

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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

with

RUTH WIENCEK

Communications Workers of America

by

Carol Bowie

Program on Women and Work

Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations

University of Michigan - Wayne State University

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VITAE

RUTH WIENCEK

Ruth Wiencek was born in Chicopee, Massachusetts on May 13, 1908 to Russian and Polish immigrants. Her parents' philosophy of commitment to social change, and the importance of the community, influenced Wiencek's thinking and have remained with her throughout her life.

Because Wiencek had the example of the Industrial Workers of the World [IWW] before her as her father's union, she could not relate to the company union which existed for the telephone workers when she began her work in 1925. It was not until the late 1930's and 1940's that Wiencek became involved with the union, and helped to change it from a company-dominated one to an organization which responded to the workers' needs.

Wiencek held a number of positions within the Michigan Telephone Traffic Union, including steward and education director, before she left in 1947 to join the CIO organizing staff. She was also involved with the telephone workers seeking to merge together into the Communication Workers of America [CWA]. After joining the CIO, Wiencek was involved with a wide variety of workers, in both organizing and educational capacities. Some of those with whom she worked include hospital and government employees, clericals, textile and paper workers, hotel and restaurant workers, and electrical workers.

For the last ten years of her career, Wiencek was with the International Union of Electrical and Radio Machine Workers [IUE], five of which she served as educational coordinator. While with the IUE, Wiencek developed a syllabus for teacher training, steward training, and auto instruction.

Her retirement from the union in 1960 did not put an end to Wiencek's activities. Throughout her involvement with the labor movement, Wiencek stressed the importance of union participation in community activities. Since retiring, she has had the time to become extremely involved in a number of these which interest her. Wiencek's particular focus concerns human relations and resources. She has served on the League of Women Voters Executive Board and as chair of the Commission on Human Relations in her home area in Maryland.

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June 2, 1976
Drum Point, Maryland

By Carol Bowie

INTERVIEWER: The following interview was conducted as part of the Oral History Program of the Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations of the University of Michigan and Wayne State University. The interviewee is Ruth Wiencek. The interviewer is Carol Bowie. The interview took place on June 2, 1976, at Drum Point, Maryland, the home of Ms. Wiencek.

WIENCEK: I retired in 1970 from the International Union of Electrical and Radio Machine Workers where I was education coordinator. This culminated about forty-five years worth of work experience, twenty-five years of which were in the labor movement. And it's been a rich experience and I certainly, looking back now, realized how broad an experience it really was.

Now I'm active in the League of Women Voters; I have been on the Executive Board. My portfolio has been human resources, primarily welfare reform. From there I became Chairman of the Commission on Human Relations, on which I served for five years. I also served on the board of the Tri-County Community Action Committee, the regional anti-poverty agency for Calvert, St. Mary's, and Charlec Counties. In a typically southern Maryland community, the Commission on Human Relations afforded an opportunity to do many things that really spelled change in community attitudes. So this is the point at which I am at now. I'm taking a sort of sabbatical. My term on the Commission on Human Relations has expired. I intend to serve again next year. This will be the kind of activity I'm engaged in.

INTERVIEWER: Well, let's get into your family history then. What do you recall about your grandparents' lives?

WIENCEK:

Well, I never knew my grandparents. Both my grandparents were in Europe. My father's father died before he was born and his mother in childbirth. He was shifted around from uncle to grandparents. He was born in that part of Poland which was controlled by Russia--Russpoland. His first recollection of having to learn to read and write in the Polish language was in Russian, because it was my understanding that teaching Polish was illegal in that part of Poland which was controlled by Russia. He was employed as a ten-year old boy by a grocer, and the grocer sent him to night school where he learned Polish as a second language, although he was Polish in Russia. He came to the United States after having served in the Russian army, and he worked as an agricultural worker--an itinerant agricultural worker --and as a logger, as a cook in a lumber camp, and he came to Massachusetts where he met my mother.

My mother came here to the United States when she was just eighteen years old. Her father was an Anabaptist, which was unusual for a Polish family. He was an unordained Anabaptist minister. Most Polish families were Catholic. This was rather unusual. My mother was preceded in this country by her two sisters, Stephana and Mary. When she came here to the United States she was a servant in a Jewish family. Her family migrated from Czechoslovakia to Prussia, from Prussia to the Ukraine, where she was born. So she spoke Ukranian, she spoke Russian, and she spoke Polish and German. But she had difficulty writing her own name. As we were going to school we taught her how to read and write.

But she was a rather remarkable woman because of the fact that she seemed to know just where to go to get help for all of her neighbors....a sort of a one-woman community agency person. She took people to the friends of the court, she interpreted for them. Unlike my father, she learned to speak English without an accent. My father always said it's because of the fact that she spoke German that enabled her to speak English so well.

My father, on the other hand, by the time he came to this country (he was then twenty), he was already a member of the Socialist Party. He was socialist in the old country, in Russia. He came to this country, he already had a very profound belief in workers and profound belief in the need for change, social change. Because of the fact that he was a member of the IWW [Industrial Workers of the World], of which I believe that he joined when he was a logger, but I remember when we lived in Oregon my family participated in the McNamara

WIENCEK: defense. In fact, that's the only heirloom I have--a long picture of my family's participation in the McNamara defense.

The McNamara brothers were accused of blowing up the Los Angeles Times. Clarence Darrow defended them, but when he found out that they were indeed terrorists, he dropped the case and did not....no longer defended them. But the labor movement at that particular time supported these two men and defended them and raised funds for their defense. So that was my earliest memory--when I was about four, having participated in sort of a labor-oriented activity.

When my father and mother moved East again, I remember that he was often a victim of the blacklist. At that particular time, any person who was a member of a union was blacklisted from jobs. He went in search of jobs from one city to another, only to be blacklisted again when they found that out. At that particular time, there was not only a blacklist--there were people who were so-called troublemakers and members of unions--but there was also an intensive spy system which developed a history on people who were active in unions of any kind. But that's the kind of a background which I grew up in. And always there was a profound belief in improving life of people, and also in change.

One of the things I think that my father helped a great deal in....giving me some sort of concept about the need to probe all the time. He used to say in his Polish-English accent, "Only one question is important in this life, and that is the word 'why'." And I think I learned that quite early, and this aroused that kind of a curiosity of why things were as they were and if they could not be different.

When I first began to work--it was in Michigan--and my first job was to care for a child while I was learning shorthand and typing, and I soon learned that shorthand and typing were not for me. I wanted to become an art student, but when I was in the first section of the twelfth grade, my parents decided that I had to help out with the family and go and learn a livelihood, and I think that was the saddest day of my life when I had to quit school and go to work.

So I got a job when I was seventeen with the telephone company. And that was in 1925. And it wasn't until 1933 that I became aware of the fact that there was anything like a labor organization in the telephone industry. It was a company union primarily, and the dues were very nominal--something like twenty cents a month. And I soon learned that it was controlled by the telephone company absolutely, even to the selection of the leadership.

WIENCEK:

By 1933, there was an effort on the part of the telephone workers to detach themselves from company unionism. And in 1934, I recall a gal by the name of Frances [V.] Smith, who came to me and said, "Ruth, why don't you become active?" And I said, "I wouldn't be found dead in a company union." She said, "What makes you think this is going to remain a company union? We need people like you to help us."

So I became active in the telephone workers union in the 1940's, there....I attended a number of national meetings of the National Federation of Telephone Workers. And it wasn't long before those of us who wanted to do something more with the organization than have it remain a company union discovered each other. At that particular time, there was discussion of strike, but nobody dared to say the word "strike" outright. Some of us talked about "withdrawing labor power," but never dared to say the word "strike." [laughter] And in the constitution of the National Federation of Telephone Workers, which really was formulated by the telephone companies, was a clause saying that independence...the independent nature of the organization would be forever "inviolable," which meant that never could the telephone workers affiliate with a major federation.

Sometime later, when I was already on the staff of the National Federation of Telephone Workers, I remember reading in the magazine Personnel--and it was in the early forties, but nobody's been able to locate that particular issue--in which the officials of the telephone company were saying that they had made a mistake in fostering company unionism. They pointed to the development in the Duquesne Power and Light Company, in which there was an independent union, and the companies thought they had these unionists in their vest pocket, that they had already bought them off by giving them all kinds of personal privileges. The leadership was so frustrated in their inability to deal with the Duquesne Power and Light, they struck; and they struck totally. None of the AF of L or CIO unions at that particular time would ever have been that irresponsible. They would have left behind a task force so that it would not be necessary for doctors to operate by flashlight.

So it was that particular incident that this official, vice-president, of the telephone company said that, "We had made a mistake in fostering company unions because the relatives and friends of the company unionists would make them feel so inferior about being controlled by companies that they had to prove the militancy and often, in attempting to prove the militancy, they would go over and beyond what legitimate unions would attempt to do." That impressed me because I think this largely describes the experience we had when we were trying to throw off the shackles of company unionism.

WIENCEK: In 1945, there was a first nationwide strike--I don't say that every telephone union was on strike, but the Washington, D.C. telephone workers struck, and in Michigan and Ohio the telephone workers went out on sympathy. On the picket line they sang the song "Sympathy," [laughter] and they supported them.

It was over a very interesting issue. The operators that were transferred to Washington received a special inducement for coming there. Not only did they get their room and board paid, but they got a premium payment over and above what they would get as operators in that particular locality. So it meant that there would be two operators working side by side--one who got paid up to forty-five dollars more per week than the other one who had to meet her room and board. This was especially hard on the gals, some of whom were no longer living at home, although the telephone company used to be very careful in deliberately hiring women who lived at home--that was the old family subsidy thing in which they are unwilling to pay the labor market price for labor, but depended on hiring girls who lived at home and whom the families would partially subsidize.

But the interesting thing was that the following year, 1946, there was a real, full-fledged national strike. And the girls who lived at home were able to survive, and the strike lasted because of them. And here you have a situation where the family subsidies nearly kicked the telephone companies right back in the teeth. The gal who lived alone and whom the telephone company usually tried to spurn couldn't possibly have afforded the strike. She would have had to cross the picket line because her rent could not be paid and she would have been thrown out.

That reminded me of the 1906 strike in Toronto where the telephone company changed the hours of work--[William Lyon] Mackenzie King was then Premier--and it was he, perhaps before he became Premier, he was Attorney General or some such title in which he was interviewing the telephone operators. The telephone company changed the hours that the girls would work, from a ten-hour day to a seven-hour day, seven-hour tricks (that's what a tour of duty was called, a trick) and it made it....no, it was just the other way around--they changed it from a shorter hour day to a longer one, to an eight-hour, from a six-hour to an eight-hour or nine-hour, whatever the hours were there. And the girls struck. They didn't strike for more money for eight hours or nine hours, or whichever the tour of duty was; it was because they couldn't hold two jobs which would enable them to earn a livelihood. Some of them worked in a bakery, some of them worked at other kinds of occupations. Well, they worked for the telephone company too. And when

WIENCEK: Mackenzie King interviewed the telephone company about this, they said, "Well, it's never been necessary for us to pay any more. It's because we always were careful to hire the girls who lived at home." And why was that? "Well, we always wanted our girls to be surrounded by nice girls." And when Mackenzie King kept probing, they finally admitted that it was economics which really compelled them to do this....not compelled them to do it, but they did. They employed the girl who lived at home because it would not be necessary for them to pay as much.

This was the wage payment which a telephone company followed. When I first began in 1925, I started at fourteen dollars a week. It took fourteen years to reach the maximum pay, despite the fact that in later years the U.S. Department of Labor--the Women's Bureau--established the fact that it took less than two years for an operator to become proficient and fully experienced. It took fourteen years to reach the top rate.

Well, when the telephone unions were detached from company unionism, because of the National Labor Relations Act which prohibited company unions and prohibited company control of unions, they began to subscribe to the Bureau of Labor Statistics figures and, in the end, to make comparable kind of wage comparisons. But they found that the telephone company would never acknowledge that they were even semi-skilled. They compared the telephone operator's job to that of a bread-wraper in a bakery factory and when pressed on comparability in job description they said, "Well, they come from the same kinds of families anyway." [laughter]

So it was through this process of attempting to really bargain collectively with the telephone companies that got the telephone workers to begin to realize that through their isolation from the mainstream of organization labor they were denying themselves the interchange that was possible if they were affiliated with a major labor organization. And a number of us began to realize that. There was a president of a telephone workers union in California who was one of the first to articulate this at the National Federation of Telephone Workers Conference, and it was he [Healy] that called for the formation of the committee to investigate affiliation with the AF of L-CIO. This took place in 1945. In 1946, such a committee was formed.

INTERVIEWER: Well, actually, let me just go back a bit. I guess we've been running through quite a bit of your history. So....I know this is changing the subject, but I think it is important to bring out more, perhaps, of the things in your childhood that have led you in this direction. For instance, you say that you moved around quite a bit.

WIENCEK: Yes. Well, partially....my father tried to get jobs, and jobs were not available in one area and you know that these were the periods of panics and depressions; and not only that but he was blacklisted, so there was always an attempt to find a job in some distant city. He immediately sent for the family. I think the one stable part of it was that in practically every locality he'd contact a socialist group, Socialist Party. The one constant theme in our lives was the contact with the radical movement in some form or another. And most of the people he knew in the Socialist Party were interested in unionization, and this followed very naturally and we knew this, too. I mean, we grew up with the understanding and also the knowledge that it was the labor movement that was trying to change the plight of the average working man so that he wouldn't be the victim of constant unemployment and wouldn't be the victim of exploitation and low wages and industrial hazards, and that through unionization there would be some chance for a working man to bring up his family.

INTERVIEWER: What year did he arrive in this country?

WIENCEK: It was in 1906, I believe. 1906.

INTERVIEWER: How about your mother?

WIENCEK: Well, she arrived about the same period, I believe. She arrived in about the same period.

INTERVIEWER: How active was she in that?

WIENCEK: Well, she was active in the Socialist Party. She was a member of the Socialist Party. But the kind of jobs that were open to women at that time, you know, it was never possible for a working man to entirely support his family. Working women have always worked. If her pay check was needed to make it possible for the family to survive, she worked. A working woman worked--she worked as a domestic or in a grocery store somewhere, or some way or another she worked. So my mother always worked outside of the family, as a domestic primarily and sometimes in a cotton mill, sometimes in a rag-picking establishment, anyplace to grub out an existence to raise four children.

The precepts that one had to struggle to make life better, one had to struggle with one's fellow man, and to do this it was very much a factor. I remember my father telling us about Eugene V. Debs, and Eugene V. Debs was the President of the Pullman Railroad Workers and when Eugene V. Debs was jailed a newspaper reporter came to interview him and said, "It's a pity that a man of your intelligence can't rise about his surroundings and above his fellow men." And Eugene V. Debs said, "I never....the thought never occurred to me to rise above my fellow men, but to rise with them." And this is always the concept that we had.

WIENCEK: So I suppose I've known since I was fifteen that I'd be active some way or another in the labor movement. It was a conviction I had, and it was sort of a natural development for me to become active. So one of my sisters helped organize the plant in which she worked--she was working for an electric manufacturing company which made stoves. She helped organize the plant for IBEW [International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers]. So this is just entirely natural from my point of view that our family always held. It wasn't unusual at all.

INTERVIEWER: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

WIENCEK: I had three sisters.

INTERVIEWER: Were you the oldest?

WIENCEK: I was the oldest. My sister was a year-and-a-half younger, and then she was also working in the factory--she was a forelady, which would have been probably comparable to a foreman for this company. And my younger sister worked there for a time after she graduated from high school, and my still youngest sister, who became a painter, worked there for a short time to supplement her income so she could go back to art school.

INTERVIEWER: So, going on a little further, for instance, to which of your sisters are you the closest?

WIENCEK: All of them, except my youngest one who is no longer living. She died when she was just forty-two. She was a well-known woman painter. She assisted Doris Lee on a mural and she painted a mural in the Mooresville, N.C. Post Office in the Depression years. She had a number of exhibitions; one was at the Corcoran Art Gallery. And so she became a painter of note, and she continued to paint until she died.

She also had a sort of feel for the radical tradition. One painter, Arnold Blank, commented once about the way she approached the things that she drew and that she directly came to the point and wasted no movements in her drawing. And he said, "Tell me about your family. Are any members of your family radicals?" And she said, "Oh, yes, how did you know?" He said, "It's the way you approach a problem, directly hitting at it." Now, I don't know if that has any significance of not, [laughter] but that was an interesting point.

INTERVIEWER: Well, you said that you, too, had dreams of being an artist.

WIENCEK: Oh, yes. I thought of it. But when I began to see the seriousness with which my sister approached it, although I had facility, I discovered there was a hell of a lot of difference between facility and talent. I could have facility all the rest of my life. I can draw practically anything I can see. But there's a difference between talent and facility.

INTERVIEWER: How did you feel, as a child, about being a girl rather than a boy?

WIENCEK: I don't recall feeling a sense of envy. You know the....although there were inequalities, that's true. Around the radical movement, these inequalities were not as sharply delineated as they would have been....as they were elsewhere. We were always encouraged to take part in discussions, and my father not only encouraged it, but he liked to see it. When we talked about the world and its significance and about astronomy, we're always part of that discussion--he always encouraged it. And we always had library books around, and when we were little my father painted the bottom of the kitchen cabinets a flat gray so we could draw on it with chalk, and when we saw the landlord coming we'd wipe it off with a damp cloth. And he'd always get extra reams of paper from the butcher, and we had plenty of crayons and water colors to draw on. And I think possibly we developed a sort of a facility--all of us were artistic in our family--because of the fact that we were always moving from one part of the country to another, and during that time, until we had made friends, we had to become self-sufficient and entertain ourselves. But the influence of my family, I'm sure, had a very definite influence over the kind of career that I finally chose for myself and what I finally did with my life. I considered it my life work and it was--it became that.

INTERVIEWER: What sort of hopes did your parents have for you?

WIENCEK: Just to survive. You see, when you have a working class background--you're a worker, and you have no particular skills--you did the best you could. That's all, you just survived. They felt that there's something beyond that survival--that was building a better society. But my father had no particular skills--he worked as a paper hanger, as a roofer, as a tinsmith, but he was really never very skilled at these kinds of things.

My mother had no particular skills. When my mother became ill and it was evident that she was not going to live, I went to work when I was seventeen, I did not finish high school. My other sister....when my mother died, my other sister quit school at the age of fifteen, and we did the best we could to keep the other two girls in school. My father used to go off in search

WIENCEK: of jobs elsewhere and the two of us--my sister Cecilia and I-- would be left to do the best we possibly could to keep the family together. And we....apart from my entertaining ideas of someday becoming an artist, when I began to work for the telephone company, there were so many responsibilities and obligations and just such questions as earning enough to buy a ton of coal and buying clothes for the two [younger] girls and paying rent, that those are the things that occupied our minds in terms of dreams and I guess we didn't have any.

Like most people, I fell into....the opportunity came along when the telephone workers began to develop their organizations. I fell into being a labor representative because I was interested. I didn't have too much knowledge about it, but neither did anyone else at that particular time. I had a theoretical knowledge about it, in general, but not specifically. And as I reread the material that Joyce [Kornbluh] assembled, I'm sort of appalled at the simplistic nature of some of it and yet, on the other hand, a little bit impressed that it was so far-reaching....that it had such insights, too, at the same time. You do the best you can with what you have and what you do know and you just feel your way through.

I believe one of the things....because of the fact that I think that artistic training had a lot to do with this, that it led us to experimentation. Somehow, the idea of failure never entered my mind because I felt that all of life is experimental anyway. So you felt your way through and you survived the best way you possibly can, and you develop what instincts you had about it and sometimes you failed and sometimes you succeeded, but you learned something from your failures.

And I remember when I first became active in the telephone workers, the only equipment I really had was a knowledge of labor history. And I had a friend who was a business agent for the Hotel and Restaurant Workers, Al Renner. He said, "You ought to develop some other kind of facilities besides a knowledge of labor history because the labor movement is really much more than just that." So I decided to run for steward, and I did in the Michigan Telephone Traffic Union,* in about 1943. And from there, I became chairman of my particular branch office, and then eventually chairman of the Detroit Telephone Workers; and you gained experience as you went along.

* Operators and clerical workers.

WIENCEK: Then, of course, the labor movement around Detroit was in a marvelous state of development and ferment, and I got to know the [United] AutoWorkers quite well, and I got to know the Hotel and Restaurant Workers who were then having the sitdown strikes, and the AutoWorkers likewise. And the AutoWorkers leaned very heavily on labor education. I got to know the education director--Bill Kemsley for one, and Victor Reuther for another. And we began to interchange the kinds of things that we were doing.

I became the education director after having served on the Executive Board on the statewide organization of the Telephone Traffic Union. From there we had conferences, training conferences--I held a number of them then--and you drew on your own experience, you drew on the experience of others who told you what it was like in other unions, what to do and how they did it. Frank Marquart* was still another who helped a great deal, and it was from the assistance of people like that who were very glad to help; they sensed something was happening with the Telephone Workers, and they were delighted to see that there was an effort to get from under company unionism. The generosity of people around the trade union movement was really wonderful.

We came to them with all kinds of problems. When we had our first strike in 1945, the labor movement responded marvelously, particularly the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union. They gave us advice on how to run a picket line and how to establish soup kitchens and how to spell each other off so that we wouldn't be on the picket line too long, and how to keep the strike together. And all of these kinds of things we learned from the other unions.

I don't ever remember any time that I met any unionists who had scorn for us because of the fact that we had a company union past. They seemed very anxious to help us in any way they possibly could. None of them had ever said, "Why don't you join our union or why don't you join the AF of L or the CIO?" They all were very helpful and let us alone pretty much except for giving assistance.

It wasn't until quite a bit later that some of us began to realize that while the CIO and the AF of L were able to draw on their past experiences, we had a very short history as a legitimate union, and so there was very little experience we could draw from, except that which was immediate, and we began

* Former education director, Dodge Local, United Auto Workers [UAW].

WIENCEK: to realize, too, that we would be victims of raids if we didn't affiliate with some major labor organization--we could be decimated by that process, so a number of us began to think very seriously about attempting to affiliate the National Federation of Telephone Workers to the AF of L or CIO--we weren't sure at that particular time which union we wanted to affiliate with.

INTERVIEWER: Let me go back a bit again. Back to your first job when you were seventeen. How did you get that job?

WIENCEK: Well, I had a friend, a girlfriend--it was a neighbor--who worked for the telephone company and she worked as a stenographer and....this is in 1925 and that was the year that my parents said, "Look, you'd better get a job because we need your help to pay our mother's doctors' bills and things are not going well." So I applied for a job with the telephone company, and I got it and the policy of the telephone company was to hire primarily Catholic girls and my name was Polish, and it sounded Catholic anyway.

INTERVIEWER: Why was that?

WIENCEK: Docile....a docile workforce. And, of course, later this proved to be not true because the so-called Catholic girls had brothers in auto plants elsewhere [laughter] and so this didn't turn out to be true later on, you know. But I got my first job there.

Not all the things were bad about that company. The very thing that the policy of the company, which was completely paternalistic, was also concerned about the welfare of employees, too. Because I remember when my family was in trouble, they gave me a loan when my father was in some distant part of the country and we needed money for coal and one of my sisters was ill. They advanced a loan, which was interest free, which I paid back.

But, on the other hand, they were that paternalistic that when I won an art scholarship, and they changed my hours at will and I protested saying that I couldn't attend my classes, they pointed out to me that being a telephone operator was a career. They were very jealous of any other kind of influences in one's life. It's so hard for young people to realize how paternalistic the industry was in those days. They decided what you should read, what you shouldn't read, what....that kind of thing--whether you should get married or not--and they didn't want any other kind of competition. There was no such thing as going to school and working at the telephone company in those days--you had to choose one or the other. That's

WIENCEK: exactly what happened. And so I had to surrender my art course so that when my hours were changed from evening hours--I was able to attend art school because my hours were 4:30 to 11:00 then, and I went to art school until 3:30--but they changed that and I was working days and they just simply wouldn't make that kind of adjustment. They said, "This has to be your career."

INTERVIEWER: What exactly were you doing?

WIENCEK: I was a telephone operator. First a local telephone operator, then a long distance telephone operator. And it was when I became a long distance telephone operator that I became active in the union, upon Fran Smith's urging. Fran Smith was a remarkable gal. She had a marvelous administrative sense, when I look back here, a marvelous mind, and she had a natural sense in collective bargaining. We made a pretty good team because there was no rivalry whatsoever because I was not at all good in the kinds of things that she did. In our family we all had a sort of lag in that we had no mathematical sense whatsoever. And since I didn't have it I could never become a negotiator. Oh, subsequently much later on I learned that I could negotiate after all. It wasn't all that difficult. [laughter]

INTERVIEWER: Calculators?

WIENCEK: Well, no. I never had a calculator. But in any case, she was very good at that and it was she that got the Telephone Workers--the National Federation of Telephone Workers--to understand that their organizational structure, in the looseness that it was, could never go anywhere as a national organization. She got them alerted and understanding that the structure had to be quite different, and she urged them to start to study the structure of the AF of L-CIO unions to see how it could be formulated. In order to avoid unionization--and that's precisely what this vice-president, Craig, I believe, of AT&T admitted that they did, and of course they did it because it was part and parcel of the open shop plan of the twenties in which they tried to discourage the formation of unions. The employers, in those particular years, encouraged the development of company unions, which they themselves helped to formulate. They would get a group of workers together and say, "You ought to have an association of some sort," and, of course, what they wanted was a medium through which workers would just express their gripes, not necessarily to do anything about them, but simply to express their gripes. And they selected the leadership for them and this kind of paternalism was typical, and it was to prevent workers from unionizing.

WIENCEK: This occurred all through the United States. The forms in which the companies formed these company unions differed--it was like a patchwork quilt of absolutely impossible structures. One example: It was possible to have one union only of telephone operators. In another locality it included telephone operators, telephone switchmen and cable splicers. In another locality the telephone workers would be segmented into telephone operators, the accounting workers' union in a separate union, cable splicers' union was a separate union, central office repairmen was a separate union, and the installers was a separate union. How in the world could you ever coordinate anything with a hodge-podge like that? And another area would be organized along an eight state area--not on an industrial basis, but at least in a loosely federated group--and it was so impossible.

So the National Federation of Telephone Workers was really a federation and never a union--or a national union--in a full sense. It was like another federation like the CIO was or the AF of L was. And the National Federation of Telephone Workers never chartered a single local*--it was these divisions which could be local with only one particular craft, or it could be along a nine state basis. Those are the ones that chartered local groups. So any amount of coordination was utterly impossible. So when the National Federation of Telephone Workers met, it was only the officers of these segmented individual, independent, autonomous unions that were federated to the National Federation of Telephone Workers. There was no rank-and-file participation. There was no democratic participation as we know most unions do have. When there was a convention, no local president of a union attended. It was the president of that particular union that attended, whether it was nine statewide or whether it was just simply in just one locality or one particular craft. And something had to be done about the structure. So we began to....quite early we began to agitate for structural change.

INTERVIEWER: Well, you say that your first involvement with the union was in Detroit?

WIENCEK: It was in Detroit [in 1943].

INTERVIEWER: As a steward.

WIENCEK: No, I think as a member first, and then I ran as a steward. And that was the funniest thing. I didn't know how to get elected because there was no regular membership meeting. It

* These developments took place in the pre-fifties period.

WIENCEK: was usually called on a single issue--something troubling the workers enough and then the membership meeting would be called. But we had no regular monthly meeting as such, as was known in most local unions. And there was very little continuity. And I don't believe it was until the forties that this kind of a thing--that they attempted regular membership meetings on a local basis.

So I cultivated friends by offering to change hours with them. As you gain seniority, you would have a wider choice on working hours--those with the least amount of seniority would have to accept the least desirable hours. So I often used to change hours with those who wanted to go out in the evening, and I got to know people that way and eventually I ran for office.

But the interesting thing is, while I deliberately set out to cultivate people that way, I found out that I was truly interested in them. I found out what they were like as people, and I began to discover that they had problems, and I was interested in their problems and would sometimes help to work out their problems. And so I developed a sort of awareness and a response to people that I never would have if I hadn't run.

What a steward did back then was to try to represent a worker with a particular problem for which they got into trouble with the chief operator. Eventually, I became a member of the statewide Executive Board and then as education director [in 1944 and 1945]. There were meetings on a state level, and Fran Smith was the President at that particular time [from 1943] of the statewide organization. We attempted to organize....we never had anything like a union shop in those days, so we attempted to organize as many workers as we possibly could, and sometimes we'd sit in the cafeteria and talk to them about joining the union.

INTERVIEWER: How extensive was union activity at the time?

WIENCEK: Well, this is the period which we're trying to develop a regular membership meeting once a month, you see.

INTERVIEWER: Early forties?

WIENCEK: Yes, the early forties. And by mid-forties we pretty much had that kind of an organization. By mid-forties we were negotiating with management, we were....we had conferences--training conferences throughout the state for other stewards. We had local union officers' training conferences by then. And it was pretty much of an organization. The only difference was that we were not then affiliated with any major labor organization.

INTERVIEWER: And how extensively did you participate in the beginning and then later?

WIENCEK: Quite a bit. I was active in the Detroit local. You see, that was composed of various central offices. I first started as a chairman of the central office exchange where I was and tried to build up the membership there. And then, of course in recognition of the job I did I got a seat on the Executive Board [in 1944]. I became Detroit Chairman then [in 1945]....Detroit, which was a collection of all the central offices in that locality, about thirty six of them, I guess. There was a membership say, maybe about 3,000; a local of 3,000. And there were about 6,000 throughout the state, membership of about 6,000 throughout the state at that particular time.

INTERVIEWER: How many telephone workers did that involve? What percentage? How much of a percentage?

WIENCEK: I don't remember. I think we came close to seventy percent of the telephone workers, about that much. It was always touch and go, and always around negotiations time we began to realize that....and since we did have a check-off, we knew that we had glass pockets and management would know then how many members we had by the check-off. And the degree to which we represented the operators was the degree to which we were successful in negotiations where we represented them. So our membership drives would be very crucial at that particular period. As education director, I know that I participated in a campaign on increasing the dues. And I remember preparing material, reducing it down to dollars and cents on how much it cost to negotiate each contract, and by a few cents per week how much more of the services that that could buy. I remember having a statewide kind of a program where we had a education conference on just this issue. And we had a newspaper called Traffic Talk.* So we coordinated the articles with a kit that we gave to each of the chairmen of the various cities in which they would use the materials and also talk about the

* A statewide paper for the Michigan Telephone Traffic Union.

WIENCEK: need to increase the dues. We increased our dues from seventy-five cents a month to a dollar and a half, which for that particular day and age was quite a bit because the dues of the AutoWorkers [Union] was only a dollar a month at that time.

INTERVIEWER: When was this?

WIENCEK: This was in 1945. And we considered that quite a successful venture. But I thought of the idea of getting rank-and-file workers to be talking in favor of a dues increase. So we had this roving reporter type of thing in which we would interview workers and, of course, some of the workers there who had relatives in the auto plants knew what their organizations were doing for them and they could readily see that if you had more income coming in, you could get better services, do a better job. So they spoke in behalf of that and we managed to do that and there was by a referendum vote, a mail referendum, and you can imagine the job it took, and so we were quite pleased at the success that we had in our first educational program venture and in getting the dues increased.

Of course, we educated on issues also. Sometimes it was on the need for increase in base rate, and sometimes it was on the need to shorten the span of time that it took to reach the top and by then we had succeeded in narrowing the length of time that it took to reach the top from fourteen to six years. And that was quite an accomplishment in itself. And of course we improved vacation allowance. We improved sick leave provisions, and those were the kinds of benefits that we were able to get [on a state basis]. And it was particularly hard because these were the war years, so you not only had to negotiate with the telephone company, but you also had to prepare a very intricate brief to present to the War Labor Board. We learned a great deal those years.

INTERVIEWER: When you first joined the union though, how would you say that it affected your personal life, and after this?

WIENCEK: Well, mostly I was interested....I played a good deal of tennis in those days and I was an art student. I went to evening classes in art school, and I joined a drama group and I was going to start to paint some scenery for that. These were the personal kind of things that one did to take up one's time, to make one's life more interesting because, after all, being a telephone operator was a pretty drab job and was pretty demanding.

WIENCEK: Being active in the union changed my life a good deal because it began to make me think in terms of issues. It made me much more responsive to the kinds of things that were going on around me. Even though I was aware of these things, nevertheless that brought the change in my life. Also, I think it brought a change in my personality. I was not always very extroverted. I was rather introverted and this--I need to project, needed to learn to communicate--and so this brought a change in the way I thought and what I did. And this is the period that I began to put my thoughts down on paper, too, because I'd had the column in the paper--in the Traffic Talk periodically and later in the Telephone Workers--and I think it helped me organize my thinking better.

INTERVIEWER: Well, how did you come to be the educational director of the national federation?

WIENCEK: Well, by then I guess, the work we were doing in Michigan drew attention to the national organization and by then I had attended a number of conferences and taken the floor to speak on a number of issues and the job was offered to me as a part-time job while I was still education director of the Michigan Telephone Traffic Union.

INTERVIEWER: That was the state-wide . . .

WIENCEK: That was the state-wide organization, the Michigan Telephone Traffic Union. And then I became full-time education director. And when I look back to these materials, I sort of reexperienced, when I was looking at that, the enormity of what we had to do in those days, precisely because of our isolation from the labor movement. And I think that this isolation from the labor movement gave us a more heightened realization of how much there was to learn, and perhaps we were even more eager because of the fact that we felt that we were denied it for so long and we saw everybody . . .
[telephone interruption]

Well, there was a sort of an eagerness to know and I'm looking through this and seeing how...the kind of things we attempted to do right off the bat, you know, in 1945, between 1945 and 1946. There was a realization that we had an awful lot to learn about the labor movement, about collective bargaining, about organizing, and that organizing the telephone industry was going to be quite a job. And we also had an awareness of the fact that we were a pretty key industry. When you come to think of the fact that wherever you had a town and hamlet anywhere in the United States, there was really an opportunity for

WIENCEK: an organization. And no other union that we knew of had such a vast network of a base from which to operate. And although telephone workers in the main were pretty conservative, it's just simply amazing how a handful could have shaped, really, with sort of a sense of direction, could have shaped the destiny of that union. Just a handful of people was all it took.

INTERVIEWER: How would you describe the--structure I suppose you'd call it--power structure from within the union?

WIENCEK: Well, up to 1945, it was still the National Federation of Telephone Workers, disjointed and frustrating to the top leadership because of the fact that they simply couldn't get through to the rank-and-file at all--they had to go through these officers. For example, even an attempt to get strike action going when they had the first nation-wide strike in 1946 and 1947, how difficult that was to try to coordinate it. And to get any kind of knowledge down to the rank-and-file was pretty much impossible because of the intervention of these local officials, some of them who were still, at that time, pretty much controlled by the company. And if not consciously, at least they hadn't detached themselves at all from the dependence upon the company. In outlook and in degree of understanding, they just were not unionists at all. And others of course were, you see--others were in advance of their time.

I think that the Michigan Telephone Traffic Union was one of the ones that were in advance and it's possibly because of the influence of the labor movement around the Michigan area. The Long Lines was; the New York group was. And Ohio was. Not everywhere was it an even kind of a mix.

There was a great deal of frustration with the structure, and this was a time that Fran Smith talked the most about structural change, the need for it. And, of course, there was resistance to structural change because each one of them had their particular little bailiwick and vested interests in retaining their office. You can imagine that.... and eventually some of the groups left because they didn't want to change. You can imagine what a gal who built her base in Chicago Telephone Traffic Union, or a guy in Illinois who had been the President of the Accounting Union--he wanted to retain his presidency, she wanted to retain her presidency, so they weren't quite anxious to let go.

WIENCEK: I remember that in 1946, going with Joe Beirne--the President of the National Federation of Telephone Workers--to visit with one of the officials of the International Ladies Garment Workers, and he was trying to get across to Joe Beirne how important structural change was and that the longer they put it off the more that the structural would gel and crystallize and become impossible ever to change, and that now that they had become a legitimate union, and had proved their legitimacy by having had two nation-wide strikes behind them, nobody could possibly think of us as a company union any longer after that. They advised that it was time to make our change. Well, we found the change wasn't so easy to make.

When I left the Telephone Workers in 1947 to go with the Telephone Workers Organizing Committee that had been formed by the CIO, the CWA began to make some structural changes--not totally--they changed their name to Communications Workers of America, and they made some minor structural changes, but the substantial structural changes never came until they affiliated with the CIO. And they were compelled to by our action, you see, because we did raid them. This organizing committee had sort of a two-prong program--one is, by persuasion, to work on the officials through the Communications Workers and not the individual leaders, and the other was through sheer raid. They finally did agree to affiliate. The condition of affiliation was that they made fundamental structural changes corresponding to those in the regular labor movement.

It was a funny thing to hear them refer to it as if it were a complete novelty to them. They would call it a "two-level structure," meaning a local union and an International Union level. It was like inside plumbing and outside plumbing, [laughter] that kind of designation. It was so new to them, because what they had was a three-level organization, you see, in their local union--their division, you see--and only affiliated to the national federation or the CWA through their division at that particular time until after affiliation. "Division" was a term comparable to "region" in labor movement structural terms.

INTERVIEWER: Well, your job then, as education director of the Federation, what sort of autonomy did you have?

WIENCEK: Well, very little. Your services were offered and if anyone wanted to use them, fine they would use them. But nobody had to, of course, you see that was no different from any other International Union in that respect. But they participated if they wanted to. And so you had some adherence--the

WIENCEK: Southwest Telephone Workers Division--it was called the Southwest Division--was one of the groups that participated quite a bit. The Washington, D.C. group did. Those in Ohio did. Not very much in the South; Connecticut, not at all. And so you had the sort of uneven participation. So my role, I think, really was to keep emphasizing the importance of gaining allies with the rest of the labor movement, make alliances and then use them as much as they possibly could for advice and for assistance, and to have them realize that they were part of the labor movement, even though they were independent.

I think, more than that, my contribution was to try to establish in the Telephone Workers a sort of a feeling of interdependence and identification with the rest of the labor movement. All the kinds of things that I wrote were sort of an identification of the larger labor movement.

I felt that, of course, we needed the more specifics then, too, and that we got. At that particular period, in the late forties, the universities were just then beginning to be interested in labor education and, of course, there was a Labor Extension Bill, which was being offered every year. And one of the architects of that was Hilda Smith, who was sort of a dean of labor education. She's now in her late eighties. She's broken a hip now, but she was one of the people that steadfastly introduced this bill on labor education. She used to have a school for workers at her estate in upstate New York and she was active in the WPA [Works Progress Administration] period of labor education.

But the kind of conferences that I held--I invited a number of people from the labor movement, like Tilford Dudley of the AF of L-CIO Community Services at that time; Ted Silvey, who was at that particular time the labor member of the War Labor Board; and Hal Gibbons who was at that time with the Wholesale, Retail and Department Store Employees; Joe Kowalski of the Auto Workers--a number of people from the labor movement, and most particularly the American Labor Education Society, ALES, which is now out of existence. It was a marvelous catalyst for development of the awareness of the need for labor education in unions and I worked very closely with them.

I think this exposure to people in the labor movement was a good thing. Not only did our people begin to realize how much there was to be learned about the labor movement, but the fact that here these people had already years behind in the labor movement and we were merely just being introduced into the labor movement at that particular time out of our company union past.

WIENCEK: These people were very valuable to us because they gave us certain insights. I remember...here we are, just developing the format of regular monthly meetings, not knowing how to conduct them and I doubt whether very many local union presidents--as the way the word local was construed by the telephone workers union, because they were called districts or divisions or whatever--even the concept of local union administration was foreign to telephone workers. And it was people like Hal Gibbons, who had a background in the WPA labor education courses which were offered at that time, that gave us some concepts about local union management and what you do in developing a good strong base and how you keep it knit together, and how you use committees to divide the work of a local union.

You see, if we had gone directly to the AF of L or CIO, it would have been threatening to the officials of our union if we had gone to them for help with labor education. But the American Labor Education Society, being an independent labor education body, became the medium through which it was possible to get all of the people together from various areas of the labor movement, and they would know the good guys, the people that had concepts were able to give something and were very helpful. Eleanor Colt was the Director of the American Labor Education Service.

INTERVIEWER: What was the relationship like between men and women who were active in that?

WIENCEK: Well, of course, you see, because the women....this is the thing that was unusual about the Telephone Workers then.... the telephone operators or the clerical workers, wherever those were organized, or the accounting workers, had their own unions. The women were leaders in their own right, and they had to be considered because they were part of the constituency.

INTERVIEWER: Constituency of the Federation?

WIENCEK: Yes, the Federation. And they had to consider them seriously.

INTERVIEWER: They were the majority? Women?

WIENCEK: Yes, they were the majority because they were the largest number and, of course, the ratio has changed, I think, since automation. I'm not so sure there are as many women as are men. I don't know much about that now because I haven't kept in touch. But they had to consider them in their own right,

WIENCEK: you see, and then whenever they spoke on issues they had to consider them. And a very powerful voice on the executive board was Fran Smith--I think she was the most knowledgeable and vocal--and Anne Benscoter. And Mary Gannon during those times. But most particularly Fran because she was the most knowledgeable of the whole bunch. She had a very fine mind. Mary Gannon was militant, but I don't believe she had the intellectual content that Fran Smith did. Nor Anne Benscoter, either.

INTERVIEWER: How do you mean militant there? On women's issues?

WIENCEK: Oh, not on women's issues, per se, but for the union. You've got to realize that in those years there was not the consciousness about women's issues as there is now. When they acted, they acted in behalf of their constituency, in behalf of their members on the kinds of things they needed, not because they were women, even though they did mention some of the problems. And the problems that were mentioned as problems of women workers were the difficulties that they were facing.

For an example, they were paid as contributors to the family income, rather than being paid as wage earners. And this is how they raised this question, the role as women workers in their own right. Now my background, because of my radical background, I tended not to think of women's problems, per se, but as an economic problem, thinking women were victims, economic victims, and that the kind of economy that ultimately would develop would have a place for women as full participants rather than mere periphery workers. And I tended to think of it in terms of an economic problem, rather than women's rights per se.

This kind of thing has become aroused since then. And also I think women like myself, of my generation, were the beneficiaries of some of the work that went on before by women in the labor movement. I'm thinking...Joyce Kornbluh mentions Hollace Ransdel. Hollace Ransdel was a close friend of mine who was one of the first publicity people hired by John L. Lewis. Now, Hollace was a true suffragette, and I always used to be slightly amused at Hollace, first because I have never found it difficult in the kind of an environment we have where leadership was so desperately needed in a young union--which was really ours, despite our company union past, which lasted quite a number of years--that they grasped at anybody who had even the faintest kind of leadership capacity to offer. And I'm appalled by what we didn't know, but we knew much more than others knew, and then you just fill a void at that particular time.

WIENCEK: Well, we had no difficulty doing that and I've never been aware of discrimination because I was always lucky to be in a union where there was equal pay for equal work. And I've never had the problem. So I used to be faintly amused by Holly, you know, she was always a true suffragette. Whenever I would come back from a field trip after I was in another union, and we would have a sort of exchange of the kinds of experiences we had; and I wanted to share with her particular triumphs of what I felt was a job well done, and she said, "Well, you did well at it, dear, because you're a woman." And I would laugh at that. [laughter] What she meant was that she felt that I had the sensitivity and responsiveness because I was a woman, and I always tried to keep telling her, "Look, it's not a male or female characteristic. There are people who have that kind of sensitivity--others that don't--that are responsive to people's needs and it doesn't have a sex characteristic."

But I now realize that the kind of society that we build make men so egotistic that they become sort of numbed to the nuances which women early on are aware of, because since we're not so much in the limelight, we sit back and observe more and we get a sort of an intuitive feeling about people. I realize that now. I didn't then.

And Holly would....once her boss sort of took her down a peg. We were sitting at a dinner once and he said to her, "Pass the cream." And she was busy talking to me and she didn't hear him. And he said, "Pass the cream" again and she didn't hear him. Finally, the third time he said, "I know why you're not passing me the cream. It's because I'm a man, that's why." [laughter] But thinking about Holly, I began to realize that it was gals like Holly, when it wasn't easy to work in a man's field. She was a newspaper woman with the Baltimore Sun and she came on John L. Lewis' staff as a writer and also as an organizer going around the Pennsylvania mountains. How much harder it must have been.

I think that because of the fact that in that particular span I found no difficulty, I found no difficulty becoming education director of the--not only the Telephone Workers [Union] but also of the Insurance Workers [Union], and later I was education coordinator for a ten-year period, education director for the International Union of Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers. Then I tended to forget that there were many women that, with equal amount of experience and knowledge, had a much harder going. And it made me probably less responsive to women's problems as such.

INTERVIEWER: Because you didn't feel that yourself?

WIENCEK: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Well, what about something like traveling? I notice that you did a great deal of traveling, to conferences . . .

WIENCEK: Oh, sure. Of course, conferences. That was no problem either because I usually handled the conference, you see, I conducted the conference. But as an organizer, sure there was. You're paid the same as a male organizer, but the places you can't go--a guy at the end of his time that he organizes can go into a bar. A woman better not, unless she's in the company of another organizer, she better not go into a bar alone. She's very vulnerable. I don't know how it's now today, but it was that way then.

So a woman organizer functioned slightly differently. I got an apartment instead of living in a motel. If I knew I was going to be there three months, even if I stood to lose.... if I was suddenly reassigned elsewhere, if I stood to lose a month's rent, it was still worthwhile to me to have some place where I could cook a meal and invite some of my colleagues for an evening meal. And that's how women organizers usually operated--they didn't do it out of a motel room. They usually made themselves a home base somewhere. And I think this is the difference between the male organizer and the woman organizer. Most women I knew did that, women organizers I knew did that.

INTERVIEWER: To whom were you reacting to--just the community at large or to the male organizers?

WIENCEK: Oh, the community at large, the community at large, certainly. Because you knew you were vulnerable and you knew that--particularly organizing the South--my God! [laughter] It was bad enough....I remember being followed, in not so deep South, when I was organizing telephone workers in Wheeling, West Virginia, having the company police follow me everywhere around I went. And in order to be able to visit my contact I would park my car several blocks down and walk down and sort of lose them walking around, and then I finally called my contact. But they would greet me and they would lower all their [window] shades when they talked to me. But if a woman organizer frequented a bar, you can be sure that they would raise a stink about this, and it would be all in the press and all of that about the loose morals of the woman organizers. So you'd have to be extraordinarily careful. Of course, the double standard would be that way.

WIENCEK: But mostly, the male organizers accepted the women. I...what they're most afraid of--they want to know what kind of a person you were. If you're willing to tattle on them if they decided to goof off one day and go to the races instead of organizing--that kind of thing. If you're minding your own business, why, it was pretty okay.

INTERVIEWER: Well, what about working with the men, say, beer drinking caucuses?

WIENCEK: Oh, you could have that. There's no problem there. I think that there's sort of a camaraderie among organizers. I know that when I had my apartment in Charlotte, North Carolina, I would invite the organizers for an occasional beer, and we'd sit around and talk and there was no problem there. There's no....there isn't any problem there. And I think most organizers accepted the fact that girls will be girls, and men will be men and just let it at that. [laughter] But there was a sort of a mutual acceptance.

But you see, in organizing, most of the women organizers call on women anyway and the men on men--there was that kind of a thing. The only time that I didn't find this true is when I was organizing paper workers and organizing telephone workers in Northern California. I stopped along the highway to organize a cable splicer or lineman. That then was the only time. But usually with textile and paper you call on the women workers, although I would call on male workers to build a committee.

INTERVIEWER: Well, the women that you were organizing, working for, working with--what were their lifestyles?

WIENCEK: You mean the women that I was organizing with or those that I tried to organize?

INTERVIEWER: Well, both.

WIENCEK: Well, the interesting thing is that I found this out--and that stuck in my mind pretty much--that women are not free agents. They always ask the husbands if they can join the union, if they should join the union. And a man rarely said, "I've got to consult my wife." Another interesting thing I found out, too, is that sometimes a man who is a staunch union member, often active as an officer in the union, bragged about how he was a charter member and helped organize the union, would himself not want to see his wife organized if she worked in a plant, as he was afraid to lose that second pay check if they found out that she was active in the union.

- WIENCEK: I know I had that experience where, in organizing paperworkers in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, I thought, "Ah, at last, we've got a good union member." And, God! The runaround I got from this guy. Gee, I was wondering why it was that his wife wasn't active in the organizing drive, why she responded so badly, and finally I discovered the reason--he didn't want her to expose herself and become vulnerable so she'd lose her job.
- INTERVIEWER: So, in that sense, also, how was your life different from . . .
- WIENCEK: From whom?
- INTERVIEWER: From these people, the people that you organized.
- WIENCEK: Oh, vastly different. It was vastly different not only in the kinds of things you thought about, but also what your life was like. My gosh, the dullness of a textile workers' life, going to work in this horrible environment, the uncertainty of it. In one textile mill, as soon as a person had five years' seniority, they'd fire them, particularly the men. They felt that after the fifth year, if they'd hire a person who was young--maybe seventeen and got married when he was twenty-two--he would then begin building a family and become more responsive to unionization because he had to think about how he was going to improve his lot working for that company. And they would routinely fire any male that was there over five years. The stark terror of being found out--they wanted to respond to the union, but they're afraid.
- I remember, in one textile plant I was trying to organize, I went to visit this gal--she was so proud of her aunt, who was active in the 1935 strike in textile, which was very violent, and how--when this cop who was beating the strikers with his billyclub--how she had, in anger, attacked him, used her umbrella and rammed him because he was beating some of the women with his billyclub. And she landed, this gal, her aunt landed in jail. And I remember the pride with which this gal spoke of and about her aunt. And yet when I tried to get her to sign a card, she wouldn't do it.
- So one time I was going through the file, and I found that her husband was a member of the union, and this was something to me that was incomprehensible. How is it that a gal, who speaks so glowingly of the contribution her aunt had made and whose husband had joined, not join? So I said to her once, "Well, your husband's a member. How is it that you don't join?" She looked as though she was struck dead. "You mean my husband belongs?" You know what happened? She turned to her husband. And I went back to her and I said, "How could

WIENCEK: you do this? Your own husband!" She said, "You don't understand anything, do you? Just a matter of time the company found out that he was a member and I would be fired, too. He'd be fired, I'd be fired. And who would feed my kids?" And so to me, what seemed like a betrayal, was just...was really an act of heroism because she was protecting her kids, you see, and the jobs are so far and few between.

People had to travel fifty miles from one area to another from a given area to get a job. You see, there'd be a textile mill about fifty miles away and there'd be another one sixty miles away, and they'd travel back and forth in the periphery of any amount of miles around there to get a job--jobs were not that plentiful. And it was then I realized that workers considered that the employer was a benefactor, giving a job, you see, and workers never thought of themselves as making a contribution to the profitability of that company. They thought of themselves as beneficiaries, of having a job given to them. And they really held onto that job. And if you once got fired from one plant, even though it was illegal to blacklist a worker, there was nothing to prevent an employer from calling up another employer or telephone....or one employer calling another one up and saying, "Got an application from such-and-such a person and he says he lived there and he worked for you. What do you say about him?" So these workers hung on to that.

But this experience shook me. I never again divulged the fact, even if I knew that a spouse was a member of the union, I never divulged that. Very harrowing experience.

INTERVIEWER: What other barriers would you say existed for women to participate?

WIENCEK: For women to participate? Well, of course, they were not free agents either to.... They had to cook dinner. They had to run home and cook dinner. There was child care, and of course there was this double business of not only being a wage earner, but also being a full-time housewife and mother.

There was another barrier in which....sometimes a woman was used sexually by the foreman, sometimes the husbands knew about this. And this was another shocking thing to me--how a husband could possibly tolerate his wife sleeping around with the foreman. But that was the fact that jobs were few and far between. They kind of had to hang onto a job.... and that was....this was common. When I thought of it as a

WIENCEK: unique experience and I mentioned it to other organizers, they laughed and said, "This is a common phenomenon in the South. The husbands know about it full well." [laughter] But primarily it's the double burden, you see, of having two full-time jobs really. And I'd often come into a household and find that the husband worked at night, and the wife worked during the day or vice versa, and that bed would have hardly cooled off before the other one had to go to bed in it.

INTERVIEWER: How about the women activists?

WIENCEK: Well, there were few, very few. Oh, you mean in unions? If there were, they were already past the child-bearing age. There were some young women, but few. Most of them were women who were middle-aged, and already had grown children or else the youngest child already a teenager. Even if they were workers before this, they just didn't have time with the families, and working women more than middle-class women had a deeper sense of guilt about leaving the families because they're much more home-centered.

INTERVIEWER: I think maybe it would be a good idea if you could just run down the history of your job experiences and your union experiences. I gather that included not only the telephone workers but textiles, you said.

WIENCEK: Yes. Well, when I left the Telephone Workers in 1947, I was on the organizing staff of the CIO--that was before the merger of the AF of L-CIO, some five years before the merger. And my job then, of course, was with the Telephone Workers Organizing Committee, and that took me to West Virginia, then took me to Northern California and Oregon, where I worked primarily with the unions which were disaffected with Beirne, and this was the aftermath of the 1947 strike in which, although settled, was not the most successful--the strike was successful but the settlement was not. Anyway, a number of unions left it so our work was primarily with these groups that were then disaffiliated from the National Federation of Telephone Workers.

That also took me to, in 1952, to organizing telephone workers in New England, and I notice that Joyce Kornbluh has quite a bit about the New England telephone workers. And she mentioned Julia O'Connor whom I knew. In 1950, the telephone workers--the CWA as it became known--affiliated with the CIO, joined the CIO, and the remnants of the staff which had been TWOC, which was then CIO. Organizing was assigned there to assist, and I was assigned to organizing them.

WIENCEK: What an interesting experience with those old IBEW [International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers] gals, because they had participated in their 1925 strike in which the IBEW had let them down completely, never supported the strike--they had to carry it on themselves. And this was an interesting period, too, because apparently the influence of the Catholic Church was very profound on the hiring practices of the telephone company as well. As soon as a gal was married, she lost her seniority and had to go down to the bottom of the seniority list. If she wanted to keep a job, she had to go down the line right from the beginning--not in pay scale, but in pension eligibility, vacation choice, hour choice, and this affected a number of the old-timers. In order to keep a job, some of the older gals had decided to live with their consort. I found when I made house calls, a number of them were living together because they'd lose their seniority and pension rights. And this is among older women, not the young women, but the older women. [laughter] And when I mentioned this to some of these gals, they'd say, "Oh, that can't be!" I said, "I know! I know for sure because I've come across them many times." I'd make a housecall and here very visible evidence of male masculine clothing, as though it belonged hanging in the closet, as you see--you know, that kind of a thing. And you knew something about the person you were calling on, and this is what the effect was.

I don't know if the telephone company still does that, but I remember having to distribute articles from the U.S. Department of Labor on why women work because many of the telephone operators were opposed to women working after they got married, you see, at that time--as late as 1950--which seemed incredible.

INTERVIEWER: The operators themselves.

WIENCEK: The operators themselves. And part of it, I think, is because of the fact they were primarily Catholic girls, and the influence of the Church on them. But the older gals--that was really quite an experience--these old IBEW gals that formed the bulk of our organizing efforts to join the CIO union. [laughter] Well, it was unique. That was interesting.

Another experience in organizing, which didn't have much to do with telephone workers but it had some sort of insight into the newness of women in industry. When I called on one woman working in the South, trying to organize a textile mill, she

WIENCEK: kept saying, "Before I was in public work," and I didn't understand what she meant. I said, "What kind of public work?" She said, "I mean working for a feed store." And I began to realize that when she said, "public work," she meant working out in the public as being opposed to working on a farm, as she used to be. And there was a change from the agrarian society to the newly industrial role as a worker working for a plant and she called that public work. So that interested me, too, because that was a sort of insight because they never worked in public as such before. I thought she meant public work, working for our government.

Well, and then after my assignment with Telephone was over, I was assigned for five years to Government and Civic Employees Union, where I was education director in a small union. The Government and Civic Employees Union was a union that took over the jurisdiction left vacant by the public workers who were at that time Communist-controlled and were kicked out of the CIO. And this included organizing municipal workers, included organizing federal employees as well. And so in a small union you get a chance to do a number of things. And so I also had a stint at organizing hospital workers at, first at Howard University Hospital, and also at St. Elizabeth's. I didn't know that St. Elizabeth's was at that time one of the largest mental institutions, second only to the one in Berlin.

INTERVIEWER: In the world?

WIENCEK: Mm-hmm. So I worked with organizing hospital employees, too, and trying to get them to be a viable local union. At that particular time, I thought that if you could teach workers just the routine thing to do to keep an organization alive, that they'd be able to do it. And I realized that was absolutely a false premise. It depended a good deal on their educational background. It depended a good deal on the kind of work they did.

I found that there was a direct relationship between the kinds of things that people would do with their hands or do abstractly, as in a white-collar job, that it was very hard to get hospital employees, for an example, to be self-sufficient in processing grievances and handling their own affairs. I found they needed the services of a representative male more than most articulate and better-educated groups. This was a disappointment to the head of my union because he felt that this could be done. This is how I sold him on an education program in the union that he didn't want. But I felt that if we could make

WIENCEK: them self-sufficient, they would do that. But I found that this was an utterly false idea. There would be some kinds of workers that would need intensive service and some others who would not. It depended upon the education level.

After I was through with that assignment, when the Government and Civil Employees merged with [American Federation of] State, County, and Municipal Workers, which is now a very large growing union, I was assigned to Paperworkers Union, and I did some organizing for them in the South and also some education work for them, did conferences for them, training sessions. One experience I had while there was a short leave of absence in which the CIO asked me to do a training session for potash workers in Carlsbad, New Mexico. That was an interesting experience.

INTERVIEWER: I don't know what potash workers are.

WIENCEK: You know, they didn't know until World War I that there was all this potash in Carlsbad, New Mexico. They had been buying it from the Germans, and they found they had it right underneath their feet in the desert all this time. And how beautiful that is! When they mine it, there are solid columns of indigo blue streaked translucent stuff, or else peach colored. When I went down in the mines, it was really beautiful.

These workers were once organized by the United Mine and Smelter Workers, and they had detached themselves and joined the Stoneworkers Union. And apparently the United Mine and Smelters Union had come to the same kind of decision that I had, that certain types of workers would need intensive service. And I...also still operating under the premise that they can be taught. I think certain ways, I thought that they could be trained to be stewards and to learn how to represent workers immediately on the job. I had a class for them and one worker says, "I can't come tomorrow." And I says, "Why?" He says, "My boss doesn't like it." I said, "Why?" He says, "Well, I hear you've been exercising your grievances and I don't like it." [laughter]

And so I had to explain to them about what the National Labor Relations Act said, that there shall be no interference, no coercion, you see, and explain to them what that meant. Next time the boss says that to them, they're supposed to say, "Look, the National Labor Relations Act says you can't interfere in our union. It's my right to go to a steward's meeting." [laughter] So I had him stopped right dead, and he said, "Well, the other union we had--all we needed to go to the

WIENCEK: union office and tell them what the grievance was about, they'd write it up and everything for us and send down the business agent." And so that was the difference, you see. So that was one experience.

INTERVIEWER: What about women's issues during that time? Were your particularly involved with . . .

WIENCEK: No. The only union that had a women's department was the UAW at that time, even at that early time, you see. Most of them did not. I don't know of any union except the UAW at that time that had women's division, a women's department, and it had it fairly early. They began to realize that women had special problems. I know that when I was working for the insurance agents--and that was in 1957, yes 1957, '58. I was with that union '57-'58. I was at that union for two years organizing, to editing their publication. I learned to put a paper together. Twelve pages I think it was. And I learned to write for space instead of pasting. It was quite an experience. [laughter] And you know what helped me? My art experience and graphic arts. I learned how to do it visually for attractiveness and how to use photographs and to use a variety of spaces and use a variety of articles in terms of shape and so it would make an interesting layout. You know that the newspaper is still the same format when I introduced it? [laughter] And then . . .

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned about the Clerical Workers.

WIENCEK: Oh yes. That was in Denver, and I was trying to get the already organized insurance clericals with the Farmers Union, to help organize other insurance clericals. You see, the Farmers Union had an insurance department in which they sold fire, casualty, that kind of insurance to members. And the insurance clericals were organized there by the Insurance Workers. And I thought that by getting some of them to assume some responsibility and spearheading an organizing drive and using their assistance, I could do it. But I was there a year, and I helped strengthen the local, but there was never any success in reaching out for other insurance companies. They just didn't respond.

Then from there I went to the IUE. Before I went to the insurance workers, I organized hospital employees in Richmond, Virginia; hotel and restaurant workers in Baltimore. IUE offered me a job as Assistant Education Director, then I became Associate Education Director and I took it and I was glad. It was a union in which I felt very much at home, and its outlook, its policies and all of that I liked very much.

WIENCEK: It's one of the best unions that I've ever been with. It really followed the policy of equal pay for equal work for its women organizers, and it was a policy long in the union--equal pay for equal work--and they attempted to get the....subsequently, it has a woman's division, pioneered in women's problems. It has a social action department, and it is particularly strong in trying to get the local unions in compliance with the EEOC [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission] guidelines and has done a very good job in this respect.

One particular local just simply ignored the International Union's urgings and EEOC. Someone filed a complaint, and the EEOC filed a suit against them [laughter] and so the Director, Bill Gary, who happens to be black, says, "Serves you right. Been trying to tell you that's what you have to do." And, of course, they examined the contracts to see there's no discriminatory provisions, especially in layoff provisions where women become the victims of layoff because of the fact that they don't have proper protections in seniority. But they've done a very good job in this respect.

INTERVIEWER: Well, what did your job entail?

WIENCEK: My job....that was before they began with EEOC--1960-1970--my job was to develop training materials. I did a teaching syllabus for steward training. Then I did one on speed reading, which is not quite programming, but auto-instruction. I did a steward's training guide on auto-instruction that could be done at home or could be done in conjunction with steward's training. And then I primarily did conferences and week-long summer schools in conjunction with some university, either with Rutgers, University of Pennsylvania, University of Connecticut sometimes. That's what I did primarily. That last part of the time I was there I developed a pamphlet on available financial aids for students when the Higher Education Act of 1965 was passed. The IUE editum was called "IUE Member's Guide to College Education Financing." After I wrote the guide, I invited twenty-one international unions to participate, with options to use their own imprint. The net result was that we were able to issue 85,000 copies which the international unions could either sell at thirty-five cents per copy, or use in conjunction with their scholarship programs. Then I revised the pamphlet with some new sections for the AF of L-CIO Department of Education. You see, many children of workers think that all you need to do is to apply for a scholarship. That's not the way it's done anymore, you see. So they have to know about this. And a lot of them didn't understand about the part family contributions play--what part the family had to pay for their children's college education. So I dealt a lot. And then the public sources.

INTERVIEWER: These are the kinds of things they want?

WIENCEK: Well, it's not so true now, but I felt that steering a member's kid to sources of financial aid was tantamount to maybe a five-cent per hour increase in the paycheck. Because the parents would have to contribute, less that is if they were eligible and the kid was eligible too, they knew how to go about it. And so that was an important kind of service. So that's one of the things that I've done in the later time.

Another thing that I was sort of proud of--I did a series of local history and labor history with an IUE-General Electric local, drawing on their own labor history and sort of putting it in perspective with the same particular time with labor developments in that particular year. One of them--in 1925 there was a strike at the General Electric plant in Lynn, Massachusetts, and it was doomed to failure from the time it started. It was a spontaneous strike without any attempt to organize it from any organization, just frustrations of the workers there who had been left out. Well, it was doomed to failure because of the fact that when the strike began, the millwrights had to go to their headquarters office for help, and the oilers had to go to another union for help, and the machinists to another union for help, the electricians to another union for help, and none of these were coordinating any efforts. And out of that came the knowledge that they had to have an industrial union.

And so they wrote to [William] Green, who was the President of the AF of L, asking for an industrial charter, and it was refused. So they then became very responsive to overtures by the CIO--in that case the United Electrical Workers who subsequently were expelled from the CIO. The GE local union joined the International Union of Electrical Radio Machine Workers. One of the local presidents dug up the material in the public library about the 1925 strike at this education meeting, and presented it. And what I did was take the same period and show what happened on a national level, you see, what had happened in that particular time they had a company union, too, you see, and how this was part of the post-war policy of making company unions there. The interesting result was that when some of the old-timers recounted this strike experience, the young union members looked at their completely different eyes at these old codgers, you see, because they would just say, "Hey, he's an old guy," you know. After the meeting I saw the young people get together with these old-timers and begin to recount strike experiences. This to me was sort of a living history

WIENCEK: kind of a thing, you know. I never had an experience like that before. Some of the things that they were doing now, in terms of their own union, suddenly became alive because of the fact that they found that others were attempting to carry through the same things--it was sort of a continuity of the experience.

One of the things, too, that I stressed was shortly after a strike of our own there--I stressed that union history, of course, isn't something that just happened in the distant past, that they're creating it, too, you know, that kind of a thing. And it was a very satisfying experience. That was sort of the program that I carried on, sometimes upon the invitation of the local union, sometimes in a weekend conference or whatever.

One other kind of a thing that I did and I was sort of proud of it, too, was interesting just the same. I realized that industrial workers, especially ethnic groups there, had an antagonism toward blacks and also not a very good understanding of why blacks find themselves in the situation where the percentage of unemployment was higher, and why it is they get stuck in ghettos. And especially our membership that was Italian, Irish, who themselves had lived in ghettos once and were able to raise themselves by their own bootstraps--who could understand why blacks couldn't do the same thing. So realizing this attitude coming out of previous conferences, I felt that it was time to do a conference on sort of an urban study conference--what is happening to cities, what is happening to housing, what is happening to the black situation, and why it's different from the time their parents came over and were able to hack it some way and went up the ladder, and how blacks get stuck there because there is no demand for semi-skilled labor--that they get stuck there.

So one of the guys from Penn State who's going to do the session and I knew that he had a short fuse, so I told the Rutgers University people sort of to get him to cool it because our people aren't going to be very good on this issue and they're not going to know enough about it to begin with and also they have the typical attitudes that the ethnic groups do about blacks. So....but that isn't where it erupted. We had the session, and they were responding fairly well. We had some young German trade unionists over from West Germany, and they were very much interested in what was going on. When Mark Brown, the instructor, was talking about some of the problems about not getting enough money into the cities for housing or all kinds of things, he said, he did make a comment saying that, "It's because of the fact that so many millions are being

WIENCEK: siphoned off in Vietnam and during our period of adverturism now, that we're not getting the help into the cities that we should be." And, my God, the whole thing erupted. All of a sudden, they wanted to know if he was a Communist and then they reacted very violently. And then, in the evening . . .

INTERVIEWER: The Germans?

WIENCEK: No, no, these are our own people who reacted that way. Then, in the evening, you usually start your session--an evening session--with a song. They began to sing all kinds of patriotic songs. And the next morning, the same thing. Then a young German made a comment about Vietnam and they shut him up. And the young Germans were very puzzled by this whole reaction.. So one of the guys that organized this patriotic fervor--I came to him and said, "You know, it's very puzzling to the Germans and frightening to the Germans because many of their own parents died in concentration camps, and they saw the route that superpatriotism took them and extreme nationalism took them. And they were very frightened by this aspect of it. They couldn't quite understand what was taking place." Well, the interesting thing is that this very leader of this group subsequently became a very staunch anti-Vietnam person on the convention floor of the IUE convention. That was one kind of experience that I had. I began to realize that, at that particular time, that the feelings of workers ran very deeply about Vietnam. Subsequently, they wearied of the war.

The year I retired was my last conference and some of the workers came and said, "When you leave will there be any more institutes?" And I says, "I don't think so," and they said, "Why?" I said, "For one thing, we reach so few. For another thing, I don't know why you want to be bothered with them anyway because you don't approve of the International Union's policy on the matters of importance anyway. You're not with the International Union policy on problems on the cities. You're not with them on the question of blacks . . ." And he said, "Oh, but you shouldn't give up so [laughter] because we're learning a lot about this."

And I began to realize that they take a position like that sometimes to find out arguments to use. "You've helped us a good deal. You don't know how far we've come." It was a revelation to me! Because you never know, even though you have the experiences like we had there with our group, for an example, a mild comment like saying, "All the money's being siphoned off to Vietnam which could be spent in the cities," and having them react so violently, then to watch how that changes in a short time. To the extent that you might be

WIENCEK: responsible for it, you never know. Probably not. But they've heard it before and the next thing that comes along, which raises a doubt about the wisdom of our presence there, it begins to sink in.

There was another one, an experience that I had with the IUE in which--in this black/white context, too, which was very interesting. It was at a summer school once in the Midwest--and this was the first time my union had a black educator, labor educator, and he was a very nice guy. And he was understandably very nervous. He kept wanting to keep preparing about what he was going to present. He was talking about--the big thing then was the McGovern plan for building peactime...planning for peactime industrial development, instead of concentrating all on war. Of course, the anticipation of that would, you know, they were anticipating the Vietnam veterans returning, returning to nothing, to joblessness, which of course subsequently did happen. It was Samson's assignment to do the session that way and he did a beautiful job. And at the end of the session, some of the whites that were very antagonistic on the black issue came up and shook hands with him.

But before that happened, we had a session on school desegregation. And I got the groups started discussing this, because as well as the bread and butter issues like steward training, local union administration, collective bargaining, arbitration, I also wanted them to be exposed to some facet of the kind of things that formulate our union policy at conventions. If they don't understand why the union takes the position of school segregation, desegregation, they'll never be sympathetic to it. So we had this roundtable discussion earlier, little discussion groups--buzz groups--and I moved from one table to another, to another, to see if they really got started and I didn't want to be appearing to listen.

Later on, I came back and there was a white guy and a black guy leaning across the table shouting at each other, and the white guy was saying that there could be separate but equal education, and the black guy says, "There's no such thing as separate but equal education." So I walked off very quickly and then came back to the black guy and I said, "How did you make out?" "Oh," he said, "we made out fine. We had to shout at each other, 'but,' I said to him, 'I want to thank you for expressing your opinions so frankly. It's only when we're honest with one another that we can get some understanding.'" Then the white guy said to me, "Thank you. I hope I didn't hurt your feelings." And I thought, all of a sudden, "I bet that's the first time that white guy's ever thought any colored guy could have feelings."

WIENCEK: Later, the next morning at breakfast, I saw this black guy sitting by himself and I said, "Do you mind if I have breakfast with you?" And he said, "No." So I found when he was talking, his enunciation was so crisp and so precise. So I was curious about him. He was from an IUE local in Indianapolis. And I said, "Where do you come from?" He says, "Alabama." I said, "You must have been quite young when you came here, came to the Midwest." "No," he said. "I was already twenty." I said, "But you don't have a trace of a southern accent." He says, "I worked at it."

And I suddenly remember myself living in Chicopee, Massachusetts, living in a Polish community, trying very hard not to have a Polish accent. And then we discovered one day that we spoke English better than the "Americans." [laughter] And we used to call them "the Americans." And I thought of this similar experience with this black, you see, who is trying to speak the language properly and precisely, and I thought of our experience, as children of immigrants.

INTERVIEWER: Well, assimilation is the same.

WIENCEK: Yes. That was quite a guy. I was thinking that it took an awful lot to be able to say this to this white guy. The composure he had, and yet the concern, too. He must have been quite a guy.

INTERVIEWER: When would you say that you were most involved, most active with the unions, at what period in your life?

WIENCEK: Well, of course, the Telephone Workers because, you see, it was a sort of a heavy experience of building something from scratch, you know. Or almost. And the knowledge that whatever we do, others will be stuck with on the basis of precedent, you know. [laughter] That's really quite a heavy experience, knowing that. Then, of course, I was most deeply involved then, more than any other time.

Of course, in 1946, you know, I was appointed--the memorandum here mentions that I was appointed to the....to the affiliation committee. It was true I was the only woman on it. But when [Joe] Beirne appointed this committee, in response to the pressure from the president and from the NFTW California Local, I can't recall this man's name. I can see him....he was formerly an old IBEW man, he had the....in California where he came from the telephone installers once were organized by the IBEW, and this man knew the value of affiliation with a major labor organization. He felt the time had come for us to explore it.

WIENCEK: So a committee was formed and we went to Joe Bierne, who was president of the union at that time, for our instructions on affiliation. He told us that he had selected a pro-CIO committee, and we could do with the report, or with our findings, whatever we wanted to do, but he knew that despite that, that we would be objective in our findings.

Well, we wrote to the AF of L and we talked to the Director of Organizing--an old former mine worker with an arm cut off, Frank Fenton--and he told us that all that could be offered to us was a department status under the IBEW, which meant that we would have only had a fraction of a vote, would not have had a full vote. And the same kind of thing that Julia O'Connor talked about, you see, the same status. And we said, "Well, look, we have 200,000 telephone workers to deliver and we don't think that we would be satisfied with that kind of status."

When we went to the CIO, the reception was entirely different. The Director of Organization, Allen Haywood, took pains to find out what part of the country we were from. He invited the regional directors from those sections of the country to sit in on our discussion. We were shown around the CIO headquarters. We saw a bustle of activity where, in contrast, the AF of L was like a mausoleum--hardly anyone around, you know. And we were very much impressed by the vitality of everything we saw around us. And we got commitments from the Director of Organization that we would be granted International Union status if we chose to affiliate. And we knew that the American Communications Association [ACA] then had the charter for organizing telephone workers. They were, I think...the West Coast was the only unit they had and that was an independent company. And the ACA, in promise for financial assistance, did surrender the jurisdiction.

So we wrote our report, and I was feeling--and I stated so--that our report would be meaningless unless we also spelled out the consequences of not affiliating and what would happen to us. And at first they didn't want to accept this. They said, "I think all we need to do is to make our report on the basis of what we found and let it rest at that." And I said, "No, because we ought to have some recommendation. Any committee worth its salt ought to have some sort of recommendation on a course of action." And I suggested that the course of action had to be on whichever organization we selected--AF of L or CIO--the course of action had to begin a conditioning of the members for affiliation, the value of affiliation, whatnot, what advantages there would be.

WIENCEK:

So to keep it from becoming a minority report, the affiliation committee did accept my suggestions on--I was going to file a minority report. It did include a sort of forewarning of what would happen if we failed to affiliate with the AF of L or CIO. Of course, we did mention the fact that by remaining independent we would be isolating ourselves from the experience of the labor movement, and also any form of participation and deliberations of the labor movement. And then I mentioned that we also would be vulnerable to raids which did happen. And then I mentioned also that we could not withstand a major nation-wide strike without some disasterous effects without support from the rest of the labor movement.

You know, that report became buried. They decided not to distribute it, except to the officers--like that Officers' Club that I told you about that was composed of the officers of the division--that was all and it just smoldered away. But how prophetic these things became that we mentioned in the report! We did not survive the 1947 strike--it was a disaster. We certainly made ourselves vulnerable to raids--IBEW certainly, and certainly from the Telephone Workers Organizing Committee later, of which I was to be a part. And these are quite prophetic things.

Well, after the Telephone Workers Organizing Committee was formed, I still wasn't sure I wanted to go with them, but the Director of Organization of the CIO came to me and he said, "I think you have an obligation. You've worked hard about the concept of affiliation and it's evident that there's not enough sincerity at all in affiliation." You see, they dropped it like a hot potato--affiliation--because the Southwest Division of the Telephone Workers did not want to affiliate. They wanted to remain independent. But Beirne did not communicate to the AF of L or the CIO that the issue of affiliation was dead. Then came our 1947 strike. And in many, many communities, this was the first strike that the community--any of these communities--had seen of any kind, you know, when the Telephone Workers struck nationwide, this was in 1947. And so the CIO, to their credit, said, "What can we do to help you people? This is going to be a real disaster unless we do." I said, "Wherever you can, offer the use of sound trucks. Get them acquainted on how to use community services of one kind or another. Get help, because it looks like a long one." It was--it was over a month-long strike.

WIENCEK: Shortly after that I left to go with the Telephone Workers Organization Committee and then, of course, from there to the CIO Organizing Department, and then to the AF of L-CIO Organizing Department, where I was until I went to the.... until I got caught in an economy move. When they merged in 1955, they expelled the Teamsters Union, and that meant a loss in several million dollars of per capita dues, so they had to curtail the southern organizing drive. So they dropped one hundred organizers. And although I was one of the few women--I think I was the only woman on the staff--I also got laid off. And about two months later, the Insurance Workers Union offered me a job, and that's where I went. And then from there to the IUE.

INTERVIEWER: I'm curious. Who buried the report?

WIENCEK: Beirne. Well, I understood, even then, even though I thought that it was a pity, because we didn't say we ought to affiliate. We didn't say, "Join the CIO or join the AF of L." We only said that you have to begin conditioning for affiliation. I can understand why Beirne decided to do that. For one thing, he didn't have the organizational machinery with which he could implement a thing, because the organization was pure mush in the structure that we inherited from the telephone companies. It was an actual structural disaster--it would be impossible to implement a damn thing.

Some of the divisions were pro-CIO: Michigan was, both the Telephone Traffic group and the telephone cable splicers and the central office repairmen--they were for it. Ohio was. The South....the Southern Division was, not the Southwest, but the Southern Division was. So there was some support for it.

But with others, they began immediately to think in the same reaction as they reacted about the need for structural change, what was going to happen to their little kingdoms, you know, and the leadership posts that they've already established. And the opposition came from primarily the same sources; the same people, the same kind of people, same reaction. That was why it was buried. And Beirne knew that he wasn't able to do it. He always said that he was pro-CIO. I believe him. But he felt that they ought to go to affiliate when they were good and ready. Some of us, particularly me, didn't think that history allowed them that luxury.

WIENCEK: Another thing I mentioned in the report, saying that we wouldn't be able to stem the exodus from the Telephone Workers because the independent union status would no longer be acceptable to a number of our people because they would want to be identified with a larger labor movement, because so many of them had relatives in other unions and they could see the difference. Well, that's exactly what happened. There were others that joined the IBEW, joined ACA--American Communications Association--and joined us, the Telephone Workers Organizing Committee. So that was happening.

Finally, at one period--I think it was in 1949--there was an Executive Board meeting of the CWA, at which the Board voted against Beirne and voted to affiliate by 1950. There was not only a commitment for organizational structural change, but also a timetable which they met. It's a good union, a very lively union. I've always had a sort of a bittersweet feeling about having to leave the Telephone Workers because, you see, I spent so much of my life in it and effort in it, but sometimes you have to do the kinds of things you think must be done.

I often thought....oh, one of the things too....the reason why I went to TWOC is the commitment of [Allen] Haywood*, saying that the raiding operation was only a tactic to get the Telephone Workers--the CWA as a whole--to come in, and that there was no intention of building a rival Telephone Workers Union through the Telephone Workers Organizing Committee. In fact, I know that there were pressures by some of the unions that joined the TWOC to form a permanent organization and Haywood, the Director of Organization, kept staving them off. I believed him and that's one reason that I went over, and I often thought of talking to Beirne about this, and discussing this with him. I never saw him, except for one brief moment once and another occasion when I went....at the dedication of the Headquarters office. It was a very friendly, very warm meeting and I knew the war was over [laughter], you know. But I deliberately avoided any contact with any of the unions after that, because I wanted no impression of interference or influencing anyone. So I cut my ties off completely.

INTERVIEWER: And what happened to the TWOC?

WIENCEK: Well, the TWOC....when the CWA decided to affiliate, the TWOC was merged with the CWA--that's what Haywood intended doing right along and this is the reason that I came over to TWOC.

* CIO Director of Organization.

INTERVIEWER: How was your personal life affected by intense activity in the unions?

WIENCEK: Well, I don't know. I think, oh my gosh, it enriched it. How could it not? It enriched it because I became aware of all kinds of things that never crossed my mind before. It opened up all kinds of interests. And the leaving NFTW was a tremendous emotional wrench. It was a long time after that I still felt badly about it. But you do what you know you have to do. And finally after I thought about this business of discussing with Beirne, I thought, "What the hell? What does it matter anyway, you know?" It's an accomplished fact, they're in the CIO, enjoying it, and finally the AF of L-CIO and Beirne played a very prominent role--for awhile they talked about having Beirne becoming the successor to Meany, until he stood for McGovern and that ended that. [laughter] I was so pleased to see him do that.

INTERVIEWER: Well, what other sorts of community and political groups were you involved with?

WIENCEK: None. Actually, being in the trade union movement, you make it your life and that's a total life, you see, it becomes your total life, partially because you have to be mobile. You're always assigned, here, there, and everywhere, and so you do that. Now all the kind of things that I used to say to our local unions activists about identification with the community, I'm just now doing because I've never had the time to.

INTERVIEWER: Ruth, you remarked the other day that you've known, since you were fifteen, that you would become a union activist. Why do you say fifteen?

WIENCEK: Well, I suppose that's because you became aware of what was happening all around you, and the philosophy and your political beliefs of your parents had some sort of impact, and somehow I knew that I'd have something to do with the labor movement in some capacity or another. I told you that one of the things that both my parents believed in was in the inevitability of change and the importance of change, and that each person should have a feeling of not only being able to meet it, but change that was really good--should help to implement it. So, somehow or another I knew that I'd be active--whether it was in the radical movement as a socialist, or whether it was in the trade union movement, I had yet to know. But in that way I had a conviction that in some way I'd be concerned with the destiny of workers.

WIENCEK:

You have here a very interesting outline--the effect on union of the Depression. Well, during the Depression years, of course, there was a company union, controlled by the Michigan Bell Telephone Company, as a basic tenet or philosophy of Vale--I believe his first name was Theodore--who was one of the Vice-Presidents of AT & T--and who, after 1925, formulated the doctrine of company unionism as a way of letting people let off a little steam, but yet not enough to really influence their working conditions and wages.

I don't think that the lesson was lost upon us during Depression years. The telephone company didn't always follow seniority when it had to reduce the force, and we found people of long service having to be let go and people of rather recent service being retained. That made us, I believe, much more responsive to doing something with our unions. And this was the period where there was an unsuccessful attempt to organize the auto workers and, after all, this is the area in which you function in Michigan--in which this had impact upon us. The failure of the organization of the auto workers was due to the fact that they attempted to organize the industry on a craft basis. And the unions had not learned yet the lesson of unionizing on an industry-wide basis, and this is precisely why the attempt to unionize failed.

Then came the New Deal. And, of course, the Wagner Act was passed, which was an offshoot of the NRA, the National Recovery Act, which attempted to set standards for minimum wage and maximum hours, and, of course, was subsequently proved to be unconstitutional. But the telephone company was one of the companies that had the NRA eagle symbol posted there, but it was not yet illegal to have company unions.

In a company union, what occurs is that the employer sits on both sides of the bargaining table. They select the leaders. They discourage workers from voting for whom they consider troublemakers, people who constantly raise questions. And the telephone workers learned that with that kind of an apparatus they could never have any voice in their own destiny.

When the New Deal came and finally out of the failure of the NRA came the Wagner Act which specifically stated that there should be no interference by the employer in the self-unionization of workers, no interference in the conduct of their organization, nor any reprisal or coercion because of the workers' desire to have their own union.

WIENCEK:

What occurred then, too, was the very adroit move by the telephone company at that particular time--and this appeared to have happened practically everywhere at the same time--the telephone companies would hire a lawyer to advise us how to be in compliance with the National Labor Relations Act while still remaining an independent union.

So what the company did was tell us it was no longer legal for us to meet on company premises because that would be a form of support. We no longer could use the Bell Telephone stationery because that would be an index of support. So we had to have our own meeting place, and the telephone companies withdrew their active control and guidance of the union.

There was, of course, the first national telephone workers conference--the word "convention" wasn't used because there was no sense of convention with rank-and-file participation--but the officers of these company unions would meet. There was a clause there which was debated very vigorously. The clause was that independent unionism would forever be inviolate. So whoever stuck in that clause was consciously--probably a company lawyer--who would try to prevent the inevitable, telephone workers affiliating with a major labor organization. And, in that way, while not visibly controlling, still could prevent unionism, bona fide unionism, from developing.

I mentioned to you before that what occurred was that as the new telephone leaders emerged, and they attempted to represent the telephone workers, they found two serious obstacles. One was the telephone workers themselves had been so conditioned by the telephone companies not to respond to unionism that they had a hard time getting the telephone workers to act in their own behalf. Then, at the same time, they found that with their friends and relatives who were active in the labor movement--either in AF of L unions or in CIO unions--that the leaders of these unions considered them company unions and were very disdainful. So this brought about a sort of a chip-on-the-shoulder kind of a feeling on the part of the unionists there.

By 1946, they realized that really the basic strength of organized labor is the ability to withdraw the labor power, and this is precisely how the telephone workers phrased it. They didn't say "strike," they just euphemistically described it as the right to withdraw the labor power, you know. [laughter] But they discovered that they had to do it. They began to act in concert. And, of course, when the New Deal came, telephone workers had just a few years to go before World War II was declared and then there was the hand of government control over the freedom of unions to strike.

WIENCEK:

I remember at one of our national conferences [around 1944-45] we debated whether or not the telephone unions should reserve or should also follow the suit of the AF of L unions and CIO unions by giving no-strike pledges. To show you how far we had come and how much thinking there had become in the meantime, I am proud to say that the telephone workers stand was against giving a no-strike pledge, and the reason for it was they said, "Look, out of our company union past we've expected to do this anyway and beside that, for the benefit of future generations....we don't know how long World War II is going to last. For the benefit of workers to follow us, we have no right to give away this right." I thought that that was a very astute position at that particular time, when many of the CIO unions and many of the AF of L unions were tumbling over each other to be the patriotic zealots who very willingly surrendered the right to strike. There were two times, in fact, in '46 and '47, when the telephone workers did strike.

The period during the war, during the wage and price control, was a difficult one. The employer was very happy about wage control because whenever we went in to negotiate a wage increase, they'd always very pompously state, "Well, you know, we'd love to give it to you but the government won't let us do it." And so what we had to do is to prove, to learn how to use the Bureau of Labor Statistics. We had to learn how to go out and take a wage survey. We had to learn how to survey cost of living in our own communities. And so we had to document our case, and we learned to do this. And so with every time that we went to negotiations, at the same time we prepared a brief for the War Labor Board, in which we had to prove the justification for our demands.

And, of course, there were many justifications. One of them was that the telephone company had traditionally underpaid. It didn't have to meet the standards. Perhaps among the telephone cable splicers, the central office repairmen, the installers--they could at least be compared to the metal trades and they based their wage evaluation on that. But the telephone company would always compare. They said, "There is no comparability." So they wanted to compare our wage rates with ourselves, with the industry itself.

At first, when we tried to break that down, they said, "Well, you're more comparable to breadwrappers or to unskilled file clerks." Or then they would say, "or to factory workers." And we pointed out that the factory workers were getting far more, substantially higher wage rates than we did without having to wait fourteen years to reach the top. And we had to prove that.

WIENCEK: We then got the U.S. Department of Labor [around 1944] to conduct a job evaluation of the telephone operators' skills--how long it would take to reach the top and what her capacities were. The Department of Labor said it should not take fourteen years, but two years to reach the maximum facility to be a telephone operator--long distance, perhaps a little longer. But, in any case, these are the kind of things that we did to bolster our cases before the War Labor Board.

INTERVIEWER: Well, for instance, how did you go about doing that, getting the Department of Labor to make that kind of evaluation?

WIENCEK: Women's Bureau. We contacted the Women's Bureau and we said, "Look, we're having a heck of a time and we think that the telephone company is wrong in making comparisons with bread-wrappers, we're not claiming that we're the highly skilled workers, but we are claiming that our job is at least semi-skilled. There is too long a period in which you have to.... an apprenticeship period, really, in which you have to reach the top rate. We think it should be considerably shorter. We'd like to have you make a job evaluation." So they did. And then they finally came out with the premise that ours was equal to a stenographer. The job of a telephone operator was more comparable to that of a stenographer, as a secretary, but not a private secretary. And this was the basis on which they made the appraisal.

INTERVIEWER: Who would have made that decision to go to the Department of Labor?

WIENCEK: Oh, the union leaders, the union leaders did you see. By "we," I mean the leaders. I mean a person like Fran Smith who was President of the Michigan Telephone Traffic Union.

Of course, we had the advice of the AF of L and CIO unions around then who said, "Well, look, use the Department of Labor. That's what it's for." We had long ago learned how to use the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Consumer Price Index, and utilized the market basket type of appraisal on the family buying habits at that time.

So what we did was we'd localize it, and the telephone company at that time also paid a differential on the basis of locality. For example, a city like Detroit would rate a higher wage rate than a city like Pontiac. They were what they called geographical differentials. And we attempted to prove that the cost of living in a medium-sized city was every bit as expensive because nobody ever walked to work any longer and that housing, because of the shortage during war years, was just as expensive in a

WIENCEK: smaller city like Pontiac, Michigan, than it was in a large city. And we would take comparisons in the super....well, at that time supermarkets were just beginning to come in--but in the grocery stores on key products, and we would then judge, from the point of view of what the rents cost, what clothing costs were, what transportation costs were, and that kind of thing, and we found there wasn't much difference. And particularly we found, in the brand goods....there was not one iota of difference in, you see, between a car, a Pontiac or a Ford being sold in Pontiac, Michigan, as there was in Detroit. And the same with a package of Rinso. So these were universal prices. And as for rents, we found not that much difference anyway. So these are the kinds of things that we did.

I mentioned our stand on the right to strike during the war. Then I mentioned to you before about the strike in 1946, which was in sympathy with the Ohio and Washington, D.C. telephone workers. This was the first kind of response that the telephone workers had to each other. They were so isolated because of the company union status--even though they met in national conference, they just never had responded to each other's need before--this is a wholesome kind of a thing. They learned what a picket line meant, and they thought twice before they'd cross the picket line of another organization, too.

During this whole period it was my role in the union--I think this is the particular thing that I brought to it, more than competency, and more than technical know-how--at least I brought to the telephone workers, at least I attempted to do so in my conferences--is to establish a sort of identity with the rest of the labor movement. Jack Barbash mentions it in one of his books--I can't recall the name of the book--but I recognized the telephone workers were so shut off from the mainstream of labor that the kind of ethical values which were current among unionists were completely foreign to them.

For an example, I was told that what I had to do was to give a steward training class. You know, a discussion leader learns to evaluate where her group is at any particular time and their own developing understanding. Well, after a few such feelers, I began to realize that these things are completely unknown by the telephone workers, so I had to roll up my sleeves and we had to discuss such simple things as ethics in the labor movement: what a picket line means, why

WIENCEK:

you don't cross it, why it is that if you have an internal union dispute you don't run to the press to air it out, how you try to resolve those problems within, and how you don't tattle on a fellow worker, you see, because of the fact that you have a sort of a sense of responsibility toward him--all these kinds of ethical values that a unionist develops into another....why you don't cross the picket line of another union, and these values.

During this time, it was precisely this kind of thing that we did. Where our own people didn't have the knowledge of how to utilize the Bureau of Labor Statistics, we would have somebody down from Bureau of Labor Statistics that would talk to us and tell us what the Bureau had to offer and how it could help in negotiations and how the Women's Bureau could help. And then, of course, we had other unionists talking on how to maintain a picket line, how to keep it going, how to establish a soup kitchen, how to spell each other, how to handle the press, how to get your own message to the community, how you establish contact with the various community agencies when, because of the strike, someone can't get medicine for a sick child. These are the kind of things that we learned to do during this period.

Now in the postwar period--and I mentioned to you that it began already in 1945, when the telephone workers were beginning to say, "Why don't we affiliate?" and by '46 such a committee was established, and I told you that I was a member of it. We were called a rank-and-file committee, but that was so ludicrous because none of us were rank-and-filers whatsoever. Here was one man who was the president of Indiana Telephone Workers Union, another one who was a president of the Southern Telephone Workers Union which covered an area of nine states, and still another one was in Ohio, and I was the Education Director of the National Federation of Telephone Workers--we were by no means rank-and-file.

We already had a sophistication, and our findings were quite different than a rank-and-file committee would make, as a result, because by then we began to look at structure, we began to look at services that the two major labor bodies would have been able to offer us, and how we would fit in, what kind of representation we would have, what kind of help the national organization could offer to us--these are the kinds of questions that we were asking. And it was precisely in this postwar period in 1946 and for these reasons that we

WIENCEK: went to both the AF of L and CIO, and I mentioned to you our meeting with both the AF of L and CIO.

What I didn't mention to you was that to pacify the still considerable sentiment of part of the officers of the various divisions--because this is what they were called--who still were for independent unionism, we did have a meeting with John L. Lewis, who at that time already had left the CIO, you see, because the CIO had refused to support [Wendell L.] Willkie, and he had gotten into some difficulties with Roosevelt, and so since the CIO didn't support Willkie, he left the CIO. Then he went back to the AF of L, and when the Taft-Hartley Act was passed, he was so bowled over by the AF of L capitulation to the punitive provisions of the Taft-Hartley Act, that he left and said, "The AF of L is all neck with hair grown over it. We disaffiliate." [laughter]

So they went to see John L. Lewis. And we went to see him, the four of us on the Committee, the affiliation committee, to see what he had to offer. Of course, he himself felt that although he disagreed with the AF of L, we should go to the AF of L. And we said, "Why not the CIO?" And he said, "The CIO is full of Communists." And he says, "I see the forces of Communism rising in this country, and on the part of Americanism is the great federation--the American Federation of Labor." And somebody--Walldecker, man by the name of Walldecker, who was President of the Indiana Telephone Workers, said, "Well then, I hear you had some trouble with Communists in your union, Mr. Lewis. What happened there?" [laughter] Lewis just sputtered. But we came away convinced, on the basis of what he himself had told us, that independent unionism wasn't for us.

When we began to talk to him about the problem of forming a confederation of independent unions, he said to us, "No sooner do we get a company union, clean them up and have them join our confederation of independent unions, why they go ahead and disaffiliate from us and join the AF of L or CIO." So we could see ourselves in the same boat. And this is one of the reasons that we worked on the report as we did.

INTERVIEWER: So he encouraged you . . .

WIENCEK: Well, it wasn't that he encouraged us. He was completely candid about the futility of independent unionism, you see, even though the Mineworkers are still independent. And, of course, another major labor organization which pulled away from the AFL-CIO, the Auto Workers, are independent--still that would be about fourteen million workers are now within the AFL-CIO. You see, they both merged.

INTERVIEWER: Let me ask you--at the beginning, when you first were active in unions, the telephone industry, you also mentioned that you had trouble when you were running for steward because there were very few meetings.

WIENCEK: That's true.

INTERVIEWER: But why was that?

WIENCEK: In the company union set-up, there were no regular meetings. They were held maybe once in three months if people had a gripe of some sort and they would try to settle it that way, but there were no regular monthly meetings, such as the business meeting of a union would be conducted.

The reason I had trouble also is that I believe that workers who are not accustomed to activism get a little disturbed by somebody who's an activist. I think it's a sort of a psychological thing. They're either teed off because someone's aggressive and trying to get them to do something, or afraid where it was going to lead. I think that most particularly occurred with telephone workers. So I told you how I deliberately began to cultivate a following and I told you, too, that I built up this kind of a good will and then, when the proper time came, I decided to run and I had no difficulty getting support. And I told you while I did this deliberately, I also found out that I began to like the people that I did something for them because I learned something about them. And I learned the problems they were having.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of problems were these?

WIENCEK: Oh, here's a young divorcee who's a sole supporter of her family--having two children, having a little girl who breaks her leg--and you commiserate with her, you do that kind of a thing, and you accommodate her so she can visit her child in the evening. You change hours with her if she works evening hours. Or someone is a young girl who is on the bottom list of the seniority who wants to go out. So you change hours with her because of the fact that you have the seniority and they don't. These are the kinds of things that I would do. And I made it quite known that I'd be willing to change hours anytime anyone wanted me to and I did that. And it was in summertime, especially beneficial to me because I was able to play tennis. [laughter]

INTERVIEWER: Well, what about the gripes?

WIENCEK: The gripes were superficial at the beginning because they didn't know what else they could do about something substantial. Usually they were on violation of seniority rights-- somebody got a more preferable vacation than they who had less seniority, or somebody got a promotion than they who had less seniority, and so out of that we learned a great deal. We learned how to put in a clause in the contract instead of letting the company say that "seniority shall prevail if all other things are equal," we demanded to know what the qualifications were of a person who had less seniority, as opposed to the qualifications of a person whom they bypassed who had more seniority, and we wanted a list of qualifications. And then we helped to make a judgment. Sometimes we ruled not in favor of the person that had seniority because it was evident that they lacked the capacity to do the job.

But those are the kinds of gripes that we handled primarily because wage rates were automatic, an automatic progression scale. But through our contract negotiations, each year we attempted to shorten the span of years it took to reach top rate, and it went from fourteen to twelve, from twelve to ten, eventually to six--I don't know what it is now, but six years was the top in which it took you--while I was still active in the Telephone Workers--it took you to reach the top.

INTERVIEWER: What do you mean when you say, "we ruled?" How did that work?

WIENCEK: What?

INTERVIEWER: You said that based on the qualification of . . .

WIENCEK: Oh well, sometimes the union had to agree that just because a person had the seniority, she may not have had the tact, or didn't have leadership capacity to make judgment. You see, the promotional opportunities were that of supervisors. They used to call them supervisors, now they're called service assistants. That was, at our insistence we found that there wasn't that much leeway in making independent judgments--although in certain kinds of things they could make independent judgments. But that was the kind of thing that we would....sometimes we'd agree with the employer.

WIENCEK: But often we would challenge the employer's contention that the person they selected had the qualifications over and above someone else. Then we began insisting that each nominee for a higher position would go through a training period anyway, and through a trial period, and when we insisted that someone of the telephone company was capable of doing it, sometimes they got fooled. The person that we went to bat for who had the seniority, they found to have quite superior leadership capacities and demonstrated ability to make judgments. So it was this trial period that we did that.

Quite a number of years later, when I represented the Insurance Workers Union, the Farmer Union--which is an employer--had contended that one of our members--the president of the local union there, who bid for a job that was opened as....something to do with computers, programming computers--they said that they had given her tests and found out that she lacked the qualifications, that her skills lay in meeting people and dealing with people on that kind of a....oh, as one of these people out in the front, usually . . .

INTERVIEWER: Receptionist?

WIENCEK: Receptionist. Well, we insisted that you can't measure an individual's drive. One thing that none of the tests show is the ambition of a person and the drive, and that the drive she had, in itself, would overcome any of the handicaps, and she made one bang-up of a computer program supervisor, which was true. So anyway, in these kinds of things we were beginning to challenge the judgments of the telephone company in doing that.

INTERVIEWER: So, in other words, this is part of the transition?

WIENCEK: Yes, right. And we began to see what other unions were doing and comparing it and doing that. Well, of course, the postwar period was a period of finally ending, in 1948--I don't remember now--I did mention that we affiliated, we merged....I mentioned that the Telephone Workers Organizing Committee was formed in '47, 1947, and by 1950 the two groups had merged--the Telephone Workers Organizing Committee and the Communications Workers. They had changed their name, meanwhile, from the National Federation of Telephone Workers to Communications Workers of America.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I've read a bit about the dial conversion, the dial conversion plans taking place after the war. How did that affect you at the time?

WIENCEK: Well, of course, there were less operators hired, and that didn't mean that there were less females because there were, you know, in the accounting department and also as service representatives and as bill collectors, as....oh, any number of jobs that were then commonly thought to be female occupations. Well, we knew that this would lessen the number of telephone operators and we knew that as the industry.... we worried about this a little....as the industry became predominantly male--which I think is true now--we worried also that the militancy of the organization would be gone. It was the telephone operators who were more militant than workers in the so-called plant department. The plant department being the cable splicers, central office repairmen, linemen, you know those types of occupations. And so we knew that, too.

Of course, gradually, when the CWA began to merge and go through a structural change, the number of women leaders began to decline. So instead of having a number of women leaders, as Fran Smith was and Anne Benscoter was, the women of the industry, when both the plant and the traffic departments were merged, tended to vote for males. And there were less and less women represented on the executive board of the union.

I remember we had quite a number of discussions in the early days about more female representation on the Executive Committee, on the Executive Board, and some of the women felt keenly that we didn't fight hard enough. So we said, "Well, look, make yourself heard. Get on the floor. Discuss issues. But also do some homework because logic doesn't wear a pair of pants nor a skirt. And if you do a good job, you'll be noticed and nobody can ignore you--they can't afford to." But I'm afraid that as years went on, precisely what happened to the ILGWU--where there's hardly a woman on the Executive Board, despite the fact that the industry was predominantly female--occurred in the Telephone Workers Union, too.

INTERVIEWER: Well, why would you think that there would be this propensity of the women to vote for the men?

WIENCEK: I think that lack of confidence in themselves carries over to the lack of confidence in one of them. Also, it was harder, as we certainly learned, to depend on continuity in an organization composed primarily of women. The industry was primarily young women. They're of the age so they're either looking for a boyfriend, wanting to be with him most of the time, or else having young families where they would

WIENCEK: have to hurry home to prepare an evening meal, care for the children. And it wasn't until the women were past the child-bearing age that they began to assume leadership positions in the union. When I looked around there, there were very few young women that were. Very few compared to the women who were in the thirties, middle thirties and early forties. This is probably one of the difficulties in developing women leaders. They simply weren't free agents.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned your role as education director. How did you, in that capacity, fit into the structure of the Federation?

WIENCEK: Well, I was Education Director of the Michigan Telephone Traffic Union, a state-wide organization. I submitted a plan, a program for an education program for the national organization. No one else had, and it was a question of timing and a question of....I was there and I appeared to have had the skills. I didn't altogether--you grew into it, and I didn't fulfill it all either because in my inexperience I developed too ambitious a program, too, and especially with only a one-person education department, you know, you could really see that you couldn't possibly carry out the kinds of things that you pledged. But you learned later how to pace yourself and what you can deliver.

Primarily, though, the conferences--that was one--and a few pamphlets, that kind of thing, that's what we did. And upon requests, under the National Federation of Telephone Workers, you assisted the Divisions.

We were talking about community support for the union. That was hard to gauge. I think that the telephone workers have developed it now. But at that particular time, apart from the large cities, where in the community really were other labor organizations. But in some of the smaller towns, the rural areas wherever the telephone existed, at least in 1946 and '47, this was the first time that that community had ever witnessed a strike of any kind anywhere at any time in the whole history of that community. Sometimes the community was hostile and sometimes it was helpful--it all depended. But once the telephone workers joined the CIO, they learned how to use community services well. Matter of fact, Joe Beirne, the President of the merged Communications Workers of America, became the Chairman of the Community Services Committee and was so, retained that post for quite some time within the CIO and then ultimately within the AF of L-CIO. So they learned how to utilize the community services.

WIENCEK:

This is an interesting concept, and this is one of the things that, as independent telephone workers, we looked at the CIO unions with a great deal of envy. The CIO unions used community services much more than we did. But, you know, when funds are collected under the Red Feather or the Community Chest, or however it's called in any community throughout the United States, usually the contributions appear to come from the large corporation. They don't. They come from the workers. Funds are collected from the workers there, and it says, "Such-and-such a company gave," and such a company, probably out of its own coffers, never coughed up more than a thousand dollars. But the workers, that group that did. And nearly all of them are organized workers.

So the union said, "We are going to have to insist on getting credit for collection of funds to the Red Feather agencies and not only that, but insist on representation on their boards." Because many times the unions would give through the union membership, and then when the unions wanted representation, and they wouldn't give it to them, and they said, "Oh, well, you're not the ones that give. It's this company and that corporation," and they says, "You're mistaken." And they just wouldn't believe them.

Of course, when questions had to be determined about where a playground was located or who gets help under what circumstances from a number of agencies, and also--particularly the workers often had to go hat in hand and wait indefinitely to get assistance from a community agency and be treated very badly in a humiliating way. So I'm not sure whether it was in Albany--it was some city in New York State made a test of it. They said to the community agencies then, "If we don't get representation, we simply will let the word go through that not one worker is going to give a dime. We insist on joint committee with the employer and a joint endeavor, and we expect to get joint credit." And it still weren't coming forth. So the word went through and, of course, that Community Chest drive for that year was a complete flop, and so the picture began to change.

Also, not only the sophistication of the labor movement, but also telephone workers began to be surprisingly keen. They became very adroit of this business of becoming a member of the board. One of the things that they insisted on was that instead of conducting the meetings in this jargonese which often social workers are capable of doing, that they would spell out what they say so everyone could understand it.

WIENCEK:

It was so difficult to get time off the job from an employer for this. The employer would grant time off the job to a steward who was processing a grievance or a union activist, if showed that it was somehow connected with the union activity vis-a-vis the company also. But simply to say, "I'm on the YMCA Board. I want to be off to go to a board meeting," it was very difficult for them to get that kind of an acknowledgment that this was a bona fide union activity.

So what finally developed is that the full-time union functionaries became the representatives and they were already overburdened because most unions are short-staffed, and they often didn't show. So sometimes they didn't do the job they should have done. But in other cases they've done a tremendous job.

One of the things they did in wartime....not the telephone workers specifically, but community services--I have a friend who developed this concept. It was during the war years when Truman was Senator--President Truman was Senator--and there, of course, were strikes. And some of the armed forces propaganda would be anti-union. Propaganda in the States would be that the soldiers weren't getting the ammunition because the workers were striking. Or sometimes the propaganda would go around that there were a lot of goof-off artists and the workers were soldiering.

Well, the Truman Commission did a study and on the Truman Commission, of course, were staff people and some who had some contact with the labor movement, which showed that during war years workers worked so much overtime that finally they became overwhelmed with all kinds of personal problems that would occur--sometimes with the kids. This was a period where you had to get coupons to get tires, you'd have to get coupons to get meat, and even to go to the ration board for coupons for tires would take time, and you'd have to take a day off to do this. Or sometimes you couldn't get your laundry done anywhere if you were a woman worker--she would finally have to just simply take time to get caught up on her problems. And this is the kind of thing they felt. Sometimes your kid was in trouble and you had to go to court. Sometimes you had a court case against you, and you had to take time off.

So what the community services finally developed with the labor movement and the community agencies was a sort of internship where they would train a worker to become a referral agent. That worker would become so familiar with the work of each of the social agencies that if a worker

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called him and said, "I need help. My kid's in trouble, I need to see so-and-so, the juvenile judge. I have to have a court case at such-and-such a time." So instead of taking the whole day off, this referral agent--who was acknowledged by the company as a bona fide representative of the union--would make the appointment for him to see. So instead of losing a day, they would, at most, lose two hours, sometimes less. And so the community service concept grew during the war years. This is the concept which my friend developed, and she sold it to the labor movement and the community agencies, so they had what they would call the counseling service.

Unions later learned that was a valuable tool in strike action because you had someone threatening to shut off your electricity, you'd have to have somebody to intercede for you, you know, when you were on strike: someone's going to shut off the water; someone's going to shut off the gas; your kid needed medication; your wife had to go to the hospital; all kinds of things that would occur. Well, the contacts then, with the community agencies and the trained counselors--trained union counselors who knew their way around and knew what agency to call for what.

A man would have a child who had--in those days infantile paralysis was very common--would have to get treatment. A child that's deaf--a school had to be found for him. And these are the kinds of things that a community counselor would know how to do. And so this concept remained, and the telephone workers learned to use this technique and become active in this process, too. It was an additional dimension. Besides being represented on the job, the workers were then represented by a specially-trained union representative in pressing personal problems.

The program was very useful because it drew the kind of person who's not particularly fond of conflict. And that's one of the things that a steward has got to learn to do--a union representative, a president has got to do. They've got to accept the inevitability of conflict. And if they can't, they can't make a leader. Impossible. But there are some people who don't like conflict and shrink away from it. To be a community service representative, or counselor, would attract people who particularly didn't like conflict, but still liked helping people, and it attracted that kind of a person. And unions have made use of that kind of thing since.

WIENCEK: Some, of course, don't put the community services committee into action until there's a strike situation. But others use it all the year around, and they've found it a very useful tool. Now, formerly, the worker would go to his employer for that such advice, and the employer would know all of his business. In this way, the union counselor has been trained to be discreet, to keep his mouth buttoned when a worker comes to him with a personal problem. When a worker is an alcoholic, immediately the union counseling system goes into operation, and that worker is referred to some Alcoholics Anonymous or some other agency that deals with this. And more recently with the drug problem, the same way. So all kinds of situations like that. Workers like it better because the employer didn't have to know their business.

The employers--I don't know how they reacted to this. At first, during wartime, they felt it was a very good idea, and they let the workers do this. Now it's an accepted part of union activity. Not all unions use it, but those that do find it a valuable adjunct to unionism.

Well, actually, when unions are active in the community in that fashion, they get to be known and that, of course, also helps build community support when workers are active in the community as well. Sometimes it resulted in sort of an identification of the community and not enough toward the union--where the union representative didn't mention that he was a member, or that his own union sent him. I think that was sometimes a question of bad selection and probably the union didn't do a good enough job to have that worker proud of the union that sent him and would make no bones about being a union activist. But very often it resulted in that kind of overidentification with the community.

INTERVIEWER: Well, what do you recall about specific support, for instance, in your job as the education director from the community?

WIENCEK: Didn't touch the community. You've got to realize that unions are insulated, too, like any other special interest group. Some churches sometimes are insulated. Some unions just have an inward kind of an interest and some, of course, are active in the community, like the Auto Workers in Michigan. There's hardly anything that they're not into. And I'm sure the Communications Workers are not that way now because they're practically into everything, too.

WIENCEK: They're particularly good at it because they have to be very vocal people. I would say their educational level would be probably higher than that of the industrial worker, although this is not so true now and many people are drawn to the factories because they can earn a good deal of money in a short time, and they can't find jobs elsewhere. But at that particular time, it was true--mostly the high school drop-out was the kind of person who got a job in industry. In the telephone industry they had to be apart from the manufacturing sectors, like Western Electric. They were required to have the high school education. And so, because the educational level was slightly higher, the telephone workers became a real natural in community services.

There's one gal who recently died in the Washington area who I think sort of exemplified what I'm talking about. Her name is Josephine Piccolo, and she became the labor representative to the community agencies--you know, the Community Chest kind of thing--and so very often you'll find union leaders that take on the job of coordinating fund drives for the community agency, Community Chest. So there is that kind of a recognition.

INTERVIEWER: What's the best job you've ever had?

WIENCEK: Oh, I think my last ten years have been the best, with the International Union of Electric and Radio Machine Workers. Of course, I look back with a great deal of nostalgia on the telephone workers because that was my first union. So many of the things that I've done, hardly anyone did, you see, even in other unions.

I'm particularly proud of that job I did on union ethics. I think that never was tried by any union before and that kind of a laying the groundwork for the philosophical base of the labor movement, you seen, even though, as we know, there is no basic philosophy that the labor movement adopts. Nevertheless, there is a philosophical base on mutual aid--particularly that workers are no longer alone when they begin to support and defend each other with that kind of mutual aid, and what you have to do in order to maintain that line of defense, defending each other. So I'm proud of that particular success with the telephone workers.

Of course, there were other successes as well. Another one I'm particularly proud of, too, is when I already was in the Telephone Workers Organizing Committee, and this was the time that the TWOC and the Communications Workers had merged, and what we had to do then was to follow the direction of the

WIENCEK:

Communications Workers who were then attempting a nation-wide strike. And this involved the Oregon Telephone Workers. Well, there are two stages, really: one, when they were still Telephone Workers Organizing Committee, working with the independent union whom we attempted to affiliate with TWOC.

What we found here was that the level of leadership was so unsophisticated and so completely lacking in leadership skills that we had to stop right dead, develop a course on how to lead, on what the obligation of leadership is when the members make a decision to follow a certain program. Even if that program may not be popular with that particular leadership, it's the obligation to lead, and even on difficult kinds of questions. We had this whole program revolving on how to implement programs, how you take it through its stages of completion and look back and see how you project a program and how you implement it. That we had to do. And I think it's because of the fact that we had to start almost below scratch, you see, that we thought in terms of doing these kinds of things.

One example of this--and I've often used this as an example-- I don't know if I've mentioned this before, when the CWA had already become the CIO union, after merger with TWOC. We were talking about getting the leaders to support strike action advocated by the CWA. In the Oregon Telephone Workers, one member of the Executive Board did not agree with us because he felt that the Communications Workers had overlooked the fact that the Oregon Telephone Workers were still remembering the disastrous strike of 1947, which for them was very disastrous because they had not won there, and that the mechanics of getting around the whole state--since it was a state-wide union--and drumming up support for a strike, would be overwhelming. Of course, the militants thought, "To hell with that guy. He's just a company union stooge," you know. But I listened to him and I watched him and I thought, "Why is he saying this?" Then when the Board overruled him, he said, "I disagreed with you from the very beginning, but if we're going to do it, this is how I think we should do it." That, to me, meant that this man had the elements of leadership. He was not afraid to state an unpopular position and, on the basis of the past disaster strike, was able to develop a program on how it should be done.

Now on our staff we did not agree on which centers to concentrate on. It was my opinion, and the opinion of this man--this chap James Farmer--that we should be hitting the smaller communities, rather than concentrating on the large cities.

WIENCEK:

Now it would appear that normal strike strategy, that concentrating on the large cities would be proper. But one of the things that we observed in going around the state is a closer identity that the telephone workers had to each other because there were not the distractions of all kinds of activities and, therefore, the union did not have to compete with all the other attractions for the attention of the workers and the loyalty of the workers.

Well, we turned out to be right. And we did it. I assumed the obligation of going all the way through the state and we delivered that strike vote. Subsequently, one president was stepping down--didn't want to run again--so I supported Jim Farmer for President because I felt that he had the leadership capacity and that, to me, demonstrated leadership--that despite the fact that he was not in agreement he could come up with a program of implementation, showed to me that he knew how to put on the mantle of leadership, and that he's equipped to do it. And he made a good one.

Well, that to me was a heartening success. Later on I had another one when I was organizing paperworkers in Pittsfield, and I always had the feeling that this was a wonderful thing. You know, they tell organizers that if you just concentrate on individual workers, you're never going to be sure of the outcome of a collective bargaining election. And this is because people can be talked out just as easily. And when they get to that booth, they often change their minds. So they said, of course, one of the tenets is an organizer always builds a committee because there's support for the union within the workers themselves, you see, and the workers are able, willing to stick their necks out for it. Then there's going to be something firm on which to base your organizing drive. It won't be much, it'll be a firm situation.

Well, in Pittsfield when I came there, I made some house calls--I picked me some leaders which I felt were key people. One of them was a gal who loved to sell tickets. She was forever selling tickets for some affair or another. Well, I selected her because I knew she had the ability to convince people and she had mobility, you see, [laughter] so that was a very valuable asset, and others like that that I selected. And I remember that the Director of Organization called me, "How many people did you call on today?" I said, "Five." "Is that all?" I said, "Sure." "Why aren't you calling on anymore?" I said, "Because I'm doing what any good organizer should be doing--working with a committee." And we won the election, of course, [laughter] and it paid off.

WIENCEK: But, of course, there weren't always those kinds of successes. In textile it was dreadful. The Textiles Workers, I think it was the fourth or fifth attempt to organize Burlington Mills in Mooresville, North Carolina. But it was a strange situation. We ourselves were given out cards by the directors of the textile organizing drive--and by "we" I mean AFL-CIO organizers were assigned to the textile drive.

What had been usual in a situation is that you go out and make your own house calls, and then you got the feel of the situation and you know with what people you ought to make a follow-up call on. That's not only purposeful for strengthening that person, giving them more encouragement, but also to be able to assess whether or not that person would be a leader. Well, this was not possible in the way they said, "You make first calls on these only. Don't follow up. Just first calls." Well, we never had a feeling that we're getting anywhere because of the fact that we weren't able to feel out that situation for ourselves or to develop any kind of a committee and I believe the drive was lost because of the fact that we never got an effective inside committee--inside-the-plant committee. And this is what we're talking when I talk about building a committee--this is precisely what you have to do.

One of the people who knew this instinctively was a CWA gal by the name of June McDonald--she died a year ago. And she was one of these natural leaders. This was the year, 1947, that we're organizing telephone workers in West Virginia that had been part of the National Federation of Telephone Workers and they withdrew from the National Federation of Telephone Workers after the 1947 strike. June would go to organize telephone workers--most of them were daughters of miners. And because of the fact that we were very much concerned with democracy--oh, this was before the merger, after the Telephone Workers Organizing Committee was organized--we were so obsessed with internal union democracy and the lack of it in the National Federation of Telephone Workers, that June would often ask, she said, "Tell me"--she would also talk to the fathers of the telephone workers--she said, "Tell me, John, is there democracy in your union?" And he'd say in his Polish accent, "Democracy? What's that?" June said, "Oh, do you vote?" "Oh, yah. We vote." "Well, on what things?" "Well, the district manager"--no, they wouldn't call it--"the district director, he come around and say, 'No contract, no work! And any son of a bitch that's not going to vote yes for strike gonna have his head mished mashed in!' Sure, yah, we have democracy." [laughter]

WIENCEK: Another time June was organizing telephone workers in Oregon, and when you talk about the companionship you develop when any group of people goes through some crisis together, you have a closeness--we maintained that correspondence with each other throughout the years. Another person was a guy by the name of Len Loring who's now on the staff of one of the Western regions of the AFL-CIO, organizing in Montana. Anyway, June made a house call and this call was one of the people that had crossed the picket line. But we had agreed that the time had come now where you have to unify your organization and despite the hard feelings of some of the loyal union members against those who crossed the picket line--scabs, as they called it--sometime has to come when you heal those wounds and get people to come back. So we were attempting to get this person to come back, and June called on this gal and she observed this gal and the guy on the sofa in the dark and they were making love. And she said, "Oh, excuse me! If you're busy, I'll come back later." [laughter] So there'll all kinds of situations that we encounter.

In Wheeling, West Virginia, I know that one of the things that--I worked out this problem differently--another problem. This woman was a matron of the telephone company. They usually have in these telephone offices--I don't know about them today--but they usually had a matron there who would help the girls with any problem they needed or like their question if the locker doesn't work, all kinds of questions like that. Well, I tried talking her into joining the union and she wouldn't talk to me. She said, "I've got to wash some walls." So I said, "I'll help you." And as I got on the ladder and she handed me the paint, we would be talking about the union. But she was scared stiff and it was in Wheeling, West Virginia, where, I told you, the police used to follow us around. But she joined the union. You have to establish some rapport in some way.

One man I tried to get to join the union, too. He was painting his store front. He had a little store, it was a side business. So I said, "Tomorrow I'll get you some Vaseline and I'll show you how to paint window frames, to smear Vaseline on the side so that when you paint just wipe off the Vaseline and the whole thing....you don't have to scrape off any paint." So I showed him how to do that and I got his union card.

So another gal I knew that organized textile workers--she remembered everybody's birthday and she'd make sure that the people she called on--to send them a birthday card or,

WIENCEK: if they had a dog or a cat, she'd buy some toy for the cat or dog, you know. [laughter] Little things like that that would be a human kind of contact, some way to establish rapport with them.

INTERVIEWER: What about the camaraderie among the organizers? You mentioned . . .

WIENCEK: Yes, there is, just that lovely thing. And we developed it with some of the union leaders, too. There was one particular guy who admired the three of us very much. He was the president of the telephone plant union, and we were talking even as early as 1949 about how the telephone workers ought to begin getting after the employers to employ more blacks in the industry. At first this guy was very hostile and he said, "You know, a black could never become a lineman because," he said, "from a hereditary point of view, the legs aren't strong enough." And, of course, we began to lecture to him about how acquired characteristics aren't transmittable. And we had to point out to him that that was a lot of hooey. Pretty soon he became so good about this issue that he became aggressive and almost embarrassingly so. [laughter]

We were out to dinner one night and he was telling us that he had gone into a bar, and somebody had made a snide remark about some black and he was ready to get into a fight over it. And he said he "doesn't like to hear anybody demeaning any race," you know, and then ready to get up....and so we had to get him to calm down a little, how he had to feel his way through this kind of a situation.

INTERVIEWER: You said, "The three of us." Who . . .

WIENCEK: June McDonald, Len Loring and myself. Then when our drive began to come closer, the CIO sent a former regional director to help us with it. And he was so good for us because we did nothing but meet and talk and plan and work, and pretty soon we were getting on each other's nerves because we were together too much and just too serious. And Len would love to plot things out with pencil and paper, and after I'd be away and I'd come back and I'd say, "How's Len?" and someone would say, "Oh, he's listing badly." [laughter] He would be listing all the things that need to be done. He'd love to ask these endless questions about "What if? If then, what?"--you know, those kinds of questions. And we'd say, "Oh, Len, cut it out."

WIENCEK: Anyway, our regional director was a man by the name of Herbert McCreedy. He was quite an unusual guy. He was once part of this New America group, a sort of Veblian group* that predated the New Deal, and out of which much of the New Deal leadership came. Also he had a marvelous sense of humor. He would say, "The time has come for us to go to the Oregon woods." So he would take a trip to Mount Hood or else he would teach us on a weekend to hunt for agates at the seashore, so we collected semi-precious stones like carnelians and agate and jasper and take it to a nearby lapidary and breathe down his neck until the gem emerged. But he would teach us how to be a little more relaxed and it was a very interesting thing.

We had a lot of good discussions and in the evening after our day's work, we'd get together at his apartment and sit and talk some more and have a drink and just relax. But it gave us a sort of sense of perspective about ourselves and about our work, too, because we'd get away from it a little. That, of course, is not uncommon. I think that wherever people work closely together and go through a lot of problems together, they sort of emerge as friends. Either they hate each other violently or they become life-long friends.

INTERVIEWER: When would you say that the feeling is strongest?

WIENCEK: I think when you're going through some problems, real difficulties, when things aren't going well. And there is sort of a tendency in that for your colleagues to support each other during this time or to....well, to commiserate and sometimes to share your triumphs. You see, we'd do that too. And you have that kind of a camaraderie. Like this gal Hollace Ransdell that Joyce Kornbluh wanted to have interviewed, too. I called her and I couldn't reach her. I hope she's not ill or in a nursing home. But Holly and I would have this sort of a thing, too, together. Holly was the Associate Editor of the CIO News and, eventually, of the AFL-CIO News. And when I'd be gone....I told you that when I'd be gone a long time, she would call, "Let's have lunch together now. Let me hear all about it." [laughter] You know, that kind of a thing.

INTERVIEWER: Who else have you stayed in touch with, say, over the years?

* A group based on writings of Thorstein Veblen.

WIENCEK: Well, then, Morris Makin, now dead, and William Roehl. He's now Assistant Director of Organization for the CIO, but he was one of my colleagues, and when we were organizing textile workers along with a very great guy--Morris Makin--the three of us sort of went together, and I told you there was a different lifestyle among women. Women usually would get an apartment. Men would stay in a motel. Well, we each got about fifteen records from the public library and spent our Sundays together listening to records or going to an art museum or whatever, you know, it was sort of fun to do that.

Did I tell you about the...oh, yes, I told you about the textile worker who spit in the little jars. She chewed snuff. I called on this gal--her husband was a sailor and he was away--and as I was talking to her about joining the union, she kept running out and spitting. And I said, "Do you have a cold?" And she said, "No." And I said, "Did you just have a tooth pulled?" And she said, "No." And she said, "I chew snuff." And the textile workers did this, both men and women. They'd put a wad of Copenhagen peach snuff right between the lips and the front teeth and that was to keep their throats moist. And apparently it worked better than chewing gum and the lint, you know, would be so drying--this is one of the reasons they called the textile worker a "lint head." "I'm a lint head." Finally, when I sat in the living room with her, I saw that there was a pint jar of brown liquid--four pint jars, one in each corner, of brown liquid, and I knew that was where she was doing her spitting. [laughter]

This Morresville, North Carolina, where Burlington Mills organized--remember you told me to mention it, not to forget it? During the WPA days, my sister submitted her work to the--I think it was the Department of Interior that was the agency in which the WPA projects were implemented--and she drew an assignment to paint the Mooresville, North Carolina Post Office a large panel. And it was so strange that after all those years--and this was in the Depression years--that I should be assigned to Mooresville, North Carolina. And here I would be going in the Post Office several times a week, looking at my sister's work.

Some of my colleagues got very excited about it. "Oh, I think it would make a wonderful story. Why don't we call the press?" And our director says, "No. The textile companies--if they knew it was a relative of an organizer they'd order it torn, defaced, torn down." I don't know if that would be true or

WIENCEK: not, but they really thought that they do that. So I never did. And that was a strange coincidence. This other one.... Did I tell you about my coincidence about being in Oregon where my parents had participated in the McNamara defense that made labor history? This was in 1912.

INTERVIEWER: I think you mentioned that.

WIENCEK: But here?

INTERVIEWER: In Portland, they had participated.

WIENCEK: Yes. Over here? That was a coincidence, too, being in the same city, the same location, the same hotel.

INTERVIEWER: Well, how else was hostility expressed?

WIENCEK: Oh, well, by the employers. Oh, they'd follow you or else they'd employ workers to follow you. I had someone follow me around with a gun, and I just got tired of having him tailgate me that close. So I finally got out and I said, "Can I help you?" And, fortunately for me, they didn't get out of the car, but I saw the gun and I walked around.

At this particular time, we were lucky. Just five years ago, ten years ago, the organizers would have been tarred and feathered. They would have been run out of the town. What did occur, though, was that the employers frequently got in touch with the stores from where workers bought their refrigerator or their furniture, their appliances. Of course, most of them bought on easy-payment plans. And so they would get in touch with the store managers and say, "We would appreciate it if you wouldn't extend credit anymore to him. He's beginning to be interested in the union," and, of course, most of the storekeepers would feel the same way.

So it was our job to talk to storekeepers and say, "You'd better not do this. If there's a union that means that the workers will be earning more money, the jobs will be safer because they won't be under such frequent lay-offs, and it's to your interest that a union exists in the plant because it's the workers, in the last analysis, not the company that buys your refrigerators. It's the workers that buy it and they'll be able to keep up the payments and they'll be in a better position to buy more often."

Well, sometimes it would make sense to the merchant and other times they would be very hostile. They would feel like the employer did. And very often what would happen is that the

WIENCEK: employer would talk to the minister, and the minister would then intercede and talk again the union. "You know, we don't want any outsiders here or troublemakers. And what you're doing is getting yourself talking in just for nothing." So there would be tremendous community pressure against the worker not to join and interference in his life.

Then, on the other hand, there would be the workers, too, that would be members of a fundamentalist church. And the fundamentalist preachers are--at least they are in this section--were not ordained ministers. They were the so-called "jack-legged" preachers who knew how to teach chapter and verse and memorize the Bible well and preach hell-and-brimstone kind of thing. They identified with nobody. They were not like the ordained ministers who would take care of all the problems and try to get help for his parishioner. And they would be jealous....the fundamentalist preacher would be jealous of any influence. Very often it was the company that would help them build a church. And so, you see, there'd be this close identification between the company and this preacher, and there would be hostility from the preacher also. And sometimes you had to feel your way around and call on the minister, but the fundamentalist ministers were among our worst enemies.

Yet it's a strange phenomenon. I wondered about the hold that these preachers had on the lives of these workers. And it baffled me for a long time. Despite the fact that most of these workers were religious as all hell, I never saw any group of people who were sexier and had sex on their mind more than the textile workers did. They were forever talking about it, forever talking about who slept with whom and what and this is occurring, and their sexuality was so extreme that I wondered how come the religion and the sexuality at the same time could be that compatible. Even the ministers.... and they often talked about the minister and who slept with the minister.

So I discussed this later with the AFL-CIO Assistant Director, Franz Daniel, who himself worked in the South and was a regional director in the South for a number of years. He was once a Unitarian minister until he got into the labor movement--he's now a Unitarian minister in his retirement again. And he said, "Don't you know?" He said, "the fundamentalist religion is the working-class religion. The lives of workers are so dull and so grinding and so miserable there, with nothing much to recommend it, that it's precisely the hell-and-brimstone kind of revivalism that appeals to them and gives spice to their lives." So I thought this was very strange, and there's

WIENCEK:

a book Erskine Caldwell wrote about his life. His father was a minister and he mentions a good deal of this, too. And in it Erskine Caldwell also remarks about the working-class nature of the fundamentalist and how it can appeal. But the black churches have quite a different kind of background. The black churches became the kind of focal point for the civil rights movement. I remember, too, when I was in the South organizing paperworkers, the Lily Cup in Darlington, South Carolina--Darlington, South Carolina--this case became very famous because it was a National Labor Relations Board case against Milliken Mills, and he threatened...he told the workers that he would shut down the plant if the union became organized. And he did. That, of course, became an unfair labor practice charge against him because that is intimidation, coercion. But it took a long...went through the courts....long, long period of time and finally the union won it, but the workers by then were dispersed and it was meaningless.

But when I called on the paperworkers, Milliken Mills was the textile mill in which a lot of the paperworkers' wives worked, where a lot of the relatives worked there. And I remember.... normally the workers are always warm and friendly and, of course, in this small little house which were company houses, company-owned, was this inevitable pot-bellied stove right in the middle of the room. And you'd come in on a cold day and they'd say, "Take off your coat. Sit down." And be very cordial.

Then the Supreme Court decision came through on school desegregation. Wow! What a change! The whole atmosphere was completely frigid. So when you walked into people's houses, all they would say is, "How y'all feel about the niggers?" And, of course, you try to change the subject by saying that unions are for workers and that we organize workers wherever they are. But that case was hopeless then. The management managed to foment it.

They blew up a picture of the President of the International Union of Electrical and Radio Machine Workers, dancing with a black woman at a convention and all they needed was that picture and they distributed it to all the workers. And our case was just simply....I mean our drive was just hopeless from there on in. We had to abandon that.

I remember calling on another family in the same town. This man was an oiler, machine oiler, and as soon as the company found that he signed a union card, they demoted him. And he ultimately lost his job. His wife worked in a radio station,

WIENCEK: and she wrote me a letter saying that although her husband lost his job and we lost the drive--the organizing drive was lost--she was never prouder of her husband than she was now that he stood for something and he stood up for what he believed. That was a very touching letter and I liked that. They were a nice family. I was having a hard time getting used to the Southern accent. They had a little girl and she said, "I have a bawble." And I was thinking of the song "Baubles." [laughter] And I says, "Oh, what color is it?" And she looked so puzzled. She says, "Black, I reckon." [laughter] She was talking about her Bible. They were a wonderful family.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of sacrifices did you make personally?

WIENCEK: You don't think of those as sacrifices, for some reason. First of all, you have a conviction about what you're doing. And it's always interesting. It's fascinating. It might be distressing, might be agonizing, but it's never boring. If you can call it a sacrifice, the deprivation from not being near a center of culture such as in a metropolitan area. Like sometimes being in a distant city, a Southern city, in which there's only one movie house and they're all cowboy pictures. But your colleagues fill in the gap. You sort of lean on each other a good deal because of the fact that you're isolated. But somehow I never thought of that because I always traveled with books. I always had my record player and I always had a lot of records. And even if I stayed in a motel I tried to make it as interesting as possible. I listened to music and I read a good deal. Most of the time you worked anyway--you even worked on Saturdays so you only had Sundays free and then you did your laundry, caught up on your correspondence and your bills, and all of that.

The work is hard. An organizer's work is hard. For example, we would be up to catch the night shift coming off and the day shift going on. So that meant we'd have to be right at the plant gates at 6:30 in the morning, getting up at five. Then you'd have to catch the evening shift going in at eight. Then you'd have to come back and catch the night shift going in, so we'd be sure to catch everyone. Then during the days you made house calls. It was very demanding.

The worst part of it is your isolation away from medical care. You see, you could never take the time off and usually you knew doctors in the town in which you originally lived, but it was awfully hard to get back. We'd have one weekend in six to come home, to take care of our personal affairs.

WIENCEK:

This would have a very bad effect upon the men. The divorce rate was very high among organizers. I talked to a number of the guys and they said, "Well, look, it's hard on our wives because they have to take care of all, you know, the complaints of the children, the problems with the children, the problems with everything, and when we were only home for a weekend once in six weeks, the wives would hesitate about bothering us about those things." Others, of course, liked it. I always suspected that, among the guys in any case, organizing attracted men who didn't want the responsibility of marriage, and they were like lovers coming home to a mistress on a weekend, you know. [laughter] That was the kind of life they lived, very free of any real family responsibilities. Of course, some guys didn't like it and eventually they dropped off and got other jobs because they couldn't bear to be away from their families that much--it was hard on them. For them, sure, it was a sacrifice to be away from the family. Some guys loved it.

Well, not to be able to see a ballet, not to be able to go to a concert or play, I suppose is deprivation of a sort. But then you have other kinds of observations that you make about people, and see what their lives are like and how they live. Regional differences are always interesting. People are always fascinating and interesting.

For some of the workers, you develop a real affection. And I remember one gal--she was fired for joining the union. So while she was drawing her unemployment check--she was laid off, they didn't want to say she was fired because that would be evidence for the union to file an unfair labor practice charge--she helped us organize. And I used to come to her house quite often, but before I went there she said, "I want to prepare you. You know I have a melancholy child." What she meant, of course, she had a child that was retarded.

INTERVIEWER:

Mongoloid?

WIENCEK:

A mongoloid child, yes. The way that they spoke of it there. She'd say, "I have a melancholy child." Then, of course, there was a difference between the textile workers in the mountains in Roanoke and the difference between the textile workers in the South, living in the rural areas. The textile workers always regarded the employer as a benefactor, giving them a job. Industries were so far and few between there--about a perimeter of fifty miles in any direction that they would have to travel to a job if they lost out--that you could understand why they were fearful about joining a union.

WIENCEK: But also because of the nature of the religion, they had absolutely no experience with mutual aid. If somebody got fired, "Well it was tough. Glad it wasn't me." That kind of a thing. And I tried to explain to them how life would be different for them--if somebody got hurt in some way that all of the union would rally around that person to help. This was awfully hard for them to grasp because they had nothing, no experience with mutual aid of any kind because the fundamentalist churches didn't practice that kind of a thing, you see. They visited you if you were ill, but they had no fund to tide you over if you lost a job, as the Episcopalian minister down here does and the black ministers at the Methodist churches do here in my home in Calvert County, Maryland, you see, or make the contact with social agencies to see that they get help--none of that kind of experience as a sort of a community. Well, really, they're like a social worker would be, the ministers. But none of that was practiced by the fundamentalist ministers. So that was a different experience. But the mountain people were different. They were more independent. They were not that fearful and they responded more. We didn't win it, but nevertheless we had a much more active committee and they worked hard.

INTERVIEWER: How long would you spend on average for one campaign?

WIENCEK: Campaign? Sometimes it would be seven months, sometimes six, sometimes two years, building a committee. Sometimes you'd return after a year, or maybe two years if you lost it.

INTERVIEWER: I had meant to ask you about school when you were a child. What were your favorite subjects?

WIENCEK: History, I think. English and history. And also drawing. I used to love to draw and sketch. I liked that. But, see, we moved around so much and I told you partially because of black-listing and that every time we moved the school system was slightly different. Every member of my family is a mathematical idiot. We have absolutely no feeling for mathematics. I attributed to that factor that we moved so often, and the school systems were so different that we never got a grounding in it and I understand, reading now, that workers move around a good deal anyway, more than the middle-class people. They're more apt to rent than to buy a house--that's changing, of course, but not for the new entrants into the labor market like blacks and Puerto Ricans, because they're still renters. Anyway, we moved a good deal from city to city. I told you about my father painting the bottom of the kitchen, you know. Those are the kinds of things we liked. We drew most of the time.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of friends attracted you?

WIENCEK: Just kids....who play. And since you moved from one place to another so often, you never had any lasting friends that you can....except for one that I'd keep in touch with, but she was not a schoolmate. She was a daughter of my mother's friend and she's now a school teacher. She belongs to that church that my mother did--the Polish National Church, which is--it's not quite Protestant, but they don't follow the Pope of Rome. That was it. She's active in that church and also she speaks Polish very fluently, which I no longer do. But that friend I keep in touch with. And one friend with whom I grew up with and worked at the telephone company back in Michigan, occasionally I keep in touch with her. But most of my friends are from around the labor movement because my life became quite different after I was active in the labor movement.

INTERVIEWER: What about favorite teachers?

WIENCEK: I remember only one, really. He was a history teacher in high school. I once wrote a composition, and my composition was about the struggle of workers in various countries and how the plight of workers is difficult in some countries, and how the coolie has to work hard and has to run with this cart. And he was very much interested in me and he said, "Where did you get such ideas?" And he began to talk with me and I remember him as a favorite teacher. But that's all so far in the distant past that it's difficult to recall really.

INTERVIEWER: Which would you say was your favorite parent? Say the one you admired the most?

WIENCEK: Both, of course. Of course, I lost my mother when I was just seventeen. But both. Both had different kinds of things to contribute. My mother was sort of a one-woman social agency, too. She....when anyone was in trouble, they'd say, "Well, go and see Emma. She'll know what to do." She was forever taking people to the friend of the court or to some social agency, translating for them, and everyone said, "Well, Emma will know what to do. Come and see Emma." You know, and she did.

In that respect, my sister Cecelia is very much like her--I told you about my sister Cele being Director of Volunteer Services with the Metropolitan Hospital. This identification, of course, with workers, with change, runs through our family--all of us had it. It took with us and lasted throughout our lives.

WIENCEK: I said that one of the most fruitful times of my life was with the last ten years--International Union of Radio Electrical and Machine Workers. This was a union that in the early years, in the early CIO days, was originally the union for the United Electrical Workers, and during the fifties the CIO had a purge of left-wing unions. They formed an organizing committee and the International Union of Electrical and Radio Machine Workers became the union which had the jurisdiction in the field, although the UE still exists--the United Electrical Workers--still exists as an independent union.

The differences that tore them apart are not present any longer. The leaders....there was a membership rebellion against communist control. And that was during the war years when the allies joined with Soviet Union. From a militant union, which it once was, it all of a sudden became terrible patriotic. Among that and other kinds of things made many of the members realize that a true....I mean, a union....it was not detached from a party which controlled, in some ways, their actions. They were always around with the cans collecting for the starving Rumanians or some such thing--a struggle against this, a struggle against that. So within the UE a strange coalition was formed. They called it Union Democracy Committee and it was a coalition of Catholic trade unionists--Association of Catholic Trade Unionists--and socialists, those that were oriented toward socialism, that began the breakaway from UE.

In terms of outlook, IUE was one of those unions that would be called a social union, and by that I mean there's a difference between a bread-and-butter union and a social union. The social union responds to workers' problems and social issues. I remember telling you how concerned we were that we wanted our workers to understand what the black struggle was all about, what the urban crisis was about. James Carey, the president of the IUE, for example, participated in the [civil rights] march on Selma. We identified closely to that, with the Civil Rights Movement. It was the kind of a union that I felt completely at home in, much more so than the telephone workers who had no kind of reaction to social problems at that time. So I would say that that was the most fruitful.

I worked under a guy the first five years that I was with the IUE, Ben Segal. I worked with a man who had an interesting background. They used to joke and say that he was the only Jew they knew that was a Friend. He worked for the American Field Service for a long time, the Quaker outfit. He had a real feel for people. He could come into a group of diverse people and a very short time jell them together so that there would be sort

WIENCEK: of a sense of unity there, and a sense of togetherness there. He also was a very ambitious man. He kept driving you to achieve goals you never knew you could, you see, and it's because of that kind of activity that under his direction I did quite a bit. I developed the syllabus for teacher training, for steward training and the one on auto instruction. He often didn't quite know what was involved, but he would drive you on to do it.

Then the other five years, although they didn't call me that, I became the education director--they called me education coordinator--I became education director for about the next five years. And it was an interesting period because I did something quite different. The emphasis was changed.

One of the things when you work for the labor movement, the thing that is ever present is change. You're assigned as an organizer to one director after another, and you have to know what ails this guy or what's he like or how will I work with him, and you learn to adapt. During the time that I was with the IUE I had three different directors. And every time I had to reestablish a relationship, a completely different kind of relationship and I had to function differently. It's an interesting sort of series of adaptations that you have to make. But I enjoy that the most, I think.

INTERVIEWER: Which sex have you worked with the most?

WIENCEK: Men....and women, too, but mostly with men. You know, we were talking the other day about whether or not there was any discrimination and now that I come to think of it, you know, we had no awareness of those things because, first of all, we thought this was the way it was, period. And when I thought about what you talked about, "Was there discrimination?" of course, because as a woman you'd have to know how to be....how not to challenge men and how not to compete because if you're competitive with men, they would immediately, their guard would be immediately raised. So it's fortunate that quite early in the labor movement, I already believed in cooperation more than I did in competition. To me, you can't even compete without cooperation. So, you see, I believe in a cooperative society. A labor union, to me, is a cooperative, a mutual aid organization. So to cooperate was really the most important end. So I would ask myself, "What do I really want out of this? Is it to really be competitive or to get the job done?" And I'd have to do it that way.

WIENCEK:

So when you talked, and when you spoke with your male colleagues, I know that you often had to preface your statements by a sort of a self-deprecating term. While most men would say, "A thing is so," a woman would say, "Well, it's been my experience and I don't know how anyone else's experience," or "As you may have heard," or "As some say."

Of course, as the attitudes of men changed toward women, toward women colleagues, more women in the labor movement, the less necessary it was to do this. And a woman learns quite quickly which colleagues are unsure of themselves and those that are so sure of themselves. If they're sure of themselves, then you don't have to use the self-deprecating prefaces. You simply say a thing is so. To that extent, of course there has been discrimination.

Another case I remember, too, in which Morris Makin was the other colleague--he was an interesting guy. He fought in the Spanish Civil War and he was an education director in one of the locals of the International Ladies Garment Workers and finally came with Textiles. He remained behind in the drive when it failed, to keep a skeleton crew. Quite obviously, because of my experience, I was the person to keep the group knit together and should have been assigned that. So whom he selected instead was a volunteer plant worker, and he said, "Well, the men won't accept you." And I said, "But this is so blatantly discriminatory. Obviously I'm going to be fronting this guy and fighting for him, and really advising him all the way. Why not me? Why didn't you...of all people, you should have assigned me." He said, "Well, they're not used to it." I says, "I think they would accept you for what you are." And I found this to be true.

I remember once when I was addressing a telephone workers' group. After I got through talking, a man came up to me and he said, "Do you know, I hope you don't misunderstand what I'm saying, but when I listen to you talk, you're not a woman to me. I don't mean that you're not ladylike, but I mean you're saying the things I believe, and I don't think of you either as a woman or a man, but just somebody saying those things." So I realized that there's more acceptance on the basis of a personality rather than whether you're male or female. I think this is possibly the key.

One of the things that I've learned, and had to learn the hard way, is that contrary to most people's beliefs, people are not attracted to pure issues. They identify with those issues if they like you or they admire you. But on the pure issues, they don't at all. It's the force of leadership, the force of identity with those kinds of things and whether they respond to you that makes them think.

WIENCEK: Looking back, while I was education director for the National Federation of Telephone Workers, Paperworkers, why was it possible for me to do some education conferences for the Paperworkers and for the steward training courses for the Allied Store Workers? Because I think they accepted women in education. Women as teachers are accepted. Eventually, women as organizers were accepted, but usually women organized women. It was only rarely that you'd organize men, too. But in the field of labor education, I think it was very much like that.

I remember a time when my boss, Ben Segal, sent me off to an assignment to Lynn [Massachusetts], and the president there, when he heard that I was coming out, that I was a woman, he didn't want me to come out. But once I got there and I worked with the group, they called up--he called up to say that I had done a good job.

We discussed work relations between men and women...my own cousin raised this question. He said, "How do you get along with the men?" And I said, "Well, for one thing, I accept the fact that all human beings must be permitted to save face, whether they are men or women. And if you permit that, you permit those face-saving devices while doing your job, they will like you for it." And so, in working with men I do that. I do that with women, too.

INTERVIEWER: Don't humiliate them.

WIENCEK: Yes. Right. If you want to establish a relationship that's exactly what you do. If you have suggestions to make, you also do it carefully. Oh, yes, I was also education director for the Government and Civic Employees for five years. But I followed that premise right along and I found that it's a valuable recognition of working with people, that's necessary to do it. Even if you have to correct people, you think of ways to introduce that so that it will help.

For an example, I discovered that working with people to get them to accept more responsibility, and therefore more leadership, I would withdraw my services gradually from them. I would be with them, maybe three executive board meetings, especially when I was working with local presidents and then I'd say....you know, after we'd go through about how you handle....we'd have a series of training, training on local union administration. Then I would absent myself, say, "I'm sorry, but I can't be there. But call me and tell me how it went." And they would call me and they said, "Well, this

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worked and this didn't work." I said, "Well, maybe next time you might try this. I found it to work when I was local president. And it did. Maybe it won't but it's worth a try." And so you give them another sort of dimension. Then eventually you don't come at all, except to give a report at the monthly meeting about what you're doing in the area, you know, to organize the area. And that's how I worked with local groups.

Sometimes it doesn't work. And then again, you don't often have time to meet with the people to assess the nature of the leadership and what the character and the nature of the local officials are. One group I was assigned to work with, the Paperworkers in Northern Virginia--Covington, Virginia--beautiful area, mountains. The education director of the Paperworkers was going on another assignment and he sent me there. And he said, "Well, they need a lot of leadership training. It's a good local, but the kind of things that they need to do for themselves they probably are not doing."

So when I went in, here I was a woman coming in and saying--and I didn't want to create the impression of saying, "Well, you're doing this wrong, you're doing that wrong." So I said, "Well, we're going to do a sort of a self-appraisal session. It's going to hurt because you're going to look at yourselves as though you're looking at a mirror." So we did this. One of the things that we discovered during this process of self-evaluation is that they were undertaking community responsibility that was not theirs to assume at all, spending six thousand dollars a year on it. When a guy had been injured and already exhausted his workmen's compensation, and still wasn't going to work, the local would help, for example, the local would help and give him a welfare check from the local. And they'd do that with laid-off members as well. So I clearly saw that what they needed was some community services training to make contact with the community.

So I called in a guy by the name of Waterson, who was one of the labor representatives of the Community Chest and knew very well what to do with the group, and he got them to make contact with the mayor of the town and some of the commissioners--or whatever, aldermen, whatever you call them there. And they came down because, for one thing, they knew that the union helped elect them. And it was Waterson who suggested to them that here this local was accepting a large community obligation and they found out by getting the mayor himself to figure out where the community--the Red Feather drives are going. They found that an awful lot of it was going to Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and things of that nature. They had no legal services, no social services,

WIENCEK: that they were really giving a substantial amount of funds to. And so these cases for which the local was paying six thousand dollars a year were finally shifted to the community where it rightfully belonged. But that's the kind of a thing in labor education that you do, you see. You try to get it relevant to the kind of activity.

This local was a heck of a good local. Maybe that's why they took it so well. They took it in stride. Why, I complimented them--this is a local union where the members took the kids to, where they usually, after a short meeting, they'd have a stomping, a foot-stomping band, you know [laughter], and they'd socialize after that. There wasn't a beer bust, but sort of coffee-and-donuts kind of thing with a band. And it was a crummy hall. It was a real crummy hall. But there was life and vitality there.

Another group that I tried to do the same thing with didn't respond at all, matter of fact, responded with hostility, had a very fancy hall. Nothing took place there, a perfunctory union meeting which was rarely attended by more than ten percent, and they rented out the hall to all kinds of other groups in the community but didn't utilize it to the extent themselves. And just the difference between the leadership and local unions, how they operate. So that was a very interesting experience.

INTERVIEWER: How would you say that your being a woman affected your influence?

WIENCEK: Upon men?

INTERVIEWER: Yes. The leaders.

WIENCEK: Well, I think that they eventually see that you've had experience and especially when you say, "When I was a local president," and they say, "How many members?" And I'd say, "Nothing like yours, it was only three or four thousand." And, of course, they would have a local of ten thousand, something like this. And you'd also say, "Well, you know what the experience is in this respect." Here you are--we're talking about steward training--how necessary it is for the steward to develop a sense of knowing how to ask questions because it's the questions that are so important.

And, of course, you intersperse it with jokes. So you go on to tell them a joke about the king of the jungle. Here's this lion comes roaring into the jungle and pounding his chest and roaring, "Who is the king of the jungle?" And the

WIENCEK: monkeys all shiver and say, "You are." And they go over and this bully lion goes all the way around and does the same thing, pounding his chest and "Who's the king of the jungle?" Pretty soon he comes to an elephant and he says this to him and the elephant ignores him. And he roars again, "Who is the king of the jungle?" And the elephant ignores him. And he roars again, "Who's the king of the jungle?" Pretty soon the elephant calmly takes him along with his trunk, swishes him around and throws him, and the lion says, "Gee whiz, just because I asked the wrong question, you didn't have to do this to me!" So you lighten up, you know, you give it a light touch. I haven't found that was too difficult. People come to know you.

The same local in which--in Lynn, Massachusetts--in which the local president there raised hell about sending a woman, asked me back time and time again after that through several successions of presidents. So you relate your own experience, you see, and you do it in that way.

Then, of course, I'm glad I had the organizing experience because that also helped. It helped to understand people and I think it made me a better educator because I understood where people were in their own development. Then the stint I had to do in building local unions. When you're a small union, you're sort of a troubleshooter. And in Government and Civic Employees, it was up to me to try to restore local unions which were trailing and were no longer operating. So you have to do this leadership bit and local union operation, have a course on local union operation--how you conduct your local union, how you appoint committees to get the job done, how you keep the committees working, what you do about publicity, what you do about getting your negotiating committee properly trained and how you use materials; the role the president plays in this and all the kinds of things, how he delegates responsibilities. All that amounts to is a sort of leadership training in a volunteer organization. And that's the kind of thing that you do.

Of course, one never knows how men react once you're gone, but I can only...I can sense this from the response and the fact that very often the local would write back acknowledging their appreciation for having me with them and we try to do something different each time. If there was an education director, I would always work through him or her in the local union situation. And this is the way it worked, always to build up... and in so doing, the local education director learned something too, and I would learn something. I would learn something from that group. I think the most interesting thing--I think I told you about this--this little local where I did this history project? Well, so you attempt to relate it to their interests and the kind of things that they do.

INTERVIEWER: Well, which sex were you more comfortable working with?

WIENCEK: I believe men. And some women, some women. I was then, at that time, more comfortable working with men because, first of all, by virtue of women's experience, it was difficult for them to be objective and not to get emotional. I think that's changing a good deal now because women are beginning to have a good deal more experience. Once somebody asked me, "From a woman's point of view, how do you see this grievance?" So I said, "A grievance is a grievance. What does the contract say? A contract clause doesn't look any different to a man than it does to a woman." And so you'd end that business of how a woman reacts.

But the difference is that some women, because of the lack of training, the lack of self-confidence, would react emotionally to a problem rather than try to figure it out. Not that there aren't any emotional men--of course there are. Not that there aren't any subjective men--of course there are. You see, by virtue of the nature of the training...but once a gal got experience, sometimes far superior women were leaders.

One such gal I remember in West Virginia, in a town--Fairmont, West Virginia. This gal became president of an electronics plant local, and apparently it was about 50/50 men and about 50/50 women. But her leadership capacities were apparent that early, that they elected her. She attended an institute that I conducted at Miami University. It was a week-long institute that we--summer schools--that we conduct. I handled the workshop on local union administration.

She was complaining about how much there was to being a local union president, about how much worrying she had to do. Well, of course, the purpose of local union administration is to get the local union leader to realize that he's got to involve other people, or else he or she is going to worry alone. And they'll let her do it, or him do it because people are naturally lethargic, they don't want to be involved. And so the key was not specifically how you take care of each individual union component, you see, but rather how to lead, how to delegate responsibility, how to keep continuity going, how to keep reporting back, how to keep seeing that you deliver on the commitments that you made, and how you use your secretary as a source, whereby they remind you of your unfulfilled commitments--that kind of a thing. And they learned how to knit an organization. By knitting I mean they've got to get cohesion there. Well, that's the kind of thing that I've been doing as a labor educator and a troubleshooter.

INTERVIEWER: What other kinds of non-union women's issues were you involved in?

WIENCEK: Where?

INTERVIEWER: Well, throughout your life.

WIENCEK: Oh, none. Because there wasn't the awareness. And within the union, if you functioned as a union leader, you didn't think in terms of women's issues. You thought in those terms of the organizational concerns and the organizational job to be done.

Going back to this little girl in Fairmont, sometime later she wrote a letter that said, "I applied what we discussed in the workshop." And she said, "It's much better. I don't have as much to do. I don't have as much to worry about." But the other thing that I used to stress is the obligation of that particular leader to develop others, even though it might mean that you're no longer president. And not everybody is going to do that. I've heard guys say, "You know, you must think I have a hole in my head to get him to replace me." And so they deliberately wouldn't. But I pointed out that the labor movement depends on the continuity of able leaders.

Supposing that particular leader decided to be a one-man or a one-woman operation and decided to withdraw his or her services. She or he got tired or it or got a better job or got a promotion. What happens to the local then? There has to be continuity. Too many important things are at stake--the contract, the relationship you build up with the employer--all kinds of things that are at stake. So the local union president in Fairmont did it. She found herself a leader and she developed him and he became the local president.

When I retired from the IUE, the gal that succeeded me as education director--her chief concern is the development of women leaders and rights of women in the plant. She heads the women's division. This is the IUE union that I told you about that always had such an excellent stand on equal pay for equal work, and they were one of the early unions, the unions early to . . .

INTERVIEWER: IUE?

WIENCEK: IUE, yes. The Social Action Department, of which labor education was a part, tried to establish the fact that they had to be in compliance with the Equal Employment Opportunity Act and that they'd better get the contracts in compliance and they'd

WIENCEK: better develop some women leaders. So every other year they had a women's conference, in Washington and on a regional basis.

They are developing some good women leaders now in the IUE, although I believe the percentage of women is something like twenty-five--about the same percentage as blacks--twenty-five percent women in the industry. That I think is remarkable that an organization should concern itself with women's problems.

This comes under a social action department. In this union, Bill Gary, who heads the Social Action Department, who himself is black; and the education director,* she's black, you know, the education coordinator and the head of the Women's Division. But she's an economist as well, so she has additional credentials. I didn't have that kind of a background. Matter of fact, I think I was the only education director in the AFL-CIO that was without a degree. And when I talked with Gloria, she said, "I'm sort of hesitant about the area of being a labor educator." I said, "Don't be. The whole field is so damn experimental. And you just feel your way. You play it by ear. That's what you have to do. It has to be based on the needs of the people, the needs of the local leaders, their temperment, their own environment and involvement, what the community's like--very often you have to take all these things into consideration and you develop a program around those needs. So you'll do fine." And she has.

She has marvelous bearing, marvelous poise. But in some areas where she hasn't had the experience, and it shows, she does what anyone else without the experience would do. For example, she overloads her program with too many speakers, so she doesn't get things done. Or else crowds the program with too many things. She has yet to develop a sense of timing and that, of course, in any planning is important. So you don't get that all at once. You have to develop it.

INTERVIEWER: Well, on the subject of women's needs, women's role in the unions, how responsive do you think that organized labor in general is today?

WIENCEK: Not very. Not very. There are some unions that do this. The Autoworkers is one of the unions that quite early on established a women's department. Well, part of this is due to the radical tradition, saying that there is no women's problem as such--it's an economic problem. It's the same as they used to

* Gloria Johnson.

WIENCEK:

say about the black problem. But, of course, they changed their position, you see. Even among the left-wingers, Lenin realized that...he thought that there's nothing more deadly than the routine of pots and pans. He felt that that dulled women's minds. But in the Soviet Union, even though women have some key positions, nevertheless, the leadership roles are pretty much preempted by men.

I remember when I first came to Washington to work for the National Federation of Telephone Workers, I inherited an apartment from a gal who was active in Germany under the denazification program. It was her job....she got a job with the State Department and it was her job to work with the denazification of the cartels. And she was definitely left-wing. She was never a member of the Communist Party, but she was a communist sympathizer and she got quickly disillusioned there because she saw some of the party leadership in action there.

But she left behind her the embassy magazine Soviet Union Today. And I came upon a story that the Soviet Embassy was trying very hard to establish that women had key roles in the professions, and this story was about a woman judge. It went on to show the typical kind of case she handles during the course of her day. And a young worker who is twelve years old came to her and he had played hookey from his job--he was a signalman on the railroad. He was twelve years old, signalman on the railroad. She at first fined him a week's pay and then she finally had to dock him three months' pay because this was the third time he had done it. Well, I laughed like hell because here's a story which shows there is child labor and such a responsible job to give to a kid on a railroad, and instead of demonstrating the equality of the sexes in the Soviet Union, it raises another question, of that of child labor.
[laughter]

But I think unions are recognizing--and of course they're compelled to now, they're compelled to because of EEOC. They have to get the contracts in compliance. Mostly it was the women who were the last hired and the first fired, and mostly it was women that enjoyed only departmental rather than plant-wide seniority. Also the jobs that were considered, the high-paying jobs that were considered primarily male jobs--now the girl...the woman worker has the right to appeal to her steward, and if she doesn't get anywhere there she appeals to the chief steward and then the local president. If they don't respond, she knows now that she can go to EEOC and very often women have. And some of the local unions have been saying,

WIENCEK: "Oh, my God, we got stung here. What happened?" you know. And then Bill Gary would say, "We told you that you have to watch out for those things. You have to represent women much more carefully now than you ever did before, and you have to examine the job contents to find out whether or not they are discriminatory." So many a case has been won, and now the local unions are more than careful about it, especially the IUE.

The Steelworkers have had that problem, too. Now they've come out with the....Bethlehem Steel and the United Steelworkers have come out with an affirmative action program for women workers and blacks. They have to get stung by the law a couple of times before they realize this is for real and they've got to do it. And so there is an awareness, with the exception of maybe a couple of unions--the UAW and ours, and the CWA which got stung a couple of times because there was this famous case in which a woman got the job as frameman and you work behind repairing that and you have to be sort of flat-chested and skinny to fit between the narrow places--but a girl got it and got paid the same rate as men. The telephone company got stung on that and the union got stung because the suit was against the union for failing to represent her adequately. So after a few stings like that, the union becomes much more aware of it and they begin to look at it in a different way.

Well, I told you that I....you keep asking me about women's problems, per se. Well, I was aware there were some, but that's the way things were then. There was no law, no law to strengthen it. And the fluke by which it was included in the EEO, as part of the Civil Rights Act, is another situation. This Senator [Harold K.] Smith from Virginia threw it in thinking that it was going to hamper the Civil Rights Act. So he added in women as well as blacks on equal employment opportunity. And for a long time the EEOC didn't do a damn thing about women, even though it was on the books. But it took the Women's Lib to begin processing and hollering about it. So now instead of something that was intended to hamper the Civil Rights Act, it has turned out to be a benefit to women.

INTERVIEWER: How do you feel about the Equal Rights Amendment?

WIENCEK: Oh, it's going to pass, ultimately. It's got to. I was a delegate to the League of Women Voters Convention this year, and some people misunderstood what went on there. The motion was to have the ERA as a separate study because they felt that a lot of women in the League of Women Voters needed to have

WIENCEK: their awareness heightened about the need of the ERA. And it was defeated. But it was defeated not by those who opposed it, but simply because they were already working on it. They were already at the stage where they were working with the state legislatures. And to make it a study item at this particular time would only distract them from their legislative job which they were now at. But that didn't mean that the League of Women Voters would not continue to send out materials, you see. And if a local chapter wished to make it a study item, nothing could prevent them from doing it. And this was the position they took on that.

I told you that I had served for five years as Chairman of the Commission on Human Relations. We've had some complaints on the basis of sex, but never anything that we could really put our teeth into. And twice it was....once on the basis of sex, once on the basis of race--but on the basis of sex, she was a black woman hired as a custodial person. She claimed that she was discriminated against.

This gal had a history of being loud-mouthed and here she is a janitor in a school, cleaning up in the presence of kids. And she usually initiated the obscene remarks, and in this case she made some sort of an obscene remark to a male colleague and he retorted in kind. She got fired. Had she not initiated it, we could have had a case because two people were engaged in obscene language before some school kids. But we had nothing. Also the Board of Education showed that upon two separate occasions they did a very remarkable thing for an adult--they assigned a counselor to work with her about work habits. This is rather unique for an employee. You know, usually they do these for kids but not for adult workers. And so we had to admit that they had more than tried to work with her and we dismissed the case. But we're very much aware of it.

Of course, I'm not on the HR [Human Relations] Commission this year, but I will be next year again. We can't succeed ourselves after having been on the Commission for three years. I was on there for five years because the Calvert County commissioners didn't know any better and they reappointed me for another three years. I pointed this out to them and they said, "Oh, well, don't go through the bother of doing it now." So they're doing some written materials, particularly on the rights of women, on lending, on borrowing, and on employment--so it'll be interesting to see.

WIENCEK: On our Commission is a gal who filed a case against American Airlines and lost it. The EEOC didn't have any more money and told her to get a lawyer to process it herself. I thought this was very unusual. I don't understand why. But she still has this lawyer and she's trying. It was on pregnancy. So at least we have one gal who is very much aware, on the Commission, of women's rights and so she's good. And the chairman's a woman, a very good woman, too. But here I am now working in the community, identifying with it, very much in the way that I used to try to advise our union officers to do. And only now have I gotten around to doing it myself.

INTERVIEWER: How would you think that women's being women made them any more or any less effective?

WIENCEK: Where?

INTERVIEWER: In the union movement, with unions. You mentioned . . .

WIENCEK: Yes. I mentioned that this is true initially, and I think that because of the woman's isolation from participation in organizations and also from participation in unions--they're not accustomed to working out problems of that nature and viewing it objectively. Well, I think it's possible. Once they do become union officers and become leaders that it's changed.

I don't know if I told you about this. I was working with a group in Toronto, Ontario, doing a conference for the Canadian District of our union with the IUE, and I'd been doing one on leadership training and also on steward training, and using my auto-instruction manual on an experimental basis to see how it would fit into it. At the end of the session I was waiting for one of the staff men to pick me up to take me to the airplane, and I was just idly talking to some of the gals. There were two gals there, one was an old French Canadian woman, Cecile; and the other one was a Scotch woman with a burr--real burr--Lucille. And I asked them, "How did getting to the union change your life?" So they said, "Oh," she said, "How it's changed my"--this is the little French woman--"how it's changed my life! You know Mr. McCann, the boss. He talks to you like you was an animal and I used to take it. But this time I just got elected president and I knew that everybody's eye was on me. And they said, 'Now, what's Cecile going to do when he talks to her like that?'" She said, "Well, I couldn't let him get by with this anymore. My knees were shaking and I know my voice was shaking and I said, 'Mr. McCann, I'm now a union officer and you can't talk to me like that! I'm not a private citizen anymore!'"

WIENCEK: And I thought, "My God, here is this woman who rose to the obligations of leadership. She knew that she had to have the respect of her coworkers, and she had to establish the fact that the management had to respect her, too. Because in this situation she represented workers, even though he represented the company. So I was sort of proud of that gal. Here she was putting on the mantle of leadership.

And so I said to this gal, Lucille, "How did it change you?" She said, "You know, I'm chief steward. And my family was always telling me I have no tact. I just say things that come to the top of my head. Now when I became chief steward, I knew I couldn't do this anymore. I had to think out what I said because I wasn't talking for myself anymore. Everyone was depending on me." And so she says, "I'd say that my life's changed because I've learned how to be more tactful." And so in two of these situations, you see, here were women who were farm women because the General Electric...not only do they run away South, but they run into rural areas, Oakville, Ontario, a rural area. They're women who used to work on the farms and women in their fifties who had gotten a job, you see. And here they were rising to responsibility and union leadership and doing it well, and understanding the nature of leadership, which is a hell of a lot more than many of the male unionists I've met who knuckled under. So, you see, women can rise to the occasion, and they do, and know what it entails. They rise to it, too, and very well sometimes, and quite courageously.

INTERVIEWER: How do you account for yourself? You were first active in a union that was . . .

WIENCEK: . . . primarily women.

INTERVIEWER: . . . primarily made up of women. How do you think things might have been different had you been in another organization?

WIENCEK: What do you mean?

INTERVIEWER: As a woman. In other words . . .

WIENCEK: I don't know, I really don't know. It's hard to say. I think that what occurs in most people's lives is that possibly at that particular time you have more knowledge about unionization than anybody else does--not what it takes, but more than anybody else does. And you step into a need. You step into a situation where there's a need. It's a combination of accident,

WIENCEK: you see, and then sometimes meeting a challenge and sometimes not meeting it. But you learn from not meeting it when you fail, just learn. And you go on again.

You know, we were talking about this with my friend Dorothy Plummer, whose husband is the rector of the Episcopalian Church. And she was talking to me about some of my experiences and how she was listening to a program on labor history in which one of the discussants was a labor leader recounting how things were when he or she was just starting out in unions. And her son, who's just graduated from Kenyon University, who's an art student, asked me this question of how I survived, very often in an organization primarily of men. And, you know, I said, "I think art training helped," because you know how experimental art is; it's art almost by accident and you develop that. And if one thing doesn't succeed, you don't feel crushed by it, you go ahead and try something else. All in the nature of experimentation. And it's this whole spirit of experimentation that gives you sort of resiliency in which you have to sort of swing with the punches. If this doesn't work you try something else, just as I mentioned labor education was experimental certainly, and so was union leadership and so was working with people. It's creative, too.

It's marvelous to see a program evolve that you project. It's marvelous to see somebody that you've selected and you've spotted as a leader, to see them develop and really helping them along the way often, seeing them come through and develop. That's creativity because here's someone that has learned to use their potential.

INTERVIEWER: What do you recall that influenced your life?

WIENCEK: Well, maybe it's the same as Lucille--you know, not talking off the top of your head all the time, and becoming more responsible. As you get responsibility, you have to become more responsible. You have to give a talk even though you have a splitting headache. You have to get yourself organized, you have to deliver. People are depending upon you. You have to be there.

INTERVIEWER: So you mean acquiring that leadership position . . .

WIENCEK: Yes, acquiring that leadership position really means acquiring a sense of responsibility and accountability. I don't like the word when it's used in context with teachers because I think it's phony, sometimes it's an excuse for not giving

WIENCEK: the teachers what they need. But in this case it is accountability--you have to be accountable for your actions and so many people are dependent upon it. How they view you as a leader, how they will respond to your leadership. If they feel you're not responsible, they won't know what the hell, they won't know whether to follow you or not, they won't know whether you're reliable. So you have to establish that degree of responsibility. And this is how my life changed.

You learned to meet a problem instead of pushing it off. You have to; there is no other way to do it--it won't go away. And my life changed like Lucille's life did, too, see. But these two gals--I never heard it put better, I really didn't. Of all the years I was in the labor movement and saw evidences of it, these two examples come out in my mind as the most telling. And especially since they're women--this demonstrates what's possible.

Another group that was like that, too, had the sort of a sense of vibrancy. When I was assigned to the Textile Workers in Mooresville, North Carolina, there was a plant that we were trying to organize near Hickory, North Carolina--that's not too far from Charlotte--and helping us in this was an already organized local union. This local union, through its presence, transformed the whole nature of that community. They bought a firehouse that was no longer in use and transformed it to union headquarters. There was so much activity around there--people buzzing around, moving around, doing all kinds of things, this and that and the other, committees meetings. And whenever we came down the Executive Committee fixed a dinner--men and women both--spaghetti dinner for us and they went out to leaflet with us.

And they introduced me to the first president of the local who couldn't write or read. And I said to him, "Chet, what made your local so wonderful? How do you account for it?" And he said, "A union is like a garden. You gotta tend it, you gotta care for it to make it grow." A union is peculiarly a workers' institution and nobody else's, you see, and this is it. I think one of the things that has been harmful to the labor movement is to pay workers for everything they do now on behalf of the union. I think some of the life goes out of a volunteer organization and the vitality goes out if everything is paid for.

For an example, when the unions that I knew of that had the most alive steward system were people who were not paid for everything they did. I think that if a person loses a day off the job, tending to the union, this is something else again because it hurts his family. But I don't think there

WIENCEK: should be any payment, like a rebate of union dues for him to come to a union meeting or to assume a committee responsibility. You see, this is the kind of thing that I object to.

And because it is peculiarly that kind of a union, an institution which is the workers', it almost has to be that kind of dedication or devotion to it because this is something that they're building, new unions particularly. They have an awareness that they're doing something that everybody after them is going to follow, you see, of setting precedents that were never set before. And it's amazing how they feel that sense of responsibility, thinking about "Well, we're just forming it now and we've got to be very careful that we do this just so, because if it isn't, others behind us will do it." And they have this sort of an inkling that if it was not properly set up, it would not jell and just because this is how you've done it, it's going to be done that way forever, you know, for no other reason except that's how you did it. But it's an especially exciting thing working with a new local, because you see the people develop, you see their attitudes develop, too, and the capacities develop and their understanding develop.

Whenever someone....I sometimes try to talk a gal or a guy into accepting a union post, and they say, "There's so much work connected with it." And I say, "Oh, but what you get is so infinitely more!" It's amazing how much you'll get in terms of self-development and understanding--you get much more than you ever put into it. And, of course, that's not conceivable until later, you see, when you look back in retrospect.

INTERVIEWER: Well, what was the most exciting part of your life?

WIENCEK: That's hard to say. Everything is, of course. You see, I think it's always most exciting beginning to work with a young organization because nobody has you pegged. When you come into an already established organization, everybody fits into a cog, and this is how they identify you with that particular spot and it's harder to move out. You don't have as much flexibility. In a young organization, there's much more going on and there are no stereotypes about where people belong. Therefore, much more can be accomplished and ideas can grow more, too, because nobody has any set ideas about what works and what doesn't work. And so whether it's a new local union or whether it's a new international union, the same holds true--there's that kind of excitement because you have a lot of leeway to do all kinds of interesting things.

WIENCEK: It's too bad, but a strike situation brings out the best in a local union. And there the ingenuity of workers knows no bound. I always try to talk my directors into returning to that place after the strike is over because the workers are just bursting with stories that they want to tell about that strike situation and how they met it. And they're proud of themselves because it's the first time that they've been called upon to do this for the union and also how they responded to that crisis situation and how they led and how they did something quite different. It's too bad that it has to be in that kind of a situation, but it develops the leaders. People never know they have that capacity until they're put to the test.

One of the things that I tried--and this is a combination of organizing and also being a labor educator. There was a strike situation in Rochester, New York, in an independent telephone company that was part of the National Federation of Telephone Workers, and they were talking about ways that they could develop a sort of identity with the union. So I involved them in a project writing a script, and we could pretend it was a radio station--and it could be played on a radio station, too, if they wanted to. So we wrote a script about various people saying what the union has meant to them and the value that they saw in it and why, you know. So we cut it later into a record and we distributed it to local unions and they were encouraged to do similar things with themselves, sort of spontaneous, you know. You do that.

INTERVIEWER: When was this?

WIENCEK: It was in 1946.

INTERVIEWER: What part of your life would you change if you could?

WIENCEK: What part? I don't know. It's sort of ideal thinking, really because you don't know. I like my life, and not having been married gave me freedom really to make a career in the labor movement. Had I been married I think it would have developed quite differently because I wouldn't have been as free. Today that's not such a handicap, but it was then. That's one thing. And I've had the freedom to travel around, to be available for assignments that otherwise I wouldn't have. And so it's been a rich life and so I don't know what I would have liked to have done with my life. I think that all things considered, it's been a broad life.

INTERVIEWER: If you had a daughter, for instance, which of your own experiences would you like her to experience, or to avoid?

WIENCEK: Oh, I'd just tell her to live [laughter] the best she could. I have a niece that probably comes closest to being a daughter, even though she was raised by my sister Natalie. But when her mother was ill, her mother's last years of her life, they used to come here quite often. And when her mother and father died, they used to come here. She used to come here during the summers. Now she's an art student now and she's living her life the way she feels she wants to live it and if I have any advice for her at all it would be simply to live it, not be afraid of it, that's all, just think out situations and.... She doesn't need that kind of advice because she's quite capable. She's made the right kind of decisions so far.

I don't know if I'd give any advice. I think it'd be disastrous. I think that young people don't want so much advice. They want the comfort of knowing that if they get in trouble, you're there and you can help out. And that's about all the older generation can do for the younger generation.

INTERVIEWER: Well, what experiences of yours in particular--are there any that you would recommend?

WIENCEK: [laughter]

INTERVIEWER Why not?

WIENCEK: I don't know what I'd recommend. Really to live it. If I had a daughter, I'd want her to live her life and develop all kinds of potentials and primarily I think not to be afraid of failure and to really embrace life with enthusiasm.

INTERVIEWER: How would you say that your political views have changed over the years?

WIENCEK: Well, I think I've become less radical. For one thing, less simplistic. I realize there are many, many factors now that come into play, and our society's vastly more complex, and I realize, too, that what works in one country may not be transferrable here. I still believe in change. I do think that sometimes you can't choose the methods of change. They occur anyway. And a combination of factors brings those into play.

WIENCEK: So if one were to say, "Do you believe in the forceable overthrow of government?" I'd say, "If you can avoid it, no." But sometimes we're not given that choice. Look what happened in Germany! Wouldn't it have been nice if the Social Democrats and the Communist Party could have been united in that situation to really adequately fight fascism? Look at the millions of lives that would have been saved. Here's a situation in which gradual change could not have met the situation at all.

Supposing we were to have a quasi-fascist state here. How long should we endure it? So it could be a long, long time. Look how long Salazar's empire lasted in Portugal and how long Franco's lasted in Spain. So it can be a long, long time. So I, while I'm much more cautious now and less simplistic, I think that the many, many, forces that are unpredictable that come into play, that you can't always say that this is the way it ought to go. But primarily, I think that I'm a little more objective.

I guess in that way, I don't know, maybe some would consider this being conservative. I don't think so. I think I've just become much more aware of many forces. It isn't quite as easy. To a certain extent, I suppose that I am still a socialist. I view with a certain amount of horror about what has happened in terms of human freedoms in the Soviet Union, particularly in view of the Jews that want out. It's too bad that a workers' revolution should have been so subverted. But I don't believe, either, that life is that bad either, that there are many, many changes that we're not willing to see, you see, and there's still a country in the process of change even though the government seems to be absolute.

There occurs to me there's a certain amount of commonality between the Communists and the Catholics, and they're both in the same kind of a dilemma, and that is that they're both devoted to infallibility--the Communist Party in the Soviet Union and the Catholic Church. And I think the Catholic Church can't get itself out of the birth control problem because of that situation now, and Soviet Union can't get itself out of the infallibility of the Communist Party, and they're both in that kind of a situation. And they don't know how to cope with dissent because of it. We came close to not coping with dissent during the Nixon administration.

INTERVIEWER: What was the most frustrating part of your union career?

WIENCEK: Most frustrating? Let's see. Oh, yes. The most frustrating part of my union career was organizing an organization of organizers. And the disillusionment, not total, but shock on how the officials of the AFL-CIO responded to unionization of their organizers.

This is the time during the southern organizing drive, shortly after the merger of the AFL-CIO when the Teamsters were expelled and a number of other large unions were expelled also for corruption. That cut the income of the AFL-CIO, and it had to discontinue much of the Southern Organizing drive and it had to drop a hundred people. We knew this was coming and we knew that seniority wasn't going to be followed in the traditional [laughter], you know, tradition of the labor movement. And we were concerned about a lot of the old guys who were in their fifties who couldn't go back to the plant to work and would have a hard time and who made the labor movement their life work.

So we organized an organization of field representatives. It was called the CIO--Committee for Industrial Organizers, that was it. No, it was Field Representatives' Federation. The CIO was another one. And that became the start of the organization of staff unions.

I had a disastrous experience in this respect. One time my director came here, we had a staff meeting, and he asked me right out whether I was a member of the Field Representatives' Federation. I said yes I was. He said, "Why is it that you're joining?" And I pointed out to him the way I felt. Well, I was going to be called to testify by the National Labor Relations Board, and he reported my discussion to the Director of Organization of the AFL-CIO. I was one of the people that got it. A lot of people felt....I was the only woman on the staff to begin with and the only woman to be laid off. Well, that was no great tragedy because at that particular time I had an assignment in a union which I thought was corrupt and it was hard....I got heartsick watching the operation of this union. And so it couldn't have come at a more propitious time, otherwise, I would have been just completely heartbroken.

Well, it took me two months to locate another job, but the role the AFL-CIO played in trying to do this....they fired some of the organizers. They tried to discredit it by saying....just because we organized southern organizers, they claimed that we were getting our funds from the White Citizens Council, which is a neo-fascist group, which was utterly untrue. If there were anyone, any of the organizers who belonged to it, it was the AFL-CIO who had hired them, you

WIENCEK:

see. [laughter] Anyway, we certainly didn't get any funds from them. And that kind of a role--the NLRB case was won anyway and they ultimately recognized the Field Representatives' Federation; and, my God, you'd hardly hear from them at all, they're no problem, no threat to the AFL-CIO.

Then I participated in forming a staff union in the IUE. Even Franz Daniel, the man I mentioned who was Associate Director of Organization, said he was opposed to staff unions because he felt that a organizer was like a soldier, had to have the same sort of disciplines. So I laughed at him, saying, "My God! To begin with, I don't think Mr. Meany would like the idea of that kind of dedication. It would embarrass him. I don't think he understands that nature of that kind of dedication. And one of the reasons that we're organizing is that we feel that we have had demonstrated to us so often by many of the leaders whose organizations we were assigned to organize totally lacked dedication." So anyway, in organizing our union in the IUE, we had no opposition in organizing it. I told you that we had some, quite a bit of difficult negotiating a contract. But now staff unions are common. They occur and they're no real threat to any organization. They negotiate year after year. But in this situation I remember the administrative assistant to our new president--this was in 1965--strode into the room where we were to meet him to negotiate a new contract, and he said, "I don't believe in staff unions." And we said, "Why?" And he said, "Well, they interfere with dedication." So I pointed out to him that "Look, many of us...nobody has a complete monopoly on dedication. There are people on our committee who have made the labor movement their life work. We've been that dedicated that we've fronted for officials that were not dedicated--when they're too drunk to come to address a meeting, we addressed it. And when they're irresponsible we fronted for them, covered for them. That's how dedicated we are." And he said, "Well, I still don't believe it." And I said, "Look, this is our labor movement, too." And ever since then they accepted us.

We joined Local 189 of the American Federation of Teachers. Local 189 is a union of labor educators, both of universities and also from the labor unions--labor educators. And it's a specialized field. That particular local union has always been an interesting one because it's been a sort of maverick local union. It's one of the social unions with social concept, and it has been trying to promote collective bargaining with college faculties and especially with the labor education division, and also between union staff and union employers.

WIENCEK: What will ultimately happen to staff unions is anyone's guess. I don't know. There's less opposition to it than there was originally. I suppose every one of them--the unionists, the officials of the unions--are afraid of seeing a picket line marching up and down in front of their headquarters, the press making a big thing of it, you see, because they're especially vulnerable, you see, treating your own employees badly. Well, the CWA has had two or three such strikes and Autoworkers another. So it happens. And it does occur. But I think it's possible to work out some sort of an agreement.

In the latter five years we had practically no problems at all in the IUE chapter of Local 189. We voluntarily dissolved when some of the staff people left. It was a period of curtailment in the union and there were only one or two of us left, you see. But while we were there, we negotiated a contract every year without any difficulty. There was hassling, of course, but ultimately negotiated a contract of some sort which they followed and we followed. But that was most frustrating--to try to organize, to extend the right of self-organization to union staff. That is most frustrating. And to have them accept the concept.

INTERVIEWER: What about the most satisfying?

WIENCEK: What's the most satisfying? Well, of course, I mentioned to you that building new organizations is the most satisfying. I mentioned to you, I think, that there's so many things that you can do. But on all, I certainly don't consider any of my activity in the labor movement as a sacrifice of any kind. Of course, you did, you see, because in order to make it a career, you had to put the union first. Of course you do. I suppose that's true of any kind of a thing to which you're dedicated--you put it first. But, in all, it's been a good life and a rich one.

It's amazing how you can carry it over, the same kind of disciplines, over into community activity, you see, the same kind of things prevail. And my work on the Commission--it's the same. You work with people, you want to knit them together. One of the first things I did when I became chairman was to invite all the new commissioners to my home, to meet the old ones and to point out what their contributions were. And I think that's the first time any of the whites on the commission--with the exception of Dorothy Plummer--ever met together in a room with blacks in this part of the country. You see, it was a new experience for them. And Dorothy is continuing in the same sort of tradition. She understands the value of binding a group together, because of her activity in the League. But anyway, I applied the same kinds of things.

WIENCEK: And also, I made darn sure that I wasn't going to worry by myself. I involved people, call them up to see what they thought and always before our meetings have one executive board meeting every two months. Sometimes we met more frequently. And in order to get more people experienced in the art of investigation, when we had a complaint I'd call together the executive committee members, and they would participate in the interviewing of the complainant and they would participate also in the meetings that we'd have with the respondent.

In any case, you knit an organization the same way. And, as a result, we have on that Commission at least four people that know how to process a complaint and how to investigate it. The whole area of discrimination is not too unlike the body of labor law. It's very similar in the same kind of way you have to dig up your facts and present them. You present them the same way, you size up your respondent. Anyway, it's really very similar. And you do the same thing, and you withhold, except that you have no real power except to make an appeal to the Maryland Commission on Human Relations in which the time lag in resolving the dispute is very long, anywhere from one year to two years. And so that's frustrating because you have to wait. And that, or else to appeal it to EEOC. So the only thing that you've got in your favor is the threat of exposure and that's why you have to use publicity very carefully. If there's a chance for a settlement, of course you'd work for a settlement.

I don't know if I told you about my activity in trying to get the Fire and Rescue Association integrated? Well, you see, despite it we got publicity because, you see, any newspaper thrives on discord because it makes news. But after we began to have meetings of understanding, we deliberately kept the press away because we didn't want anything to jeopardize the understanding we were reaching. And unions do the same thing.

INTERVIEWER: Looking back, then, how would you evaluate your contribution?

WIENCEK: To what?

INTERVIEWER: To the trade union movement.

WIENCEK: Well, I like to think that I've influenced a lot of people during the whole course of my twenty-four years in the labor movement. And every now and then I get a very nice call or letter or affirmation of the fact that it's been worthwhile and that you've been successful in influencing people. I like to think that I've brought about some change some way or another. And so I assess it that way.

WIENCEK: As far as being a big ball of fire, I never wanted to do that for myself anyway. I mean, really, the important thing was to do a solid job and hope it comes out. It doesn't always, you know. [laughter] So you do the best you can. But I think most of the women that I've known in the labor movement feel that way about it, too. They value it because of the background it's given them and experience it's given them. And I know of so many people have gone on to other--in the labor movement--have gone on to other things, and they've found that their background in the labor movement was immensely helpful to them.

So now I'm retired and enjoying myself. I play tennis three times a week and have a portfolio with the League of Women Voters on Welfare Reform, about welfare. I started an outreach program for stamps here, food stamps. So we work closely also with the Maryland Conference of Social Concern in getting decent legislation passed to help people who are the poorest and have no clout for themselves. So, you see, by habit, the kinds of things that you do in the labor movement carry over into your personal life. Just a little different arena, that's all. I'm still concerned about people, especially people who, through no fault of their own, have not been able to help themselves.

INTERVIEWER: It sounds worthwhile. Thank you very much.

WIENCEK: This has been fun.

INTERVIEWER: Good.

[interruption]

WIENCEK: You asked me, really, what would I advise my niece to do, and I told you to live life. And to live it with courage. Well, I'm so glad that young people have that courage to do it now, and they're not bound by convention. Here is Maria, still at the beginning of her education, an art student, and the young man she's living with now--he's just starting his career. But she's doing what so many young people have the courage to do, is to wait until they develop their own potential before jumping in to grow a family.

I'm sure that if and when they decide to get married, or if they get married, they'll be better parents for it, because there won't be the resentment about what they could have been if it were not for the untimely arrival of the children, you know. I'm glad--I'm glad she's got the courage to live the life she feels is right. And I'm sure that she has to meet people who do not approve of her lifestyle. I think it takes a certain amount of courage to do that.

INTERVIEWER: Well, you were saying that in your youth . . .

WIENCEK: In my time, you wouldn't have had the courage to do it. And if one wanted to live a normal life, they had to do it sub rosa, in which the woman was not always the winner. It was very difficult. So in a sense, she's doing exactly what I would want her to do, living a normal human life.

We were talking about some of the connotations of Women's Lib, and you thought that what came across so often was a sort of sneering at the lifestyles that young women who want to be mothers and homemakers, a sneering at that kind of thing. If there has been a certain amount coming from the leaders--the acknowledged leaders of the Women's Lib, because I've heard Betty Friedan plenty of times and I've heard [Gloria] Steinem many times, too, and there's never been a deprecation of that kind of role. Maybe some of your other young women are strident about it, but it's not from the bona fide....I salute them.

INTERVIEWER: I think it's just an unfortunate outgrowth . . .

WIENCEK: How interesting that this should be a revival now, after so many years. You remember the suffragettes? Only fifty years--maybe more--that this has come around again. While the suffragettes were mainly concerned about the right to vote, now this is a much broader scope, the exploration of the whole of woman's existence, and her right to a fuller existence, and the right also to be treated as an equal partner in life with men. To me, that's the most significant thing, the breaking down of legal barriers which have stood so long and are still on the books, in which a husband still collects the paycheck of the woman, and it's legally his. And so many other inequities which still exist.

I was talking with a friend of mine who's a divorcee. She owns her own home. She gets a very adequate alimony. She gets certain proceeds from her former husband's business, but when she applied for a credit card at Sears she was refused one. Yet her daughter, whom she supports, is sending to college, got one, got a credit card. She thought it's because she was divorced, and I know that divorced women are discriminated against. Banks discriminate against them. Even though it's illegal to do so, they still do. They can say for sound business purposes--they don't have to divulge how good your credit rating has been. I think that last barrier is a terrible one.

I was saying that at first I had difficulty getting a loan. Did I tell you about the problem I had? I went to the bank, and I tried to get a loan, and he said, "What do you do for a living, Miss Wienczek?" And I said, "Well, I work with the labor movement." "What do you do?" And I told him. He said, "Well, we don't like labor unions." I said, "Oh, why?" He

WIENCEK:

said, "Well, we don't like the things they do." I said, "Like what?" "Strike." "Oh," I said, "well, you know it's very interesting because you told me last year you had a construction loan--you don't have one now. I wanted a construction loan. Why did you discontinue the construction loan?" "Oh, well, we didn't find it profitable to give that service any more." I said, "That was a good, sound business decision. But you know when workers do this--withdraw their labor power or their services because it's no longer profitable to render those services at that price, why, then that's a crime against society. But when businessmen do the same thing, it's all right." Well, I got the loan, [laughter] so there's no problem about that. But finally they--somebody woke up.

I deal with another bank, and I said to a friend, "Well, here I was, a woman, working for a labor movement. How come I wasn't refused?" And someone said, "Look--you've got a prime piece of property overlooking water! How could they go wrong on it, giving you that? They've got a mortgage for that! You default on it, it's their property!" [laughter] So that's probably one reason that I got it. But another.... too, I met a guy who wanted to get more people from the labor movement putting in funds to mortgage banks, savings and loan. He said, "Well, I would think that a job in a labor union would be just as secure as one in government." So he thought it was a good risk, and he let me have it.

I think that it's an interesting world we're going to be having. I don't know if it's going to be better or worse, in some ways worse, because the deterioration of the standards of living and the quality of living. Certainly a deterioration of standard of living for workers, because inflation has eaten into it, and many of the workers are currently unemployed--they suffer a reduction of their standard of living now. The cost of living is such that even those on welfare suffer, because they only get a stipend which is quite limited. For a family of four in Maryland, the grant is no more than \$1,600 a year. No, I'm wrong on that--\$2,400 a year. Something like that. So the standard of living for a great many people in the United States is deteriorated.

It is deteriorated for young people, because the environment is being polluted. The longer we have this kind of an economy, where job market isn't growing--what is it? About three million young people enter the labor market, or four million now? You don't know. Between three and four million every year. So if there's still 7.5 percent unemployed, you can see how many jobs we'll be needing, and young people'll be needing those, too. That concerns me--this kind of a thing

WIENCEK: concerns me because when there's a large army of unemployed, that means deterioration of standard of living for a lot of people, and lifestyles for a lot of people.

But the other aspects of it I like. I like the fact that young people are freer and that they question and, as I pointed out to you about my father, saying the most important word in any language is "Why?" Well, I think that people of your generation are asking why more frequently than we did, than people of my generation did. Or perhaps even your mother's generation. You see, they really want to know, and that's good.

I told you what disturbed me was this retreat into mysticism. This is not good. I think it's attributable to the fact that there's very bad scientific education. There isn't enough emphasis on the scientific method, of cause and effect, and inquiry. If there's more of that in the public school system, I don't think young people would be drifting off into mysticism. That's one of the things that I find disturbing, but apart from that, many of the young people I know today I admire greatly.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you very much.

WIENCEK: This has been fun.

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