THE TWENTIETH CENTURY TRADE UNION WOMAN: VEHICLE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

with

BARBARA WERTHEIMER

by

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Program on Women and Work

Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations

University of Michigan - Wayne State University

Ann Arbor, Michigan

BARBARA MAYER WERTHEIMER

Barbara Mayer Wertheimer grew up in New York City, near Columbia University, and attended the public schools. Her father was a doctor, her mother a social worker. Ms. Wertheimer has one younger brother.

Wertheimer attended Oberlin College, near Cleveland, and received a B.A. in psychology. She married another Oberlin student, Val Wertheimer, shortly after graduation. Ms. Wertheimer was hired, as an organizer, by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) and during 1946 and '47 she and Val organized throughout New York and Pennsylvania. She says the key to organizing is "learning to listen."

When the Taft-Hartley Act passed in 1947 Wertheimer found organizing more and more difficult. She could "no longer in good conscience tell people that the law protected their jobs." The Wertheimers moved to New York City where Barbara became Associate National Education Director of ACWA and, later, Acting National Director. In addition to conducting basic classes for new union members and teaching at summer schools for workers, Wertheimer was responsible for a staff of more than thirteen.

In 1953 the Wertheimers' first child was born, and Barbara began working part-time. In 1958 she left ACWA to finish her masters' thesis. She received a Leadership Training Award from the Ford Foundation's Fund for Adult Education to help with completion of the thesis which she describes as a "blueprint for union-community cooperation in developing neighborhood networks." From 1961 through 1966 she worked as a consultant to the American Labor Education Service and the New York State Division of Housing and Community Renewal.

Wertheimer joined the staff of the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations (NYSSILR) at Cornell, in 1966, as a labor program specialist. Just six years later she accepted further responsibility, becoming director of Trade Union Women's Studies. Ms. Wertheimer initiated that project in 1970 and built a year-long, for-credit program. She says the women who participate in Trade Union Women's Studies "feel, literally, that it's their chance and they want to have this opportunity for themselves." Wertheimer finds that the program is a big encouragment for women: "they learn from each other, appreciate each other, and help each other."

The Institute for Education and Research on Women and Work, which Wertheimer has directed since 1977, grew out of Trade Union Women's studies. In addition to conducting regular classes the Institute sponsors conferences and research on specific issues and acts as a resource for unions and women's groups.

Barbara Wertheimer is also an associate professor with the NYSSILR, Cornell, and is an active member of many professional and community groups including the University and College Labor Educators' Association (UCLEA). She initiated what is now a standing UCLEA committee on programs for union women. She has written many articles and books including a two-volume history of working women, We Were There: The Story of Working Women. A list of her publications may be found elsewhere in this volume.

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INTERVIEWER: In reading Passages [Gail Sheehy] were you reflecting on your life?

WERTHEIMER: I was telling you that I had read Passages on my vacation recently and that I found it a fascinating book that makes you wonder how much of you is really you and how much you really do bring with you from your mother and your father and your family environment. I think that I also said that so many of the people that Gail Sheehy interviewed and wrote about were unhappy people who had to shed their past in order to find themselves, but that I didn't feel that if you were happily involved and busy that you needed to take the time to do that. I haven't really thought it through to determine how much of me I really want to shed from my past, but whatever I am, certainly I do owe a lot to my mother and father. I don't have the same kind of conflicts about it that some of the unhappy people Gail Sheehy talked about have. I feel at this point a kind of gratitude for the parents that I had. I learned a lot from them and I appreciate the kind of people that they were and the kind of things they tried to do.

INTERVIEWER: And are they happy with what you wound up doing?

WERTHEIMER: They're both dead. My father died when I was quite young; I was only sixteen. My mother seemed happy with the way both her children turned out, although she never did understand why I cast my lot with labor unions. She always thought I should have been an administrator or worked in management, and at one point offered me scholarship money to go back to school and learn how to work as a management expert. She really felt that I was barking up the wrong tree. But I think that she was pleased that I was happy in doing what I was doing, and reasonably successful in it.

INTERVIEWER: Did she have sort of a specific direction in mind for you or was it more of a general thing?

WERTHEIMER: She herself was a career woman and a very successful one. And the only thing that she really had in mind I think for me as a female was that I not undersell myself. I remember one time when I was very deeply sad and upset about my father's death--my father was a doctor, a very fine doctor and surgeon--and I said to her, "I think I'll be a nurse." She realized it was my relationship to medicine I was trying to explore. And she said, and it's the only time she has ever tried to influence my career choice, she said very angrily, "You will not."

WERTHEIMER: She said, "If you're interested in medicine you'll be a doctor, you will not be a nurse." She said, "Nursing is a very limited kind of profession, very few people get ahead in it. It's a dead end job and you will not be a nurse." That made quite a deep impression on me, not because I don't admire and respect nursing, I do. But it made me realize that she had deep faith, that didn't necessarily come through every day, in my own capacity, and that she would support my educational goals whatever they might be. And she did.

INTERVIEWER: What did she do?

WERTHEIMER: She was a social worker. She was the first Director of Training for the New York City Department of Welfare. And when I was very little she was a policewoman. Later she was one of the top people in the personnel department at Macy's. From there she went into social work and became the Director of Training and Personnel for the Department of Welfare. But, in addition, she developed a parallel career as a photographer, and also as a trainer of dogs. She became not only a very fine trainer but a judge in the obedience ring, so that when she retired from social work she had another profession in which she was very emminent, the dog world. She had a lot of capability: a very bright woman, very reserved and shy, but very, very bright.

INTERVIEWER: And so from your early childhood on your mother was working?

WERTHEIMER: Oh yes, she always worked.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have brothers and sisters?

WERTHEIMER I have a brother, a younger brother.

INTERVIEWER: And was she at home or did you have someone taking care of you?

WERTHEIMER: She wasn't at home; we had a live-in housekeeper.

INTERVIEWER: And did you spend much time with her? With your mother I mean.

WERTHEIMER: Not as much as I would have liked. That was something that was a problem. When I grew up in the thirties, which was the depression period, many many women didn't work. I was one of the few children in my neighborhood who had a working mother. And it wasn't easy. Today it's quite different; if your mother does't work, you have to explain and apologize about why she doesn't work. But it was quite the opposite in the 1930's; you had to explain why your mother worked.

INTERVIEWER: Well, did your experience with a working mother, did it influence you any as far as bringing up your own children?

WERTHEIMER: Very much so. When I had children I worked part-time. I was fortunate in that I didn't have children until I was twenty-eight years old, so that I'd had a chance to get a foothold and experience in labor education. I never had the problem that I do sympathize with, and that so many women have now , of finding interesting part-time work. I was always fortunate that organizations or agencies were willing to make interesting part-time jobs

WERTHEIMER: available to me. I'm very grateful for that because I had exciting, fascinating jobs part-time. I was able to spend half my time during the day at home with the children and was able to take work home if they were sick. It was an ideal arrangement. And I will be grateful for it forever because I enjoyed the children so much. I have a lot of sympathy for women who want to spend those years with their children and yet also want to do interesting work.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you grow up?

WERTHEIMER: In New York City.

INTERVIEWER: What neighborhood?

WERTHEIMER: The Cathedral Parkway neighborhood, 110th Street, which is fairly near Columbia University.

INTERVIEWER: And did you go to public school?

WERTHEIMER: Yes, I went to P.S. 165 just one block away. Sometimes we sat forty-five and fifty in a class, two in a seat, and shared books--and it was wonderful. It was a great class and I enjoyed the school tremendously.

INTERVIEWER: Were there teachers there who were particularly influential in one way or another?

WERTHEIMER: There were teachers that I remember vividly; I wouldn't say that they influenced me very much one way or another. But I remember them with great pleasure. And some of them I got to know fairly well. I remember them with great fondness.

INTERVIEWER: Did you do other things while you were in school, jobs or....

WERTHEIMER: Are you talking about elementary school or high school or college?

INTERVIEWER: I guess high school really.

WERTHEIMER: I didn't in high school; I did in college.

INTERVIEWER: And where did you go to college?

WERTHEIMER: I went to Oberlin College, in Ohio.

INTERVIEWER: Was that your first time away from home, living away from home?

WERTHEIMER: Except for summer camps, right.

INTERVIEWER: Did you find it a positive experience?

WERTHEIMER: Yes, it was marvelous, it was a great school; it was the school I had dreamed of going to, was able to go to, and loved every minute.

INTERVIEWER: Wasn't Oberlin important in the underground railroad?

WERTHEIMER: Very much so, right. That kind of thing was what steered me to Oberlin in the first place, because it was a school with a very liberal, democratic tradition. It was the first school to admit women and the first to admit blacks. That was important to me. I felt that's the kind of school I wanted to go to.

INTERVIEWER: And you had some part-time jobs when you went to school?

WERTHEIMER: Right, I was a waitress and I washed silver and glasses to earn board money.

INTERVIEWER: And what was your major?

WERTHEIMER: Psychology.

INTERVIEWER: And what did you intend to do at that point, did you know?

WERTHEIMER: That's a very interesting question, because that's another thing that's very different. When I went to college no one really asked young women what they wanted to do. You weren't encouraged to plan your career. Supposedly I had a guidance counselor assigned to me who met with me once my Freshman year, and that was all. And I don't think she knew what I majored in or anything else, and she happened to be the Dean of Women. But her idea of career guidance of course was, "If you have trouble, come and see me." But not any kind of planning, nothing about what are you interested in, what do you want to do? I really didn't know what I wanted to do. When I went to school I wanted to be a religious missionary and go to Africa. But that changed, after my first year. But there was no real idea of what I wanted to do. I majored in psychology because it interested me. And a lot of the women on campus wanted first of all to get married and then have kids. And what they studied often seemed entirely incidental.

INTERVIEWER: Were there lots of women at Oberlin or was it just a few?

WERTHEIMER: I went there during the war, so we had a lot more women than men. We had relatively few men on campus. The women were oriented toward the men they knew who were in the service. But there was a high proportion of women from that period who have gone on to careers. Oberlin does turn out a lot of women who are much more career oriented than many women on big college campuses. Oberlin is pretty small. A lot of the women majored in things which did lead to careers, to social work and teaching, to medicine. We had a few women who went into medicine and law. Some very outstanding

WERTHEIMER: women were in my class or adjacent classes, and have become quite well known. After you got out you realized that you weren't going to just be at home; you were going to do something else. But I don't think this was a real emphasis for the women there at that time. It's very different on campuses now, women seem to know what they want to do almost before they get to college.

INTERVIEWER: Well, were you expecting to get married soon at that time?

WERTHEIMER: When I was graduated from Oberlin I was engaged to be married. And my husband really didn't know exactly what he wanted to do either. What happened was that on graduation day we got a telegram from the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union asking if we would like to come to work as organizers. And we did.

INTERVIEWER: He was a student there too?

WERTHEIMER: Right. We got married in July and went to work with the Amalagamated [Clothing Workers Union] in August, and that really started us on our career. But that determined what we would do as much as anything else.

INTERVIEWER: How did that happen, I mean....

WERTHEIMER: Well, I had gone into the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union to do some research during spring vacations and winter vacations during the preceding year and gotten to know the head of the research department, Gladys Dickison, who was a very remarkable woman. I guess she sort of kept tabs on me that I wasn't aware of and invited me, actually she invited me to come on the staff. She didn't know about my husband. And when we arrived on the doorstep of the Amalagamated, I said, "Well, I'd love to have this job but there's two of us now, not one," and so they put both of us on, although they don't usually like to put a team on to do organizing. And I must say that they took one salary and divided it in half.(laughter) They really did, the secretary-treasurer of the union said to my husband, "The salary is seventy-five dollars a week."

INTERVIEWER: Was it Frank?

WERTHEIMER: Frank Rosenblum. "The salary is seventy-five dollars a week." And Val said, "But there's two of us." And Frank said, "All right. Well, we'll take the salary and cut it in half. We'll pay each of you thirty dollars a week and ten dollars a week for expenses." And being very young and very innocent--I was twenty and Val was twenty-one at the time--we accepted. Our take home pay was twenty-six dollars and forty cents a week. But we had a great time.

INTERVIEWER: And you lived in Pennsylvania?

WERTHEIMER: We organized first in New York state, then in Pennsylvania. I think, really,very successfully because we were thrown into a very interesting strike situation where before we knew it we were leading a strike of five hundred pantsmakers.

INTERVIWER: Where was this?

WERTHEIMER: In Old Forge, Pennsylvania, near Scranton. It was a very strange situation because we were fighting a racketeering union that also wanted to organize at the same time. We couldn't have been greener or more innocent about the ways of either the labor movement or racketeering unions or anything else, and there we were. One morning we'd get up, for example, with our old car--we had a 1929 Oldsmobile that got us to the picket line and back just barely--and find that the racketeering union had put sugar in the gas tank so that we couldn't get to the picket line with our leaflets. You know, that kind of thing. And we got initiated very quickly. It's a good thing we were young. (laughs)

INTERVIEWER: Well, how did you go about it? I assume that you had no experience in organizing.

WERTHEIMER: You're right. (laughter) Well, the union took a few weeks to indoctrinate us and . . .

INTERVIEWER: Who did it?

WERTHEIMER: They sent us up to Kingston, New York, where a wonderful woman named Mabel Fisher who later married Charlie Garahan talked about the kindergarten that she ran for Amalgamated organizers. Because every time they put new organizers on, they'd send them up to Mabel to be initiated into the ways of organizing. Of course, you use a lot of the experiences with groups that you've had in the past. I'd been editor of a church school newspaper and done a lot of group work, organizational work in college. And so you just use that and you'd transfer your experience and you put out a leaflet. It doesn't take much experience to stand at a shop gate and distribute a leaflet at five in the morning. It takes being able to set the alarm clock. Then it's a matter of also learning about the industry. We got taken through some shops, we learned about the various operations, and got a feel for what was involved. Then you talk to people and you learn to listen, and that's really the key, learning to listen.

INTERVIEWER: And you made house calls, I take it?

WERTHEIMER: Oh yes, night after night.

INTERVIEWER: How did that campaign go?

WERTHEIMER: Which one?

INTERVIEWER: I mean the pants one.

WERTHEIMER: Oh, in Pennsylvania? We won. We got a contract but in the process we managed not to get along too well with the very, very old man who was the manager. He was actually astounded that these two green kids could come in and crank his mimeograph machine and manage to stir up enough activity to have a strike and win it. He got very nervous about us and the only thing that we did really that was clever was to call up and ask for a transfer twenty-four hours before he asked to have us transferred. That was the end of our Scranton experience. We moved then to Williamsport, which was in Pennsylvania but with another joint board. And we spent a year organizing in the Williamsport area, which was a very valuable experience for us, very good.

INTERVIEWER: What sort of shops are there?

WERTHEIMER: Shirt factories and pajama factories, what they call cotton garments.

INTERVIEWER: I guess the Amalgamated had started organizing in the thirties there, in Pennsylvania.

WERTHEIMER: Right.

INTERVIEWER: So that it had been under way for a while.

WERTHEIMER: This was a big joint board we were assigned to that spread all over Pennsylvania but just focused on shirts and sportswear.

INTERVIEWER: And at that point there was still quite a lot of organizing left to be done.

WERTHEIMER: Oh, there still is.

INTERVIEWER: There still is.

WERTHEIMER: Nothing's changed. I'm afraid that's sad but true.

INTERVIEWER: Well, was this in a region where there were coal mines too?

WERTHEIMER: Right. We got to know a lot of miners' families, especially in the Scranton area, got a real feel for some of the terrible problems they face.

INTERVIEWER: Well, were the wives of the miners, and the daughters and so forth, were they the ones who were working in the. . .

WERTHEIMER: In the shirt factories, right.

INTERVIEWER: And did you find that it helped that the mine workers union had been active there too?

WERTHEIMER: Yes, but the Williamsport area isn't a mining region. It was very different in the Williamsport area where they had no union experience and the whole idea was strange to them. It makes you very humble when you organize, because you're really asking people to sign a card that can endanger their livelihood, their jobs. It's a great act of faith in you and what you're telling them, and that what you're telling them is true. It's an experience that I have really never forgotten. You have to keep faith with them. And one of the reasons we left organizing was because the Taft-Hartley Law was passed in 1947, and it became increasingly difficult to organize and to find any kind of favorable reception or quick action on the part of the National Labor Relations Board[NLRB]. You could no longer in good conscience tell people that the law protected their jobs. If they were fired you couldn't take the case and expect to get back pay and so forth, because everything was in great turmoil. It was a very anti-union time. So Val went to law school and I got transferred to New York to the education department of the union.

INTERVIEWER: And how did this happen? Did you request it?

WERTHEIMER: Right, Val applied to Columbia Law School and was accepted and I requested a transfer at the same time. The education director, who had seen some of the material I'd put out.... I'd done some education programs along with the organizing and put out some informational pamphlets for union members.... He'd seen those and I guess thought the chance to get a staff person was one he'd better take while he had it.

INTERVIEWER: Who was the education director at the time?

WERTHEIMER: Bob Levin was education director, a really fine person. But that was at a time when the Amalgamated wasn't sure that it really wanted a full-blown education program, so the budgeting for education was very slim. Getting an extra staff person on wasn't very easy. So when he had the opportunity without a major fight to get a staff person, because there was someone in the field who had asked for a transfer to the national office, and he liked what he'd seen of my work anyway, it worked out well. He was delighted and I was delighted. I got a raise from thirty dollars to fifty dollars a week, on which Val and I started housekeeping in New York City while he went on to law school.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you live then?

WERTHEIMER: We lived in what is now East Harlem, on 96th Street on the east side.

INTERVIEWER: And the education program that you were working on out in the field while you were organizing, what sort of things did you do?

WERTHEIMER: New members' meetings, get to know your union, this is how the union works, this is how you participate in a meeting, this is how you chair a meeting, that kind of thing--very basic stuff for people who are brand new to unionism.

INTERVIEWER: Do organizers do that now?

WERTHEIMER: I'm sure they do; I don't know why not.

INTERVIEWER: Did you find that people were staying organized at that point? I mean once the union was started, did enthusiasm kind of keep up or were you around long enough to really know?

WERTHEIMER: The shops we organized still are in the union, but we didn't always succeed. We found a lot of anti-union maneuvering on the part of the employers. It was very difficult to organize. There were places where we got cards signed but not enough for an election, where we had to leave because it just didn't work out. We didn't win every case.

INTERVIEWER: Were most of them small companies, or were some of them those giant . . .

WERTHEIMER: Fairly small. No, no giant firms. The biggest was that five hundred person shop; the others were smaller, two hundred, a hundred and fifty. But the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union is basically made up of shops that size. The big giant companies are few and far between. It's one of the problems with a union of garment workers in a labor intensive industry. It takes a substantial staff to service; it's expensive to service so many small shops. Business agents travel miles and miles going the rounds outside of the city.

INTERVIEWER: At that time at the Amalgamated, how many people were on the national office education staff?

WERTHEIMER: On the national office staff there was just Bob Levin and me. But he developed a field staff. There were, oh, I don't know, when he left maybe seven or eight field staff people who were based in different regions. And by the time I left the Amalgamated, which wasn't until a number of years later, we had a field staff of about thirteen. At that time when I first came there, the national office really coordinated and initiated the education activities. We did publications for other joint boards. We would initiate summer schools and call the field staff in for conferences, develop course materials and things like that. But essentially the basic work in the different regions is done by field education staff now.

INTERVIEWER: What was your first year in the education department like, what did you do?

WERTHEIMER: I learned a lot. I learned about the union nationally, about the different joint boards, and who was who and what was what. And about the attitudes toward education on the part of the different joint board managers; what would go with one joint board and what wouldn't. I learned a lot about teaching, I really hadn't ever taught a class. I started with public speaking, which is a good beginning class to teach. I was terrified the first time I taught a class. Terrified. I was even more frightened when

WERTHEIMER: another education staff person came and sat in on one of the classes and I knew perfectly well that this was kind of a monitoring to see how I was doing. I was petrified. It takes a while before you stop being a little nervous when you're teaching.

INTERVIEWER: Was this for a local?

WERTHEIMER: This was at a union summer school.

INTERVIEWER: Well, what sort of things were part of the program at that time in the summer schools?

WERTHEIMER: We talked a lot about some of the problems that may still be important at Amalgamated summer schools, problems of the industry. One of the most basic couses was what we called Building the Union, which is still a basic course. It's how you develop union spirit, how you develop new members' programs, how you get committees going and develop activity and participation on the part of the members. We also had courses in public speaking and grievance handling, and the union contract and on union structure, things like that. We always had, or tried to have, foreign unionists at the school who were visiting with one or another program from the U.S. Labor Department or the U.S. State Department. We tried to include something on international affairs as well as legislative issues that unions were really interested in.

INTERVIEWER: Sounds interesting.

WERTHEIMER: Summer schools are great.

INTERVIEWER: The foreign trade unionists thing, I don't think the Amalgamated does that particularly anymore; that sounds good.

WERTHEIMER: In the summer school last summer [1976], the summer school in Northeast that I directed for union women, we had three absolutely fabulous trade union women from abroad. They were the hit of the school. They were really popular and made a great contribution. I think that the idea still has a lot of validity; it opens a lot of new windows for people.

INTERVIEWER: I was talking to Dolly Robinson about the workers' schools that were very big during the twenties and thirties and the classes that the Women's Trade Union League had, in terms of education for women workers in particular. She was telling me that there was really quite a broad sort of program and that they had history, biology, more of that sort of liberal arts kind of approach, I guess you might say. What's your feeling about the value of that in workers' education? I mean, I know that you must be doing some of it here in the Cornell University program.

WERTHEIMER: That's an interesting question. Because it really isn't an either-or. What you would wish, I think, as an educator, is a both-and. The unions themselves, of necessity, have to build stronger unions as one of the goals of labor education. And you can't do everything; you get people for a very brief period of time, they're people who work during the day and they have union obligations as participators, plus their families and homes. So you get them for a very brief period of time if they're willing to come to a class or to a summer school. Then you have to decide, "I have this very brief period of time, what am I going to do with it? What will be of most value? So you have to think, of most value to whom, to the student or to the union? And sometimes those two merge. For example, if you're building a stronger union, you're going to have better grievance procedures and you're going to have the workers get what they're entitled to. That's terribly important: it means money in their pocket, it means job security.

So that's a case where the students' interests and the union's interests really are the same. Whether you could justify saying to the student, "Well, let's teach you something about economics or sociology, not related to the labor movement first, and then we'll worry about the labor unions," I don't think you could justify that if you were a union educator working for a trade union. You can't justify spending the union's money on your salary that way, nor could you get workers really excited about a sociology course that wasn't related to their job or to their union or to their work in some way, their work-life experience. In university labor education, almost the same holds true, but in a little different way. The courses that we run, the short courses that attract union members, are really all very much the kind of courses that they might get from the union. We offer it now because many unions don't. Our short courses are in public speaking, in mathematics of work, in grievance handling, arbitration procedure, negotiating, collective bargaining and the political process. Things which are very basic, but also build the union. Our students are from unions that don't offer those courses. Maybe they can't afford an education director; maybe they don't want to allocate their money in that way. In any event, we fill a gap and that's true of university labor education around the country.

But the other thing that university extension labor programs do is to service individual unions that don't have an education staff and offer the same kinds of programs to these union members that their own education staff would offer if they could afford one. We go into a union and tailor a program to meet that union's needs. We'll offer a course on how your contract, or how grievance procedure works, for example, specifically for a particular union and to that group of students' interests and needs. I think the world was very different when the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers was in operation, or Brookwood. The

WERTHEIMER: courses they offered in English and in sociology, though, according to Hilda Smith, related to workers experiences too. They weren't ever given in isolation. She trained the teachers who taught very carefully to be sure that the courses related to what the workers needed and wanted. You can do that with English or any other course.

Today there's a new dimension in workers' education which is the labor studies credit program. This is a direct outgrowth of the trend towards credentialing and toward needing more and higher credentials for the kinds of jobs that are available, or moving up in your job at all. Or even to do a better job in the union, because so many experts are called in to do various kinds of union work and you need so much more information now. The world is more complicated; collective bargaining is more complex; the laws are more involved. You have to almost be a specialist: you have to know how to read contracts, how to understand a pension agreement, and how to negotiate with firms where, perhaps, you don't have the whole company under contract. There you've got additional problems in negotiating. Anyway, for whatever reason, university labor extension programs are moving into the credit mode, not entirely but in part. That is what probably led you to talk about the kinds of courses that we offer here that are.... Like Labor Explores the Arts, and Science and Technology for Union Workers.

But again, whatever the couse is that gives union workers college credit, and fulfills requirements for a basic set of courses that can be applied to a degree, whatever the course, it is rooted in the worker's experience. So that in introducing workers to the arts, for example the visual and performing arts, it is through plays that have a theme that relates to work experience; poetry and novels that relate to work experience. In Dubious Battle for example, the Steinbeck book. Or other books that describe work life.

Art can also be equally related in terms of what the subject is and also what the artist's life is like. We bring also an appreciation that the people who make art are workers and have unions themselves, and that there are problems connected with careers in the arts. I remember one group of workers once that we took to an open rehearsal of the American Symphony Orchestra. We talked with some of the performers at intermission. Our group was absolutely astounded to find that the musicians worked from concert to concert, that they didn't have a yearly contract and that they might work for one concert and then not work for eight, ten, twelve weeks. They had no way of knowing if they would get called for each succeeding concert that the symphony gave. Their average yearly income was really quite small. The group was amazed to learn about the problems that these artists up on the platform had in connection with being artists that were the problems of all workers. So there's a lot that relates, even a subject that you think of as being rather remote from your job on the assembly line, to art and other subjects like that. It can be done, and it's not forcing the issue, it's just the way it really is.

INTERVIEWER: It seems to me that more of that is probably to the worker's benefit. I don't know if it's necessarily to the union's benefit, perhaps, in terms of making the person a broader person.

WERTHEIMER: Right, and of course not every worker who goes through a labor studies course is going to be a union president or a secretary of a union or a committee chairperson. But if they're a more understanding human being, then when they come to union meetings and discuss issues in collective bargaining, for example, what they want to put on the bargaining table for the next contract, it will be with a greater understanding of what they can ask for, what they can expect to get, and some of the problems and the trade-offs.

We find this is extremely important for women because so often women's issues are the ones that get traded off. When women learn how collective bargaining works, it helps them get onto negotiating committees where they can make sure that their issues are not traded off.

INTERVIEWER: Do you find that the problems that women have as workers.... When you were working for Amalgamated back in the forties . . .

WERTHEIMER: In what my children call the old days.

INTERVIEWER: In the old days, yes. (laughter) Are they any different than the problems that you see the women students have now? Are they bringing [up] different things?

WERTHEIMER: (pause) I'll have to think about that for a while. One of the things that's different and at the same time the same is the responsibility that women carry. They're very much the same; heavy home responsibilities plus job, plus union involvement. I think it's different in Pennsylvania and New York, too. New York City is really not typical of the country, that's one thing we've learned. Among our students we have a much higher proportion of women who are heads of families, supporting their familes alone. And in Pennsylvania there are a lot more married women. We found in our survey that we did in 1972 and 1973 that in New York, there is a much higher proportion than the national average of women who are single heads of families. Women who really do carry the responsibilities alone. On the other hand, there are in our own Trade Union Women's Studies a number of women who have been made more aware--I guess because of the women's movement and all that publicity that women have been getting now--more aware of their rights, and women who indicate that they do share a lot of the work load with their husbands. In effect they don't take a back seat any more. I don't think we would have heard that kind of

WERTHEIMER: talk very much in Pennsylvania in 1946. The women just did two jobs and that was it; they expected to and they didn't complain.

INTERVIEWER: Do you see a change in ambition and expectations?

WERTHEIMER: I think yes, but I have to amend that a little because the women we get in our program are self-selective. We said to them once, "All of you are active in your unions, you have full time jobs, you have homes, you have children and most of you take full responsibility for that. And you're going to meetings during the week for your union and now you're coming to school one night a week and doing homework two hours for every hour you spend in class. How do you do it? Something has to give." And we found out what gave: what gave was sleep. The women in our class averaged four and a half to six and a half hours sleep a night. None of them got any more. That is a very challenging kind of student to have. Because if they're willing to give up so much then you've got to produce a really fine program that is worthy of their sacrifice. We have tried very hard to do that in the Cornell Institute on Women and Work, but we do lose people by the wayside. There are women who have problems with their children and have to spend more time at home, or women who get sick and have to drop out, or women who just can't manage to do everything and go to school too. But we try to do as much as we can to keep as many as we can going, because they really do want so desperately to do this.

INTERVIEWER: What are the statistics, I mean, are many more people being reached through this sort of labor program now?

WERTHEIMER: When you say this sort of labor program, what do you have in mind?

INTERVIEWER: I mean Cornell workers, I mean the labor extension division.

WERTHEIMER: A lot of workers are being reached, the number of programs has grown rapidly. Right after the war there were somewhere between fifteen and twenty state university labor extension programs around the country. Now there must be forty-five. They have really grown a lot. Of course, as each state uses its state university system for a labor extension program it serves more than just its immediate area. It is usually a state-wide operation so that it serves unions all around the state in different centers. For example, Cornell, which has its headquarters in Ithica--known as the most centrally located isolated spot in the state of New York--would not be able to do much extension work right there. But it has seven district offices around the state so that the state is pretty well covered by extension services for trade unions and union members. That's one of the bigger operations in the country. Most other state university programs also operate out of regional offices: Pennsylvania, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, for example.

INTERVIEWER: Who pays for it?

WERTHEIMER: A lot of it is paid for with tax money, state education funds, state tax money. And the union members and unions pay modest charges, although these don't cover the cost. If we run a program for a labor union, we charge maybe ten dollars a night to that union, which is a nominal charge. We might have twenty students in a class or twenty-five students and then our program pays for the cost of the teacher and all the developmental time, everything like that. The union would pay for a six-session course perhaps sixty dollars. Other states may charge more. Sometimes if the union has used our services a lot and can afford it, we ask it to pay us what it costs us to pay the teacher, but that's about it. It's a way, even though our budget is very small, that workers get a little bit of their education tax dollars back. It's nowhere near what is spent on the agricultural extension service, which gets millions and millions of dollars. That's one reason that unions and universities are interested in getting Congress to pass a National Labor Extension bill so that federal money would be allocated for worker education in a way similar to the agricultural extension program for the farmers.

INTERVIEWER: Was there sort of a gap in between some of the workers' schools of the thirties and the growth of the extension program in labor studies?

WERTHEIMER: Yes. Actually, it's an interesting story that has been written up a number of times. The workers' schools gradually were hit by the depression and folded. As unions grew in the thirties they got more and more interested in their own education as kind of an adjunct to organizing. The Worker's Education Bureau, which was part of the American Federation of Labor [AF of L] handled education programs for the AF of L and then when the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] was formed in the thirties it developed its own education program as did most of the new industrial unions. That was a period when the workers' schools not only had financial problems because of the depression but also began to fade out because labor's focus was on organizing and on education only as an arm to organizing. During World War II, of course, there wasn't a great deal of money. I should say, however, that during the thirties the WPA [Works Progress Administration] had a very good worker's education program, especially in the days before the CIO. Hilda Smith headed that program and trained more than 8,000 unemployed teachers to teach workers. There were one million workers who went through free education programs as part of the whole anti-depression program of the New Deal. That phased out in 1943. During the war, relatively little attention was paid by the universities to labor education programs. What programs there were related to workers on war jobs. After the war, universities really began to develop labor extension programs and unions began to develop their own education departments. There was a renaissance of interest in workers' education.

INTERVIEWER: As far as your education work went at the Amalgamated, how long did you continue doing that?

WERTHEIMER: I was there as Associate Education Director and then I became Acting National Education Director for a period of years. In 1953 I went on half-time instead of full-time ,because that was when my first child was born. From 1953 to 1958, I was on the education staff as Associate Education Director, again on a half-time basis.

INTERVIEWER: And then when did you leave the Amalgamated?

WERTHEIMER: In 1958.

INTERVIEWR: And when did you become involved at Cornell?

WERTHEIMER: About 1966.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do in between?

WERTHEIMER: In 1958 I got a one year leadership training grant from the Fund for Adult Education to finish my Master's degree. I had been going to school at night on a part-time basis, but I wanted to write a thesis. The grant enabled me to stay home and work on my thesis. Then I worked for a short period of time for the American Labor Education Service--directed by Eleanor Coit who died recently--as a consultant and a writer. Next I went to work as a Community Services Consultant for the New York State Division of Housing and Community Renewal. I worked there for six years doing leadership training work with new cooperators who were moving into middle-income cooperative housing and who had no previous experience in how to run a large cooperative housing development. The State Division of Housing developed a program to train different resident committees and the boards of directors of these housing developments. I worked with Clara Fox, who was the person who really initiated the whole idea of leadership training for these boards. I worked with her for six years.

INTERVIEWER: Is this when you moved into the co-op or did that come after?

WERTHEIMER: No, we had moved into the co-op in 1955.

INTERVIEWER: So you were familiar with it.

WERTHEIMER: I knew a little about what a co-op was all about. Actually, the leadership training work that I did was a transfer of skills that I had developed in the Amalgamated. The client group was different but the training was similar: how committees work, how you put out a newspaper, how you develop an education committee and what a committee like that should do, and how you run a conference and that sort of thing.

INTERVIEWER: Did you enjoy having some diversity, I mean, in doing other things after working in the education department for a union?

WERTHEIMER: Yes, I did.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think it's important to do a lot of different things during one's lifetime?

WERTHEIMER: Yes, I do. (laughter) I think it's great.

INTERVIEWER: How much were you able to do in the education department? I mean, did you feel that some limits were set by funding and political realities?

WERTHEIMER: Yes, but I think that I was able to do a lot. I was able, as Acting National Education Director, to put new staff people on. I was sent by the CIO to represent the United States at the first UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organization] Labor Education Conference in France in 1952. I traveled to various regions, conducted summer schools, held staff meetings, and put out publications. But there were some pretty stringent budget limitations at that time. Every new idea that you had, you had to sell before you could go ahead and do it. But a lot of the time, it seems to me, we were able to sell the ideas although we really couldn't do everything we wanted to.

INTERVIEWER: Who did you have to sell them to?

WERTHEIMER: The top officers of the union.

INTERVIEWER: Did one or the other take a greater role?

WERTHEIMER: The secretary-treasurer had a lot to say because [it was] he who watched over the budget. When you're in workers' education you always think, "Wouldn't it be great if the union had a major commitment to labor education? Look at all these marvelous things we could do." And the reality is that there are lots of other demands on the time, the interest and the funds of the union. So that I wouldn't say that education was the overriding interest of the union, when I was there at least.

INTERVIEWER: Where did the staff people come from? I mean if you were, you must have hired staff people. What sorts of qualities did you look for in terms of people?

WERTHEIMER: Well, some of the people I hired are still very much around. One of them was Joyce Miller whom I put in the Pittsburgh area and helped to train as Pittsburgh Educational Director. And another person whom I worked with and helped to train is now at Penn State doing labor education. And I worked with people who are very much around now, like Bill and Mary Elkuss whom I put out in Chicago as Midwest Regional Education Driector. He was very experienced in labor education at the time so I was not in any sense training him, but he was somebody who has stayed with the Amalagamated. I guess you look for a dedication, first of all,

WERTHEIMER: to unions and to workers, and you want people with a faith that workers can respond to the kind of training that you are going to present, and staff who will learn what workers want and what will mean the most to them, and will give it to them in a form that they will find useful. I think labor educators have to be generalists really, they have to understand the situation, see what needs to be done and then design a program that will do it. They have to be flexible, and inventive and creative; these are qualities that you can have in many walks of life and transfer to labor education. You can learn about how a union works and you can learn about how a shirt is put together; but if you don't have this sort of innate sensitivity to people and a real dedication to what you're doing, I don't think you can succeed. I guess that's what you really look for first when you're hiring somebody.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any people who came out of the shop who got further education and training and wanted to do education work?

WERTHEIMER: I'm just trying to think. Of course, most of the leaders in the union come out of the shop, and there are a lot of people that I work with today who are union people that we have trained as teachers. In fact, we're holding a two-day teacher development conference next week which is designed especially for unionists whom we use as teachers and who are very eager to learn more about how to be a good teacher. They're coming in from all over the state to attend it. I do have great interest in having union people, as an added dimension to their own careers, do some teaching. They have the experience to bring to it, the practical know how and the ability to communicate this. They make awfully good teachers.

INTERVIEWER: I think that they would almost need an avenue such as you're offering in order to be able to do that.

WERTHEIMER: Dolly Lowther Robinson is a good example of someone who came from the ranks and was on the education staff of the Laundry Workers at the time that I first came to the Amalgamated. She has done a great many interesting things since, too.

May 3, 1977

INTERVIEWER: I'd like to ask you about your dissertation which you were working on in 1960.

WERTHEIMER: My Master's degree in adult education at New York University involved writing a dissertation which was actually a blueprint for union-community cooperation in developing neighborhood networks to put the union forward as a prime mover and sponsor of involving people in the community, in helping them to a better community life. The design of the blueprint was also to improve the public image of unions and to extend the concept of worker's education, using the union as the initiator. It was a plan for developing an outreach on a neighborhood-by-neighborhood basis

WERTHEIMER: so that the people who lived in the neighborhood would realize that unions were interested in more than just bettering the wages and working conditions of their members but also were interested in their members' families and in the whole community. And that this was a very important aspect of what unions in America were all about. I did do some writing based on that dissertation afterwards, some articles that appeared in Adult Leadership and other publications, but what's interesting to me today, Betty, is that I hear from a number of union leaders from different parts of the country that some of what I had been thinking about, and I suppose in a way dreaming about, that unions might undertake, is actually something they are now thinking about undertaking. I take no credit for the changing on this, nobody has looked at that dissertation at the NYU library, I'm sure. But it means that workers' education and all the things that people in the field have been working toward may be bearing some fruit, I don't know.

I certainly feel that the plight of cities today could be helped by unions going into neighborhoods with a focus like this, and some unions, of course, have made quite a reputation for themselves by doing just that. The Hotel Trades in New York City, for example, has neighborhood centers around the city, and other unions, and the Community Services program of the AFL-CIO to some extent, has this in mind. I still think that it's a good idea. But after that year when I was not actually in the work force but writing the dissertation, I did some work for the American Labor Education Service as a consultant, doing a little writing. And then I spent six years with the New York State Division of Housing and Community Renewal, and then came back to workers' education, but this time [via] the university route. I took a job as a labor program specialist at the Cornell School of Industrial and Labor Relations here in New York City. I have enjoyed the eleven years that I've been here more than I can say. It has been a marvelous chance under the leadership of a terrific person, Lois Gray, to really stretch my mind. It has been an opportunity for every person who has worked on the staff to develop ideas, to sort of take a ball and run with it. We have been encouraged by Lois and helped when we need it. She has realized that the best way to expand the ILR Extension Program is to pull together a staff of lively, creative, interested people. Her staff represents that belief, and I don't think she's been proved wrong. One of the things I was able to do, in addition to the work with trade unions around the city developing programs to meet their particular needs in steward training or collective bargaining courses or other kinds of leadership training, was to take a particular idea that interested me at the moment and see just what could be done with it. And as I look back on my work in labor education, I think this is really the way that I've worked all of those years. For example, I developed a course called Labor Explores the Arts, which was for trade union members to try and take advantage of what was free or low cost in the city of New York and to introduce workers to the visual and performing

WERTHEIMER: arts. It gave them, in addition, the knowledge of where to go after they got interested through the course, to continue to explore their own interest in it. In order to do this, we ran some courses that were on that subject and I found a couple of really gifted women who were good teachers. We introduced workers to literature, poetry, drama, music, dance, museums, and we did it not only in the classroom but by taking them to the theater or to a concert or whatever. Then we ran a training program for leaders of education programs around the city; particularly women and men who were working with retired workers to show them how to use the material we'd developed, and run programs of their own.

And just to be sure that what we had learned wasn't totally lost for the future as I moved on to something else, I developed this handbook called Exploring the Arts. It was published with the help of a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts and is now used rather widely by people around the country who want to plan such programs. It involves the students in the planning process, in the carrying it out, and becoming a program that can develop leadership on the part of the participants. Even though it was published years ago, I'm interested that every now and then I still get a request through the mail from some library or some museum or some program somewhere in the country, asking for a copy of this handbook. The course itself is a permanent part now of our Labor Studies college credit program. It's called Labor Explores the Arts, and it's one of the most popular courses.

Based on the work I did in that program I got interested in the whole question of retired union members and what could be done to develop programs for retirees. I developed a consumer counselling program for retired workers, so that specially chosen members of retiree programs from unions around the city could get training through a special course I developed on how to be a consumer counsellor to other retired unionists. Again, I developed a handbook that I wrote for the course and for consumer counsellors, which gave them information that they needed, resources to use, and material from a lot of different services, organizations and agencies around the city. I got a small grant from the New York City Office on the Aging to publish that handbook, which is now out of print--even though we still get requests for it. But that was another attempt--as I look back on the way I tend to work--another attempt to institutionalize or to make permanent some of what had been learned in the process of running a particular kind of program, so that it wasn't lost, and to leave in the wake of each program a how-to-do-it manual.

Based on my interest in retirees, I got involved in pre-retirement, and how you prepare people for retirement. Getting acquainted with some of the problems of retirement made me realize that you have to prepare a long time before you retire, if you're going to deal with it and all the problems that it brings to you, adequately. So we developed a series of pre-retirement programs that we did for unions around the city and in Long Island. One of the programs,

WERTHEIMER: and that was so many years ago, but one of the programs is still going on on a regular basis with the International Association of Machinists [IAM], who got the company to pay half the cost of released time for people about to retire so they could really be sure that everyone who was going to retire would come to the course. It began about an hour before work was over so that the worker gave part of the time and the company footed part of the bill. Well, out of that program, I developed on the request of the IAM a handbook on running a pre-retirement series with an outline of the materials that would be used and the kinds of things that should be discussed, and how the discussion leaders should handle the discussion. And after the IAM published that and distributed it around the country, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers [IBEW] took the same handbook and put their own cover on it and published it for their unions to use. I mention this only because it's only another example of how I think I've worked over the years, not that it has any special elements. I'm just.... Looking back makes me realize that one does develop one's own sort of style of operating, and my style seems to be to leave something; and, again I left this pre-retirement pamphlet in place and went on to develop.... I guess the next thing was the Trade Union Women's Program.

INTERVIEWER: How did that start?

WERTHEIMER: One of the ways it started was that we began to offer courses for women union leaders in the city, without any thought of a long-term program but just to see whether there was an interest in this kind of a program. That was about 1970, I guess, so the women's movement had had a few years to make some impact on labor union women too. We were really interested at the response. A lot of women came to these classes, to grievance handling for women and courses in public speaking and in women's role in labor history, putting women into the picture. Working Women and the Law was a very popular course. Every course attracted some women who held various leadership roles, but women never had the key leadership role in any of the unions, with perhaps one or two exceptions. I really began to wonder about why. At first I thought: "My goodness, if you sit down and you think about why women aren't in the leadership positions, you can answer that question. There is the usual discrimination and attitudes toward women moving up; or the fact that men have always had these jobs and don't want to share them with women. But there must be more to it than that, and wouldn't it be interesting to find out in detail what really did hold women back?" Was it simply the attitudes of men or were there other things? One could hypothesize and say of course there are other things: home and family responsibilites, and in the city women don't like to go out at night, and you can name a host of reasons. But we didn't have any hard data, we couldn't <u>prove</u> what was the most important reason, the next most important, or whether, indeed,

WERTHEIMER: we were right about it. So I went to the Ford Foundation with a grant proposal to study the barriers to the participation of women in labor unions. They funded the study, which was a year long research effort. I was very fortunate in persuading Anne Nelson to join me in doing this. She became associate director of the project and we've worked together ever since 1972. The year long project resulted in a book called Trade Union Women: A Study of Their Participation in New York City Locals, published by Praeger in 1975.

First of all, in an overview questionnaire, we examined about a hundred and ten local unions in the city that had a substantial number of women members, to find out what the general attitude of the key officer of each union was in terms of women's participation. What percentage of women were stewards, other leaders, and what percentage of women were on the staff; how did the officers feel about women's roles; were they more active or less active than men and why did the officers believe that was the case? Then we moved on to look at seven local unions in depth. Those seven union unions represented a cross section of unions in New York City, mostly blue collar workers, only one would be what you'd call white collar, that was a sales local. We included NYC [New York City] government workers, with District Council 37 represented, but a blue collar local, the night cleaning people who are called custodial assistants. We had retail food store employees and one local of the Ladies Garment Workers. We had members of the New York Metro Area Postal Union.

Altogether seven unions participated. Our findings broke into three categories; the barriers that were social, societal-personal in nature; job related barriers; and union-related barriers. What we found was that the barriers that we had hypothesized such as family and home responsibilities did hold women back, but they also held men back though not as much. In most of the unions the survey included men as well as women. There were a couple of unions that were overwhelmingly female where we didn't have enough men responding to make it statistically reliable.

While some of the same barriers did hold men back as well as women, other barriers were ones we really hadn't expected to be as important or as strong as they were. For example, we found that women really wanted information, and particularly wanted to know why it was important to the union to have them active. They really didn't see a role for themselves. We found that they lacked self-confidence and they felt a lack of competency, and that they wanted encouragement as well as recognition for the roles that they were playing because many of them were already very active. Most of all they wanted education and leadership training in order to equip them to be more active and effective in the union. They wanted it more than the men did, and minority women wanted it most of all. So based on our findings, of which this is just a very brief summary, we developed a program which we called Trade Union Women's Studies and went back to the Ford Foundation for funding to put this program into place.

WERTHEIMER: We developed, first of all, short courses that were like tickler courses to get women interested, to show them that they could do this kind of work. These courses were on very specific subjects, special material [was] prepared on those subjects because we found there really was nothing for union women as women, as well as as unionists. So now we have a whole set of courses and materials on subjects like grievance handling for women, mathematics of work, public speaking for union women, women in American labor history, and similar courses on specific subjects.

The next year we went into a year-long credit program which developed as a parallel or alternate first year to the Labor/ Liberal Arts Program that Cornell's School of Industrial Labor Relations, Extension Division, had been working on for the last few years, a two year program that carried college credit with it. So the women in our program spend a year studying with other women and then move on to the second year of that Labor/ Liberal Arts Program where they get full credit for the year with us, do a second year if they want to move on--most of them do--and then they can take eighteen Cornell credits to any college that they want and work towards a degree. Many of them go on to study here in the Labor Division of Empire State College because that's a labor studies program, but they don't have to.

Now we are in the process, at the end of our fourth year of operating this credit program, of pulling together material in a longitudinal survey to see what impact the program has had on the students who have been through it. One of the interesting things we've found, and I don't have all the data collected yet, is that in their second year, in the Labor Liberal Arts Program--where our women go after the year with us--when we monitored the class participation of the women, it turned out that our former students participated more than twice as often in class than women who have not been through Trade Union Women's Studies. If nothing else, we have at least succeeded in boosting their self-confidence and their own feelings of competency to participate when they are in a miniority, since most of the classes we monitored still had a majority of men in them.

We also found that our program has helped to integrate the Labor/Liberal Arts Program. Last year for the first time the graduating class was half women, and half of those were women who'd been through our program. We feel that in that sense we have been fulfilling one of the goals of our program, which was to help women fulfill their own educational goals. Often women put those on the back burner, and only when they get to be middle-aged and their children are older are they ready to begin to think about themselves and about what they want to do in terms of their own education. We are also analyzing where women are in the leadership of their unions after they have had a chance to complete our program.

WERTHEIMER: I should mention the courses that the women take in the program. In the first term they take Written Communications and Study Skills, which is paired with a content course, Women in Labor History. The second term they take Oral Communications and Logic, paired with a course on Union Organization and Administration. This tries to bring women into the organization and administration of unions and discusses some of the women's issues that need to come to the bargaining table or [be] taken up as grievances. The third term includes a course on collective bargaining, paired with a course called Social Behavior and Work, subtitled The Psychology of Leadership. In that final course we try to pull everything together and talk about what you do if you want to move up in the leadership of your union. We're curious to see what the results are going to be in this longitudinal survey that we're doing, to see where women have moved in their unions and personally.

INTERVIEWER: When do you plan to complete it?

WERTHEIMER: It will be done this summer. We have a number of individual stories of what women have done. They've moved into staff positions, they've moved into elected offices in their unions, they edit union newspapers. I got a call today from someone who just received an award from the National Council of Negro Women on her community achievement, and she's one of our graduates who has been increasingly active. We are immensely proud of the women who have come through the program. They are marvelous women, highly motivated. That is another aspect of Trade Union Women's Studies. But again, we don't like to just do programming and not leave in place the how-to-do-it kind of documents.

When Anne and I wrote up the barriers study, it included enough how-to-do-it material so that the study has been replicated in New Zealand and could be replicated by others. It also has been done in West Germany and England. In addition, we're now working on some other projects in connection with Trade Union Women's Studies that should widen the range of women who are able to take advantage of it. We expect shortly to become an Institute, approved by the faculty of The School of Industrial and Labor Relations [ILR], of Cornell University. We will be the Institute for Education and Research on Women and Work.[1] As part of our growing program we now are studying women's use of Tuition Aid under collectively-bargained labor-management agreements. There are a number of tuition reimbursement programs where workers can go back to school part-time, but very few people, maybe four percent of those who are eligible, take advantage of that money. There is a national study which the National Institute of Education is sponsoring, to determine why more workers don't utilize Tuition Aid. We're doing a much smaller study in three different situations in New York state,

[1]The Institute was unanimously voted into being May 13, 1977.

WERTHEIMER: to determine particularly why women don't take advantage of it. That study will be ready at the end of September; we hope to learn a great deal.

In addition, we plan to design a program which we hope to get funded, to try to do something in one of the situations to overcome the barriers that we uncover, and to enable more women to take advantage of this tuition aid, particularly because it's the route now to moving up the job ladder. And women, as you know, are so clustered in the sex-stereotyped, ghetto jobs that without some way of helping them move up, they are likely to stay there. With so many women today heading families, they need the extra money that moving out of that ghetto job would provide. It might be into a blue collar skilled job, or a job up the ladder in her present occupation, but it is essential to them.

Then we have another program that is new for us, to take what we have learned in the Trade Union Women's Studies, and develop a year-long package for working women who may not necessarily be union members and to use a re-developed year-long program to build somewhat different skills. These would help women move up the job ladder, a Career Development Women's Studies. We're working under a special grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York with State Civil Service Workers in Albany and with clerical workers in Westchester to develop this year-long package that is very job-related and career-oriented rather than union leadership oriented.

INTERVIEWER: Are there clerical workers at one particular place?

WERTHEIMER: There are a number of headquarters of big corporations in Westchester. And those headquarters are primarily clerical workers and workers in computer centers. The blue collar production centers are not located in Westchester, they may be scattered all over the country. For a pilot project you have to take it somewhere where there are enough workers to serve as a recruitment pool; not everybody wants to take a special program at night and devote the time and effort and the out-of-classroom hours to doing homework and preparing. So in order to recruit successfully you need enough workers from which to draw.

We're discovering that there is a lot of interest. The problem may be one of how to select rather than whether you can recruit enough. There also is a concern on the part of the companies where we're working that we're going to be innundated with applications. Since this is such a difficult time in the employment field, companies can't offer much to many of those who might want to move up. So companies have a problem of selection, too, and that's one of the problems we don't have an answer for.

WERTHEIMER: Another area in which we work is to offer conferences on specific problems and issues that concern women. We're discovering that we can be of service to specific groups, to bring them together, to meet each other, to learn to work with each other and establish a network that will help them in the future. Not long ago we had a conference for Women as Third Party Neutrals, women who want to be mediators, or factfinders, or arbitrators, on the question of gaining acceptability. To our surprise we found a hundred and ten absolutely marvelous women who came out on a Saturday for this program. Twenty-five of this group will be joining a special training program which the ILR School will work out with the American Arbitration Association, who co-sponsored the Women as Third Party Neutrals conference with us.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you get the women, from what sort of backgrounds?

WERTHEIMER: They were recruited through Schools of Industrial and Labor Relations, through law schools, through unions, through union staff. Some graduates of Trade Union Women's Studies came, and women who already were in one aspect of the field or another. For example, women who were mediators and wanted to learn about how to get into arbitration, or women who were factfinders and wanted to think about other aspects of neutral work. One of the interesting parts of the program was a discussion of some of the new opportunities for neutrals opening up, such as prison arbitration, community dispute settlements, and family dispute settlements. These are areas that you don't think of traditional work of arbitrators or neutrals, but which are developing as important fields where these skills are needed. The prison arbitration for example, really started only after the Attica prison riot.[1] Now it's being recognized that prisoners do need an avenue for getting their grievances aired and having an impartial person to say what obligations the prison has to the prisoner. While this is a growing field, it doesn't pay, which is one problem. You have to be established in another area that lets you do this as your public service work. But community dispute settlement does pay, and so do some of the other kinds of dispute settlement.

Very shortly we will conduct a conference for women executives in New York state government. These women want to reach out to each other and work more in conjunction and support each other. Each one of them has arrived at her rather top position through quite independent routes, most often because of political savvy and expertise as well as their subject matter competency. This is another exciting way to bring working women together at different levels, for different kinds of problem discussions. But always behind everything, there is the need to relate to

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[1] Riots at the New York, Attica State Prison, September, 1972.

WERTHEIMER: other women who are going through the same sorts of struggles, to find mutual support in doing that. Our working women's program has, for Anne and for me, been extremely satisfying and resulted in a great deal of growth on our part. We learn so much every day, it seems. We're in touch with union and university women all over the country who are working in this field. Anne was important in an international seminar that was conducted in Israel in December of 1975 in conjunction with International Women's Year. It brought together union women from about seventeen different countries for ten days of discussions, talk, really a very important point in her career and her experience as it was for the other women who were there, too.

INTERVIEWER: Has the program been supported almost entirely by grant funding from various sources?

WERTHEIMER: It has been, although Cornell ILR School gradually is picking up some of the cost. I would say that in the coming year they will probably contribute somewhere between thirty to forty percent of the total cost. And I think they will pick up increasing amounts of it because it's a program that is really not separate and apart from the ongoing labor program that Cornell ILR has all around the state. The school reaches out to workers, and women are workers too. What we're really interested in insuring is the ongoing nature of the program, that is, having it accepted as part of the labor program, an important part. Statistics show that very soon women will be fifty percent of the work force. So actually we shouldn't always be a special program, we really should be part of the regular labor program. We should be entitled, as fifty percent of the work force, to fifty percent of the extension funds that are devoted to labor programs, and women should be part of all those programs.

INTERVIEWER: I was just wondering.... The first program of the regular Cornell degree for the, not on campus liberal arts, but the regular degree program for workers, how does it differ from what you do in the first year of the program that you have for women?

WERTHEIMER: It's a college credit program, it's not a degree program. I want to make that clear because the labor studies program is part-time at night. The student who's gone through two years of it earns eighteen college credits. Cornell does not offer an undergraduate degree off campus. The program titles of the Trade Union Women's Studies courses, however, are very similar and parallel the first year of the Labor/Liberal Arts program for men and women. But the content is different because we approach these subjects from the point of view

WERTHEIMER: of union women. That is, union members who are women. For example, our labor history course really is Women in American Labor History, and that is mind blowing for students. They have never learned in their own high school courses or even in any other labor courses what contribution women made to American labor history. That's a very exciting course; you could call it consciousness raising, you could call it esteem building. It's what Black Studies and Black History has done for minorities, that is what we do for women. They stand so much taller at the end of that term when they know that women really made a contribution all down the years.

We do the same thing in Oral Communications, in fact in all of the courses. One reason we had to write our own materials for every single course was that the course materials that usually are used refer to all the key figures as "he." The steward, "he," the negotiator, "he," the arbitrator, "he," the union president, "he." We had to change all of that so it either read "he or she" or "she." In Oral Communications there is one session on introducing a guest speaker in your union. The students read a number of biographical pieces in their manual and choose someone to introduce. All the guest speakers that the students choose from are women. And in the process of introducing one of these women "speakers" they learn about all these women who have done interesting, outstanding things. For example, they might choose to introduce Lillian Roberts who is Associate Director of District Council 37, and there will be biographical material about her. Or Ida Klaus, an outstanding labor arbitrator and one-time solicitor of the NLRB [National Labor Relations Board]. But, in addition, they also get the idea "Why shouldn't we have more women speak at our union meetings? Why are the guest speakers almost always men?" And so they take that idea back to their unions. In many ways, each of the courses puts women workers into the program. We talk about the statistics of where women are in union administration, how many top union leaders are women. Why do you have a union that is eighty percent women with one vice-president who's a woman? We discuss it from the standpoint of what has to happen before you can earn your way up the leadership ladder. When they go into the Social Behavior and Work course they're ready to discuss the whole psychology of leadership. In Collective Bargaining we put into the collective bargaining game women's issues as well as wages and hours. We talk about why these are traded off so often, what you have to do if you want to see that they're not. How do you get on a negotiating committee. What's the role of the negotiating committee; what role do women usually play?

One of the things we found in our study was that women most often play the role of helper, which is the traditional female role. This is the role as mother, as nurturer, as homemaker, and that's the role, when she comes to be active in the union, that the union assigns her willy nilly. She has accepted it

WERTHEIMER: willingly in the past. But we find this isn't true anymore. Partly because of the women's movement, partly because there are so many women in the work force now that they reinforce each other, and partly because of the impact of equal rights legislation on women and the idea that they should have equal pay and equal job opportunities.... All these things are impacting on women and changing their attitudes about themselves and their roles.

But then you have kind of a time lag. These are also women who have been indoctrinated by society, as all of us have, and you have to overcome that indoctrination. We all feel it. In so many things, in little ways and in big ways, we take on what society expects us to do. It's hard to change and it's always hard for people around us to accept that change. That's the other thing we have to talk about with the women. What happens when you feel differently about yourself but you're dealing with the same officers in the union, the same stewards, or the same people who work around you.... They haven't been through this change, they don't feel differently about you; how do you handle it, what do you do? That's some of the things that we talk about. It's part of what makes our program different.

INTERVIEWER: Have you had any sort of conferences for male union leaders and how to deal with this rising wave?

WERTHEIMER: We've never excluded men from our conferences and we've always had a few men attend. We probably should be doing more of that. We're talking about developing a conference or program for men about women. Maybe we will get to it at some point. One way we're trying to get at it is through our work with the University and College Labor Education Association [UCLEA]. We began a task force on programs for union women.[1] And at every UCLEA regional meeting we try to run a program that deals in one way or another with programming for union women. One program that we ran was about men, women and unions. It tried to deal with attitudes that people who program for women or the women themselves have to face if they try to move themselves forward in the union, or want to develop education programs for women, or attempt in some special way to help women move up. Although most of the members of the UCLEA are men, more women are coming into the field of worker's education. But until very recently it was overwhelmingly male. Now I'd say it was about 60-40 or 70-30. Still, women are the minority. But we have been interested in noting the attitude of men in university labor education to the women in the field and toward programming for women. There are a few men in the field who are good on working women's issues and programs, but you can count them on the fingers of maybe two hands. In this profession of worker's education, you really have to understand that it's necessary to reach out specially for women, to plan programs that will give them that special boost, that

[1] Now a permanent standing committee of UCLEA.

WERTHEIMER: special encouragement that they need. But some of the men in workers' education still make the traditional cracks and jokes about women and don't take programming for women seriously, which is very strange since worker's education was founded by women, and all through its history there have been outstanding women workers' education specialists, from the Women's Trade Union League [WTUL] to Hilda Smith, to Esther Peterson and people like that, to Eleanor Coit and others like Orlie Pell, to name only a few of these wonderful people. I hope most of them are on tape with the oral history project.

INTERVIEWER: Orlie Pell was on our mailing list, I never knew who she was, that's interesting.

WERTHEIMER: She's one of the ones who did a lot with white collar workers in the thirties and forties. Many of these women came out of the Industrial Program of the YWCA [Young Woman's Christian Assoc.]; which in itself was a program for women workers. But back to the UCLEA. We have had to contend over the last few years--since the task force on programs for women was established--with unpleasant, snide remarks by some of the men in the field. Gradually they have come to respect the women at the UCLEA meetings. I don't say that we're winning them all over, but it gets easier every time we meet, so that's encouraging.

INTERVIEWER: How about your relations with unions in New York City, just in terms of setting up the program initially and dealing with it on a day to day level?

WERTHEIMER: We have a labor advisory committee that meets once or twice a year and we can count on a number of unions for support of our program. They send their women members and stewards and leaders to the program and pay part of their tuition. The Advisory Committee is always there when we need it, if we want to go and talk to them. We have run a number of in-service-programs in their unions for women members. One of the most successful we've been running lately is a course called Women and the Political Process, which is on union women in politics. It has been designed not only to give women information about the poltical process and how they can participate in it, but to prepare them to do a lot more than the traditional pouring of coffee or distributing of handbills. It has been designed to involve women in the core, in the center of the union's political action programs.

We've done other courses that unions have wanted us to do for their own unions. There is one on women and the work force, which is a union women's issue course that includes statistics and background on women moving into the work force, and some of the laws that apply specifically to women and minorities. It's been a process of gradually growing acceptance and growing cooperation. Of course Cornell has a history of twenty-eight years of labor extension work in New York city and is highly respected. That has helped us a great deal.

INTERVIEWER: And the unions that have been supportive, do they tend to be unions with a large number of female members?

WERTHEIMER: Yes. Not all the unions with a lot of women are particularly interested in our program, but the ones by and large that work closely with us have a large number, although not an overwhelming number, of women.

INTERVIEWER: The book that you just did on women in labor history, that sort of came about in the same way that some of your other things did, I assume.

WERTHEIMER: It did, really. I had been talking about women in labor history at conferences in different parts of the country and I really believe that history should pull from the fire of the past rather than the ashes. I tried to convey some of my findings about women's roles when I have spoken about it. As a result I have always had questions after I spoke like: "Where can we find more information? We never learned this in school, we never knew these things," and, "There must be more material about it, we'd like to look at it." I found myself ticking off on my fingers, "Well, there's three chapters in this book that are very good, there's a chapter in that book, and there's an article in this magazine that came out...." I realized that there really wasn't any one place where all of this wonderful material was pulled together. So I made the rash promise to a group one time that maybe there should be a history of working women that pulled it all together; I said I would try to write it. And that was almost the end of me. But after several years I got the manuscript ready and it has just come out. It's called We Were There: The Story of Working Women In America, published by Pantheon. It does serve a useful purpose for our own Women in Labor History class, it provides a readable textbook. It just came out (1977). We pulled copies from the bindery for our spring term students even before publication date so that they could have copies for this term. I'm finding that they read it, that they are enjoying it. Not only do they come up and tell me about it, because I'm sitting in on some of the classes as I always do, even though I'm not teaching the course.... But they are participating in the class discussion in a way that indicates that they really have read it--they weren't just telling me that they were reading it. That's really whom I wrote it for. If it's useful in Women's Studies and other college programs, and if other people enjoy it, that's great. But I really had trade union and working women in mind when I wrote it, and I hope that those women will find something in it that they can enjoy and relate to, and find their roots.

INTERVIEWER: It really seems that in worker's education in general as in this special program for women, history is sort of the key element. I mean people getting in touch with their roots, and if they do that it sort of gives them something that can push them on to other things.

WERTHEIMER: That's a very interesting comment Bette, and I think it's true. I'm not sure that we haven't benefited also without knowing it, from all the excitement about the Bicentennial. Because before that when you said history to somebody, they'd go "Uggh," you know, "that's dry stuff."

INTERVIEWER: Maybe our conception of history has been changed.

WERTHEIMER: History is different now, it really is. Partly it's because of blacks looking for their roots, long before Haley, maybe through Black Studies programs, and especially the civil rights movement. Taking pride in their origin. That's done a lot for us. In the same way, I think the Bicentennial has made us more conscious that knowing where we came from is interesting, not boring. A great many of the books that have been written recently and television programs and films that have dealt with history have excited people about it. I think television has had a big influence in that area. A lot of the television programs were made with Bicentennial funding. That's something we really need to be grateful for. Books that have been written recently, some of them, have popularized history. The way books are put out, with photographs and beautiful to read, not little tiny print, that has helped a lot too. We owe a lot to this very short period in our past where history has been given back to us as the exciting story that it really is. That is the origion of the word, it comes back from the French "histoire," which means story. It never was meant to be dull or just a recital of dates and places. I think that's out for now, thank goodness.

INTERVIEWER: Well the whole time that you spent working on the book and other various projects that you've done, how do you organize your time so that you're able to do that?

WERTHEIMER: I'm afraid that the word workaholic is something that sort of applies to me. I found that--and I don't think I ever could do it again in the same way--that trying to write a book, do the research that's necessary for it, and hold down a full-time job is just impossible to do in any eight, ten, or twelve hour day. So it required a high degree of organization, and a great price from me, personally. It's hard to unwind at night after it gets late. I would work like mad and work very late at night four days a week so that I could take one day to work at home, plus the weekend, which would give me three days in a row to do research or to write or rewrite. Because you can't write a book in a little bit of time, you can't take two hours and write a piece of a chapter. You find that it takes you time to get back to the point that you were at when you stopped, and you have to get back into it before you can really start moving forward. You can't do it in two or three hours, you need large blocks of time. I did get one two-month mini-sabbatical from Cornell: two months in which I could work on the book and nothing else.

WERTHEIMER: I went to the country and did just that. I found that I would work literally from nine in the morning, time out for meals, till midnight and be so wound up and excited that I couldn't sleep. You'd think I would, and I would think that I would, be exhausted. But it was so exhilarating just to work on that and not have fifty thousand phone calls and letters that had to be answered and programs that had to be taught and conferences that had to be planned.... That just to work on the book was exhilarating. It was unbelievable, a marvelous experience to have those two months to focus on one thing.

INTERVIEWER: And does that make you see perhaps what you'd like to do in the future any differently? (laughter)

WERTHEIMER: I have to plan for my retirement! I'm all in favor of pre-retirement planning. That kind of writing experience, researching experience, would be very exciting to do at some point when I have the time to devote to it.

INTERVIEWER: I was just wondering really, how you were feeling about the program now. I know it must be taking much more time administratively as it's grown.

WERTHEIMER: It does, it takes a lot of time. We have a good size staff now. It's really very time consuming, but I love what I'm doing. It's constantly new, constantly challenging. We have a couple of books in planning. Not a narrative history, that I could not do again and work full-time too. Other kinds of books, that I think I can manage, with co-authors, and writing articles. Anne and I have been doing a lot of speaking. The program is exciting and the staff are wonderful, interested,dedicated people who work with me; without them nothing would be possible. It's a very full life. I should say, for people who listen to this, that I have two grown children who are not home and do not require a mother at home. And I have a husband[1] who is very, very busy in his own work, often either travelling or tied up until fairly late in the evening,so that I have a lot more flexibility with my own time than many people have. I realize that, when I devote time to my work--and I often do work until late at night--it's something that I can do with a clear mind; I'm not depriving somebody else; I'm not on any guilt trip because of it. But I really do know what it's like, having raised two children, to have that kind of conflict. One has to devote periods of one's life in different ways to different things and make conscious decisions. Today's young people don't make the same decisions I made but I understand the conflicts and problems that they do face; there's no one answer for anything. Right now my life is very full and very exciting and I love it.

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1 Died November 18, 1978.

INTERVIWER: In your recruitment of women for the Trade Union Women's Program--is that the right name for it?

WERTHEIMER: Yes, Trade Union Women's Studies.

INTERVIWER: Do you think you got a lot of women who would not go to a normal sort, for instance the other Cornell program?

WERTHEIMER: I think so. They come because they like the idea of studying with other women for a year, and they come partly because we offer certain special services. We have tutoring and counselling services,we have an extremely outgoing, warm atmosphere which they comment on; they've never been anyplace where they get the same kind of personal, individual attention. It's partly because we understand the problems that working women have, since we are working women ourselves. Sometimes there'll be a sick child or there'll be a sick member of the family and the responsibility will be theirs to take care of the person. Or they will be ill themselves. Middle aged women have amazing things happen to them. We will send their homework assignment to them, we will call them up to find out how things are going. We have women who would qualify as battered wives whose husbands beat them because they don't want them to come back to school; whose husbands don't speak to them the day before and the day after class. They give them the silent treatment, because they're so angry that they're going to school; they'll hide the car keys if they're driving. One woman didn't come to class because she was too bruised and didn't want to have other people see her looking like that and know she was beaten at home.

But they are very motivated. They feel, literally, that now it's their chance and they want to have this opportunity for themselves. We're willing to work with them. We've got some women in the program who have tried community colleges and were just so turned off by the red tape and all of the bureaucracy, not knowing what courses to take or how to go about registering, or whether they could ask for financial aid, for example. But our program is small enough--we have a hundred women altogether in four groups who go through our program during the course of the year--our program is small enough so that we can give everybody individual attention. This helps women stick with it, where otherwise they might fall by the wayside.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think it could grow very much and still offer the same kind of service and support?

WERTHEIMER: It could if we had the facilities to deal with it and were able to make the recruiting effort. If we had the funds we could find additional competent women to hire to do some of the things that our staff that's currently on board does. What we're trying to do though, instead of expanding here in New York City,is to take

WERTHEIMER: it to other parts of the state and work out programs for working women with the cooperation of not only other ILR district offices,but of universities and colleges around the state . So that eventually there will be something like Trade Union Women's Studies,or Working Women's Programs in all cities where we have district offices. We do on-site programs too. For example, I mentioned the hundred women, but of those hundred, fifty of them are in the program we run at District Council 37,State, County, and Municipal Employees Union, in their own headquarters. They coordinate it. We do the course materials, supply the teachers, and monitor it, of course. They have a lot of the support services there that the women need, including tutoring and counselling, a library and a program coordinator. That is one way we can expand our program.

INTERVIWER: You were talking about [the development of] networks. In some of the conferences, that was an important outcome. It would seem that the classes offer that kind of thing too.

WERTHEIMER: They do, it's amazing. The women make friendships that have lasted for beyond the time they spend together in the program. We have an alumnae association where the women come together, see each other and keep in touch. In addition we have worked with the UCLEA, University and College Labor Education Association task force on programs for union women in developing regional summer schools. Some of the women from Trade Union Women's Studies go to these week long summer institutions and meet women from other states who are members of different unions. That's another kind of network. They start to realize that their problems are shared by women in Massachusetts, in Pennsylvania, and Connecticut and they reach out to each other.

INTERVIEWER: That's bound to help women move up, too.

WERTHEIMER: It is a big encouragement to women, they learn from each other, appreciate each other, and help each other.

BARBARA WERTHEIMER INTERVIEW INDEX

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