37, 40-43, 44-45
Women's Committee, 41-42, 43
Wood, Roberta and, 37, 40, 42

Teamsters' Union
Local 668, 8
Retail, Wholesale Department Store Employees Union and, 8
summer camps of, 10

ALICE PEURALA INDEX CONTINUED

UAW, See: Unions, United Auto Workers

UE, See: Unions, United Electrical Workers

Unions and Labor Organizations,

Coalition of Labor Union Women, 37

International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, 17, 20

Peurala's attitude towards, 24

Rank and File Team, 39

Teacher's Union, 13

United Auto Workers, 19

United Electrical Workers, 17

See Also: International Union of Electrical Workers; Retail, Wholesale
Department Store Employees Union; Steelworkers Union; Teamsters' Union

United States Steel

Metallurgical Division, 24a., 28

Peurala and, 24a., 25-26, 28-29

product tester, 31

Steelworkers Union and, 31

women and, 25, 28

See Also: Peurala vs. United States Steel

Women's Movement

Civil Rights Act, 28

Coalition of Labor Union Women, 37

Equal Rights Amendment, 43

National Organization of Women, 37

Peurala and, 37

protective legislation and, 43

sexual discrimination, 28, 44-45

See Also: Marriage; Sex roles

Workers' Education

Peurala and, 9

Teamsters' Union and, 10

Working conditions

candy factory, 21-22

cashiers, 9

potato chip factory, 21, 23

salesgirls, 14

shoe factory and, 6