International Union,
United Automobile, Aerospace, and Agricultural Implement Workers of America,
UAW

International Executive Board
Oral Histories

Raymond Berndt

Interviewed by Warner Pflug
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PFLUG: Ray, I wonder if we could start by reviewing your election as director of Region 3 in 1947. We have a lot of information on your early days in Local 5, and so on, so I don't think we need to go over that. But I'd be interested in how it all came together that you were first elected to the International Executive Board as director in Indiana.

BERNDT: Well, as a delegate from Local 5 in prior conventions, we had tried to unseat Arnold Atwood, who was then the director, and we had misfired in 1946 when Walter was elected.

PFLUG: Did you try to get elected in 1946 or did someone try to unseat Atwood?

BERNDT: Oh yes, somebody tried to unseat Atwood in 1946 and was unsuccessful. And so during the period from 1946 to 1947, we were quite aware of the fact that Arnold Atwood was not working with Walter on all the problems of the union. So we started to develop an anti-Atwood caucus within the region. And we developed it primarily through what was then, and is now, the Auto Council in Region 3.

Arnold Atwood always avoided the Auto Council. The Auto Council was provided for under the constitution, which says the director shall report to the Auto Council delegates when they meet every two months. Arnold Atwood would just refuse to meet with the delegates and make any reports. So the Auto Council became a very good place for getting together delegates every two months and talking to them about the fact that the director was not carrying out the mandates of the constitution.

PFLUG: What exactly was the Auto Council then? I'm not clear.

BERNDT: The Auto Council was made up of delegates from all over the region that met every two months. They had their own set of officers and they put on educational

programs, political action programs, but it was a melding together of the small and large local unions in the programs of the UAW.

PFLUG: But even though it's called the Auto Council, it doesn't necessarily mean they're just from auto plants; they could be from other UAW plants?

BERNDT: All UAW plants were involved. And we had a small per capita tax paid to the Auto Council, which made it possible for them to subsidize small locals' and newly organized locals' attendance at the convention.

PFLUG: If the Auto Council passed a resolution on anything, would that be binding on you in any way as regional director, or were they just an advisory body?

BERNDT: No, they were sort of an advisory group, but the Auto Council had a status under the constitution, so even their resolutions could be sent to the Resolution Committee of the international union convention. And the Auto Council would also help to send delegates to summer school. So, it was boon to the small local unions, who couldn't afford, really, to participate totally in the programs of the UAW. The large local unions were helping the small local unions through the Auto Council. So my being a delegate to the Auto Council meant I learned a lot about locals from Kentucky and southern Indiana, and I was out of northern Indiana. Without it, I had no way of knowing anything about the other locals in my region.

PFLUG: And Atwood wasn't working with the Council.

BERNDT: He just refused to attend their meetings. He wouldn't show up. He'd just expect one of his assistants or one of his representatives to speak at the Auto Council and all the delegates felt slighted. So it was possible to get most of the delegates to join an

anti-Atwood caucus. He had some of his friends there at the Auto Council, but we would find time between the Saturday and Sunday sessions for a caucus.

Coming up to the 1947 convention, we agreed to hold an anti-Atwood caucus at the convention. Shortly before the convention they found that three of us were going to run. I had the support of the delegates in my local union totally and I put that information out at the Auto Council prior to the convention. Soon I began receiving letters from all the local unions in Evansville and Louisville and all around the region endorsing my position running for regional director. And Pat Murphy, who was on the Chrysler staff out at Region 3 — Pat came out of Chrysler Local 371 in Newcastle, Indiana — was also throwing his hat in the ring for regional director as a member of the anti-Atwood caucus. And Frank Barter, another Region 3 staff guy, who had been fired by Atwood just before the convention for attending an anti-Atwood caucus, also announced.

So we got to Atlantic City and found that we really had three candidates from the anti-Atwood caucus. So we went ahead and scheduled a caucus of the anti-Atwood delegates and decided we'd have a secret ballot and ask them to support the majority choice in the convention. I won, so both Pat and Frank got up and asked their delegates to stay in line and support me against Atwood and he was overwhelmingly defeated in the 1947 convention.

PFLUG: So you then became a member, I guess, of the first executive board that Walter really was ever able to put together. Prior to that he'd been out there all by himself.

BERNDT: That's correct, that was the first group he put together. And the rest of it came together later on, in 1949 and subsequent conventions.

PFLUG: One of the things we were talking about yesterday and this morning of course, was your role in developing the retirees department. Can we go over that again? We spent a lot of time talking about that yesterday, but we didn't get it on tape, and I wish I had.

BERNDT: Well, let me go back just a little bit, give you a little background. In 1933 Studebaker went into the hands of receivers. The corporation was trying to get the judge to give them another chance to operate without liquidating the corporation. We became a friend of the corporation at that point, we appeared before the judge and we asked if he would give us the opportunity to go back to work at half salary. We would try to go back to work and save the corporation on that basis, provided the judge kept control of the total situation, so that at the point the corporation started to come to the break even point or to make a profit, all the hourly-rated employees would immediately go back on full hourly pay before any executive would get an increase or any stockholder would reap any rewards from the credit side of the ledger.

Well, we the judge kept control of it and we did eventually go back on full pay, but during this time, we found out that a number of people had been retired by the corporation from the hourly-rated roles on a cash pension basis, that is, each one of them had to go to the Studebaker administration building each month and was handed so much in cash. The largest one I ever ran across was $26.00 in one month — that was the pension for over thirty-some years of service, almost 40 years of service. So we went back to the judge and told him what had happened tried to get him to have the corporation open the files on pensioners so we could find out how many there were and whether we could get their

pension restored. And he told us we had cut a deal and that was it, he wouldn't open up that can of worms again. So the pensioners were stuck.

PFLUG: They had no protection at all.

BERNDT: They had nothing, no income, no protection at all. Later, I had the job of telling some of them that all they had in front of them was the county poor farm or getting their kids to take care of them, because there was no pension available. So, as a result of this experience, I was very interested in what happened to people after they retire.

While I was director, we found that a number of retirees in the Ford plant in Louisville, Kentucky wanted to get together, so we worked out a deal whereby the local put up some of the money to finance monthly meetings of the retirees and we called it the retiree club of Local 862.

But we had some resistance on the local level from those who felt they didn't have finances big enough to really run a program for retirees. I had developed a resolution prior to the 1955 convention, which I asked my local union president in Local 5 to have passed by the membership and submitted to the Constitution Committee of the convention. It just so happened that they didn't have a quorum that month, so they didn't have a membership meeting, so they did nothing with the resolution. They didn't even ask the executive board to adopt the resolution and submit it to the Constitution Committee. So I took it to the Auto Council, which was meeting the following weekend, and asked them to pass it. Well the Auto Council did pass it, but the recording secretary didn't mail it in within the deadline for resolutions to be submitted to the convention committees.

PFLUG: So technically, you had no way to get this before the convention.

BERNDT: I had absolutely no way to get it before the convention at that point. I did, however, have Lester Fox from Local 5 on the Constitution Committee. Lester tried to get the committee to accept the resolution even though it was past the deadline, but the president's office decided that there was too much involved and you couldn't do it at the last minute, so the committee voted it down.

The convention opened on Sunday, March 27th, 1955 and on Monday a delegate from my local union, who was then the chairman of the Auto Council, a guy by the name of Forrest Hanna, got on the floor and raised a question about pensioners. Walter said that he understood that the matter had been referred to the Constitution Committee and would be taken up when the Constitution Committee reported.

Well, on Thursday, another delegate from Local 5 raised it again, because it hadn't been taken care of and he wanted to know when it was going to be taken on the floor. And Walter advised them that the Constitution Committee had looked at it and had decided that it couldn't be handled. Later on that day when Walter tried to dismiss the Constitution Committee, there were delegates on the floor again from Region 3 still wanting to act upon a resolution about pensioners.

PFLUG: What were you doing during this time?

BERNDT: I was sitting on the platform, knowing that our guys had all been wired in to keep that floor hot, until Walter would recognize something.

PFLUG: You weren't sitting there with your hands folded just letting things develop?

BERNDT: Everything had been done organizationally that could have been done in the face of the late resolution. I had Owen [Ammans] from Local 862 talk about his retiree club and how he couldn't continue that unless he had some help from the international union. Then a different guy from my local raised the question again. So Walter was beside himself with all these people from Region 3 popping up, making these statements, and he finally said he was in favor of doing something for the pensioners and we would have something for the delegates at the 1957 convention — some constitutional changes that would allow the international union to set aside funds for programs — and in the meantime, the board would be working on this problem. So the delegates finally put it to rest. When Walter's motion was adopted, he said, "The motion is carried, with one brother up on the platform from Studebaker Local 5 in opposition. I won't mention his name; he is a good friend of mine." This was Lester Fox, who I had put on the Constitution Committee to follow this thing through. After the vote carried, Walter turned around and walked back to me — I was sitting on the platform — and said, "You are on the pensioners committee of the board." Well there hadn't been any pensioners committee of the board to this point, so I was appointed the first member of that committee.

PFLUG: So then you had two years to try to put something together.

BERNDT: Right. The last board meeting before the 1957 convention finally adopted the kind of language we needed in the constitution to set aside funds to finance a retirees program.

PFLUG: What was the role of retirees in the union prior to this time? Did they have any institutional support? Did they participate in meetings?

BERNDT: Oh, they came to meetings.

PFLUG: Did they have a vote?

BERNDT: Yes, we permitted retirees to vote in our meetings. We didn't exclude them. This was one of the questions we had on the retirees committee when we had to put something in the constitution — what kind of voting rights would they have? We compromised by saying that they had the right to vote for officers, but they didn't have the right to vote for people on the Bargaining Committee, because they were not people going into the shop. There was some opposition from retirees on that, because they felt the Bargaining Committee was going to be bargaining for their benefits, too, so they ought to have a voice in who was on the committee. But they finally agreed that the compromise gave them recognition and some role to play in the local union, that these people who had helped organize the local union in the first place weren't being shut out.

PFLUG: And even though they're retired, they still have a stake in the health of the union.

BERNDT: And those were the guys that were in the fight in the early days, the early sit-downs, the early struggles, and the discharges and standing outside the plant gate. I can well remember — I stood outside the plant gate for six weeks when I was trying to raise a family and I had more seniority than anybody they took in, but when the foreman would come out in the morning and choose, he'd pass me up because I was a little noisier than some of the rest. I stood out there for six lousy weeks.

PFLUG: Just waiting to get called in.

BERNDT: Waiting to get called in. And one morning he came out and needed three people and there were only two of us there, so he had to take me back. [laughter] And when you went through these kinds of things and then found out the company terminated you because you were too old to work, you had no place to go. You had nothing to do, you couldn't have any input in the local union you helped to build, and it left a kind of a void in their lives, which the retirement program really filled.

PFLUG: Well, also for the retirees, didn't you played a role in setting up the village at Satsuma?

BERNDT: Well, I found out when I was director that a number of our people were moving to the South. In fact, some people who lived on the second floor of my building — he had been retired from Studebaker and his wife was in ill health — just packed up one weekend and took a trip to Texas to see if they could live there, because he thought that would help her physically. He never checked with the doctor and they were there about a month and she died. When he came back he said, "I've made a mistake and the doctor said she should never have gone into that climate."

But he also had some physical problems and decided that since Texas had been the death of his wife, he was going to Florida. So he went down to Florida and was down there about six weeks and he died. Neither one ever had checked with their doctor to see whether the climate in the various states was agreeable with them.

So I started a program with the retirees to at least tell people before they made a move to check with their physician to see that the climate they were moving to was a healthful climate for the kind of diseases they might have had. If they had emphysema or

something of that nature, they had to watch what climate they went into. And then I found out when I got interested in health care and retirees that a number of them who had gone to Florida had been bilked out of thousands of dollars on bum real estate deals. I had friends of mine who had been taken in land deals.

So I talked to Walter one day about the plight of retirees and how they went down to Florida and places like that without any help from anybody. So we checked and found that a great number of UAW retirees had been moving to Florida. Primarily they had landed in the St. Petersburg area. So we thought it would be nice if we had a place in Florida that retirees could go to for one month and then maybe make overnight trips into various other areas and look them over. And it would be good if we could have people around a retirement jumping-off place in Florida, who could advise the new arrivals where to look and what to look out for. If you buy a home in Florida, two things you want to look at very quickly are the roof and the air conditioning system. Both are very expensive; a normal roof that you put on up North that's supposed to last twenty-five years would probably last ten or twelve years in Florida.

PFLUG: Why is that?

BERNDT: Because of the heat. But after fifteen years, the people you bought it from are probably no longer in business, so you have no recourse. And an old air conditioning system can go at any time. And you're talking about a lot of money again. So these are two of the items we kind of warned people about looking at when they get to Florida. And then the other thing was the location: Was it a low spot in Florida where it

flooded out every time they had torrential rains during the rainy season? So we looked at that aspect of it.

PFLUG: You have this village then, where people can stay for about a month to look around. Is there a staff over there then to advise people about these problems you're talking about?

BERNDT: No, it never materialized in that direction. Walter then set up a committee to look around Florida for a place. Emil Mazey headed it up, with E. T. Michaels, Ken Morris and myself on the committee. And we looked at various sites in Florida. Emil was not really in favor of the total project; he was against spending any money in Florida and he just couldn't see the benefit of having a place like this. So Emil turned the committee over to the three of us and told us to find a site and bring it back to the board. We finally found a site south of Palatka at Satsuma right on the St. John River. About 31 1/2 acres there, and we finally took that back to the board and they voted on it. We finally put 80 units on that site, which could accommodate 80 retirees per month, and if you take the five winter months from November through March, that would get you 400 retirees every year that could come down to kind of look around to see if they wanted to stay down here.

Detroit then hired a caretaker for the place and I had advocated that the caretaker be instructed to provide our people with all the information about Florida, but I don't know, we changed caretakers quite frequently and that just never materialized. But at least they could get down and look at places themselves and talk to other people who lived down here. There was a housing project across the canal from the village, and some of our people, the

first ones that came down in the fall of 1970 (we dedicated the place in February of that year) bought into the housing project next door. And it got so that they would come over and visit with the retirees in the clubhouse, because every month they had new people to meet. They could talk to people who maybe worked in their home plant, or something like that, but they also brought with them what they'd learned about living in Florida which became helpful.

PFLUG: Yes, I suspect that's a real problem, people from up North moving to this area. It's a different world.

BERNDT: It is. Florida is really a provincial state. We used to have two people in my region, one who always went to Daytona Beach for his vacation and one who went to Clearwater for his vacation. One is on the ocean, one is on the Gulf. These two guys would spend hours arguing that the places they went to were the best places in Florida, but neither one would go to the other place to look at it, let alone live there. And they had their likes and dislikes, but these places are different, the elevations are different in Florida. In this area here where I live, we are the second highest elevation in Florida, which isn't saying too much, but at least it isn't the low, marshlands of Florida you get into when you get south of here.

PFLUG: Well, continuing on the retired workers business, you're active now in the retirees council in Orlando.

BERNDT: When I came down here, I was recuperating from a bout with some surgery — January 1st of 1972 I had a new aorta put in, and of course at that point I was 62 years old and it took a little while to recuperate from that kind of surgery. So when I

came down here, I wasn't much inclined to do anything but try to get my strength back and so I just worked around the house and around the yard doing physical labor. And I set up a little woodworking shop in the garage as a hobby. I spent almost two years of repainting and rebuilding. We didn't buy a new home; we bought an old home and remodeled it to suit ourselves, and I put on this Florida room here, this was a porch out here.

PFLUG: You did all this yourself?

BERNDT: Yes.

PFLUG: That's quite a job.

BERNDT: So I did this kind of work out here and after two years I decided that none of this would let me use any brain power for getting into any fights with the union. So during one of my conversations with Emil Mazey, who was still then secretary-treasurer, I told him I thought we needed a council of some kind to band together UAW retirees in this area. The closest one was St. Petersburg and that was 125 miles away, which put that out of reach of my traveling very often to a meeting. So Emil sent me a mailing list of the retirees in Lake County where I live and I found out we had 234 members of the UAW living in Lake County alone.

I found I had retirees from Buick Flint living two blocks down the street, had a UAW member from Dodge Main living three blocks away. I didn't even know they were there until I got the mailing list. I went down and visited with them and then I went around and started visiting with other retirees who were on the list and started talking to them about whether it would be helpful if we had a council in this area. And every place I went the answer was in the affirmative.

So then I got back with Emil and said that this was probably not the location to have the center for retirees; it really should be in the biggest city nearby, which was Orlando. If he could get me some mailing lists for the counties between here and Orlando and the Orlando area, I could then get an idea about how many people we had in the area. We drew a circle in a 50-mile radius around the city of Orlando and found it encompassed eight counties in a hundred square miles. And at that time, in early 1975, we had some 1,700 UAW members in these eight counties. That number today is 3,045. And of course we've lost a lot of them through death, moving back with families again, moving back with children after one spouse dies, but we still have gained some 1,300 more than we had when we first organized the council.

We had our first organizational meeting in September of 1975 and we had 175 people show up in Orlando. And since then it's always been from 175 to 300 a month showing up at a meeting. And they'll drive 50-some miles a month just to attend a monthly meeting.

PFLUG: What sort of things does the council get involved in?

BERNDT: Well we try to make our members aware of the fact that we're available for any kind of a problem. We developed a little 3" x 5" card we send out to every member. The office hours and the address are all typed on the card, but right in the center of the card the telephone number is printed in 3/4" letters, so that it's nice and large. We ask them to put this next to their telephone and if they have any problem whatsoever, to call the office between those hours. The office is open on Tuesday and Wednesday from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. In addition to that, on the back of every letter I send out is a map of

how to get to the union hall where we hold our meetings and have our office. And in addition to that, I have my board members-at-large elected from the areas in which they live and their names and addresses and telephone numbers are on the back of every letter. So a person living in Lake County doesn't have to wait until Tuesday or Wednesday between 9:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. to get a problem handled; they can call the board member right in Lake County and make it a local call and get an answer.

I have eight counselors that we have trained that work in the office and the five board members-at-large are also trained along with the counselors and they also take a hitch in the office too. They're scheduled in the office the same as counselors are and are kept up to date on current problems that might come up — like the kind of problems we're going to have with the new General Motors structure. That's going to cause all kinds of problems and they need to be talking to people who are going to be encountering these problems.

PFLUG: What sort of problems are going to come for the retirees out of GM restructuring?

BERNDT: Well, General Motors recently sent out a questionnaire asking retirees what kind of coverage they would like to have in their insurance: traditional, HMO or PPO. We don't have any HMO's or PPO's in the area. So we told those who contacted us to mark the questionnaire "traditional" and send it back. We now find that those who didn't send the questionnaire back, who just disregarded it — and a lot of retirees in their 80's will get confused about these things — the corporation has automatically transferred them from Florida Blues back to their home area. For example, the Chevrolet local in Indianapolis is

under an HMO in Indianapolis. So a retiree from Local 23 Chevrolet who didn't send his questionnaire back finds his membership has been taken from the Florida Blue Cross and shoved back into the HMO in Indianapolis, which doesn't do him much good.

PFLUG: Theoretically, if he needs some medical help he's got to go back to Indianapolis to get it.

BERNDT: Theoretically, he's got to go back. Now if he's got an emergency he can go in down here. If it is a non-emergency, he may be liable for $100-200 up front, because he's not using the HMO. We now find that General Motors hadn't realized this could have happened and the repercussions it would cause. And I understand they're now meeting with our people talking about maybe working out a transfer back for some of these people. But in the meantime, we have a problem. We try to minimize that problem by trying to handle it with the benefits section of the UAW General Motors Department. In fact, I have a meeting scheduled May 16th with all of my counselors, board members-at-large, the Florida Blues, the Michigan Blues and the GM Department.

PFLUG: To try to sort all this out.

BERNDT: To try to sort out all the problems that this has caused and see if we can minimize the number of problems we're going to be faced with by this coverage. An HMO is all right, but they ought to tell the people in HMO's that when they travel out of their district, they are only covered for emergencies. If we had an HMO down here for our retirees to participate in and they went back to Michigan to visit the kids or grandkids and got a second opinion from a doctor up there because they didn't trust the diagnosis of the Florida doctor (and you can't blame them, because everything down here, the doctors tell

you it's because of old age) and the doctor said he wanted to put them in the hospital for some tests, they'd have to pay out of pocket, because they wouldn't be covered.

PFLUG: And a lot of people don't understand this.

BERNDT: That's right, a lot of people don't understand it. But it's a saving for the company. I sat in on one of the meetings here, when they were selling the HMO idea in Orlando, and one of the small manufacturers said, "But I have some people living in Sarasota, which is 125 miles from here. Are they expected to use the services here?" And Blue Cross said, "Yes." He said, "Well, they probably won't drive over." And Blue Cross said, "Well, they save you money, because they won't be using the program."

PFLUG: That's great thinking.

BERNDT: Yes, it saves the corporation money, but it doesn't help our people. And this is my problem.

PFLUG: That's what the complex role of the council is.

BERNDT: Under the Gold Card system we have in Florida here for the General Motors Blue Cross, we have "exact fill," so the bills are sent to Florida Blues and they pay the bill completely. Then they file the Medicare and recover from Medicare whatever Medicare will give them. We don't care how much that might be. But the bill has been paid in full for the retirees.

PFLUG: So the retiree doesn't have to get involved with Medicare or anything.

BERNDT: That's right. All he has to do is get the physician to send the bill to Blue Cross directly instead of Medicare. The "exact fill" procedure works for "customary and usual" charges. If the doctor is charging over and above "customary and usual," we

expect Blue Cross, under our "hold harmless" clause, to send their representative back to the doctor to get the doctor to reduce his rates. If he won't, it's up to Blue Cross either to pay that rate or take the doctor to court.

PFLUG: So I gather one of the major things your retirees council gets involved in is straightening out medical insurance problems.

BERNDT: The biggest share is. Of course, we've had all kinds of other problems — land problems. We've had people buy motor homes or trailers that leaked and nobody would do anything about it, and we get the state offices involved in these kind of things. We do have departments in the state we can call upon for consumer protection. We use those departments. We use the insurance department of the state on other kinds of things — automobile insurance, other kinds of problems we might have in the state of Florida. So we use all of these departments and all of my counselors have the toll-free numbers for every department in the state, so that we can contact the state officers.

PFLUG: And your people can bring some pressure to bear then, whereas an individual would be . . .

BERNDT: As a group. An individual doesn't go anywhere, but as an organization . . . When they get a letter on one of our letterheads, from one of our counselors, why, they will move in, and we will be able to move them as an organization. I don't go to the office. I have eight counselors and five board members-at-large and I have one of our counselors — quite capable — who schedules all thirteen into the office.

PFLUG: You have the telephone.

BERNDT: I have the telephone at home in case they run into a knotty problem; all of them know how to get ahold of me. I'll iron out any of the knotty problems they can't seem to handle. But we have a system whereby we only bring in one counselor per day, and we have a running account on a legal pad in the office of what transpires each day. So the person who comes in on Wednesday looks back on Tuesday and sees what transpired and what is still open. Maybe that counselor couldn't complete a telephone call on a case. The first order of business is for the person on Wednesday to close the cases that were still open on Tuesday. And if they're still open on Wednesday, they mark it "open," so the person who comes in the following Tuesday can bring the cases up to date.

PFLUG: And this is all volunteer help.

BERNDT: These are all volunteers. We provide mileage and we provide a small amount for meals, because they're going to be gone from home. Some of them can catch breakfast on the way in and some of them catch lunch on the way home. Or else they'll have to brown-bag it. But all counselors in Florida are paid the same rate for lunch.

PFLUG: So the work being done for the retirees has come a long way since 1955.

BERNDT: There's no comparison. I understand that we now have seventeen international union retirees councils set up across the United States, and these are all set up by the International Executive Board. We are not answerable to the director in the region in which we are operating; we are directly answerable to the International Executive Board. We have more retirees here in Florida than you have working, dues-paying UAW members, by far — we outnumber them almost two to one.

We have councils such as this set up all across the United States, reaching people we were never able to reach before. No other union ever tried to do anything like this, and our experience indicates they ought to all be doing this, because you can't leave these people out on their own when they get in the bracket from 75-90 years old — they certainly need somebody to lean on.

PFLUG: One of the other areas that you seemed to be concerned about when you were regional director were educational programs. You seemed to want to make sure that things like summer schools were set up and operating properly, and the other educational . . .

BERNDT: We probably had the largest summer schools of any region when I was director. We held a two-week summer school. The first week we called "elementary" and the second week "advanced." We wouldn't let anybody take the second week unless they had been in the first week some other time. Through the Auto Council, we would always take newly organized local unions and send one delegate to the first week of summer school and get them basic training in administration or collective bargaining, so they could do their own handling of their grievances and things of that nature.

We were instrumental, when Carroll Hutton was the educational representative of Region 3, in starting the labor bookshelf in all the high schools. We probably were the only region that saturated the entire states of Indiana and Kentucky — every high school has a set of labor bookshelves. We make the local unions buy the labor bookshelf and go to the library and put it in. Since I've been down here, we've been able to get our hands on labor bookshelves, and I've had them put in libraries here in Florida now. Retirees have called

upon the school system and had these bookshelves put into community colleges and into high schools down here in Florida. We don't have may of them, but we do have some in the larger cities, in the largest high school in Orlando, in the largest high school in Daytona Beach, and Lake Sumpter Community College has a labor bookshelf.

PFLUG: Must have been a real eye-opener for the people down here.

BERNDT: Well, this is an anti-labor state you know, a right-to-work state. Kids are brought up on the basis of "if it's for labor, you've got to hate it." So labor's a bad word. In fact, some of our people who had UAW signs on their cars ten years ago had their windows knocked out of their cars, just by kids going by and throwing a brick through them because there was a labor sign on the car. So we couldn't get people to identify themselves publicly with the union. But I now have, and have had for the last five years, an emblem on the back of my car that says UAW retiree."

PFLUG: You haven't had your window broken.

BERNDT: I haven't had my windows broken either. And that car's parked all over 100 square miles here in Florida.

PFLUG: That brings up something else that I've often wondered about. Indiana in many ways is a very conservative area; they had a right-to-work law at one time.

BERNDT: Yes. Indiana had a right-to-work law and it was a conservative state.

PFLUG: How do you explain the strength of the UAW in Indiana at the same time as . . .

BERNDT: Let me start with telling about how the international union through the executive board would allocate funds for a political fight in a given area. They'd go state

by state until they came to Indiana, and Walter would say, "We'll pass that up." And I said, "Well, Walter, when do we get a turn at bat? You know, you keep passing us up with funds every year, we have no funds with which to work. So how can we make a fight if we don't have any funds at all?" So he said, "All right, we'll allocate $5,000 to Indiana." And I said, "Walter, you can keep that, because we can't even start a program with that. We have eleven Congressional districts in Indiana."

PFLUG: When would this have been, roughly?

BERNDT: In the 1950's. And he said, "What are you talking about?" I said, "A minimum of $15,000 with a right to come back to the well, if we see we're really making progress with the 15. That lets me have a little bit more than $1,000 per Congressional district, which is peanuts anyway. But nevertheless, it lets me find out whether or not I can get a job done."

So we got the $15,000 and we started on a real job. And of course, in the larger areas it took a little bit more than the $1,000 per area, so we had the $3,000 extra we could work with. In some areas we weren't going to spend $1000 because it was going to be useless, or so we thought. But then as the thing started moving, our people saw that we had some funds with which to work and the local unions had some political action funds. And the locals started putting in some effort when we had some money to show them that the international was going to be doing work in this field too. The locals started doing a better job. So I went back to the well and I got $10,000 more later on in installments of two or five thousand, or whatever it was.

Anyhow, it accumulated and we spent $25,000 that year. We elected ten out of eleven congressmen in the Democratic column that year. That set the pattern for Indiana in the future to get some funds with which to work. That made it possible for Johnny Brademus in 1958 to be elected out of the northern part of the state, and Johnny eventually became the House whip and stayed there from 1958-1980. So that we did have friends in Congress as a result of this kind of deal.

After the right-to-work law went into effect, we saw we couldn't get it turned around because we couldn't elect enough state legislators. But one year we sold the idea to a lot of them that if we were obligated by federal law to represent everybody in the plant after we'd won an NLRB election, under an NLRB election and spend our money to benefit everybody, even if we'd only won 51% to 49%, then we should be able to collect dues from everybody. We went to the legislature and were able to push through the agency shop clause, which said that if you belonged to a shop that had a union contract, you had to pay dues to maintain the bargaining position, even though you don't have to join the union.

PFLUG: These are the same legislators who had passed the right-to-work law?

BERNDT: Well, some of them, yes, but most of them, no, because we had made some changes. We were getting some friends in the legislature and even some who weren't friends thought we had a reasonable argument.

And so we were able to get the agency shop clause in. Well, with agency shop we had everybody paying their dues, but these people got no representation. They couldn't attend meetings and they couldn't decide on programs, so a lot of them started to join the union so they could have a voice in things. So we were able to build up our membership on

that basis. When we finally elected a Democratic governor, he followed through on his campaign promise to repeal the right-to-work law. I understand the last legislature in Indiana contemplated putting back the right-to-work law, but I understand they were able to get it killed in committee. Had it gone to the floor — the Indiana Legislature's solid Republican, House and Senate both — it would have passed.

PFLUG: You worked on Birch Bayh's campaigns then, too.

BERNDT: Oh yes, I got into Birch Bayh's campaign in the early stages against Homer Capehart. We ran that campaign on a shoestring, but Birch had a personal appeal to a of people and a lot of young people followed him in the campaign. I was able to have our people sit on his advisory committee all the way through — everything that was done in Indiana was done with us. We were part of decision making in his whole campaign; we were not told about it afterwards.

But as we started to wind this thing down, about three weeks before the campaign, it appeared that Capehart had put enough money in that he was tying up all the TV and everything else and there was no way Birch could win. A lot of people — influential people — were leaving the campaign and just not doing anything, just sitting by and wouldn't put any more money in. There was one person, who was a millionaire, who stayed with Birch, and myself, but we were the only two who had been on the original committee to get him to run who stayed with him. And we were in constant telephone communication wondering how, at the last minute, we could get this thing done.

I came up with the idea that we should buy the cheap TV time in the morning, say from 10:00 to 10:30. May Mann was the director of the Communications Workers, and I

asked May to get us some telephone operators who were good lookin' little gals, who would man the table. We'd put in a bank of telephones and for a half hour, Birch Bayh would answer any question that anybody called in. Well, between the two of us, we were able to raise enough money to buy a week's TV time for a half hour in the morning. Birch stood at the end of the table, his coat hanging over the back end of a chair, his sleeves rolled up and one foot on the seat of the chair. Our telephone number appeared on the screen constantly and these girls would answer the phone and refer the question to Birch and he would answer it. Well, Birch was able to get to the housewives that morning. While they were unhappy about losing their soap operas, they were willing to trade them for this young guy with curly hair, who was good looking, who was talking directly to them as housewives and answering basically housewife questions, because those are the ones that heard him. I think when papa got home that night from work, mama was saying, "Look, this is the guy we ought to be going for."

And we put that election into Birch's column in the last two weeks. It wasn't a huge majority, but we did raise it to a fairly good one in the last two weeks. And after six years in office, he rolled back in with a good majority the next time and then the following term too, but the third term he got washed out in the Reagan landslide. But he got washed out primarily, I think, by the right-wing pack that came on for two years prior to that election.

PFLUG: He was on their list.

BERNDT: He was on their hit list, because of the abortion issue and the gun issue. They played that up every day for two years. You always had a piece on TV against Birch Bayh for two years. And they used that to get him in 1980.

PFLUG: Were you involved in his run for the presidency — was it in 1968?

BERNDT: Yes. I had talked to him before that and we thought we ought to try it here in Florida a little bit. And of course, the governor at that time was a friend of his and thought that maybe he might make a stab at it. Birch did a couple of meetings down here.

PFLUG: Was that Leroy Collins?

BERNDT: Oh no, that wasn't Collins. No, he made a couple of meetings down here, and I don't know. I came away from the meetings with mixed reactions about whether or not the older people down here wanted to take a guy that young. I don't think he really clicked with the older people and that's who mostly attended the meetings. The younger people didn't show, because the meetings were held during the day when younger people were working. Plus, Birch found out that his wife had cancer and Birch decided he owed more to her than to a run for the presidency. So he didn't sample many other areas. It was a short run, he folded his tent early on that one. In my estimation, had he tried out in the Midwest in the evening, where he could have gotten young people out to meet him, he would have had the same appeal that John Kennedy had.

PFLUG: You were able to put things together in Florida for Carter in 1976.

BERNDT: When Carter first ran, they came down here and wanted to know if we could put things together. I said, "Well first we'd better have a meeting with Carter." We had to satisfy our retiree leadership down here that Carter would be talking the kind of things we could sell to retirees.

BERNDT: We had a meeting with Carter at the Ramada hotel, a breakfast meeting at which we probably put him on the grill and asked him all kinds of questions. I

was not satisfied with his position on the Social Security issue and Medicare. I never felt he was completely in our corner. But he was sufficiently in our corner that I felt that if we had other people surrounding him, he would not do us any damage. So we went out and we really had our retirees work in the places. One thing people don't understand about our retirees . . . On my executive board, for example, I have thirteen people, but out of the thirteen, seven or eight may live in retirement villages and they may be an officer of a group in that village. My vice president, for example, lives in a village with a thousand retirees.

PFLUG: So he's representing them as well as . . .

BERNDT: So he can have his voice heard in that group, and he can be selling the UAW line without saying it's a UAW line. You can multiply this by the six councils we have in Florida and by the number of people we can reach in the retirement communities and we can be a real factor. The same thing happens with the National Council of Senior Citizens. Our members who belong to the National Council of Senior Citizens live in retirement villages and they get the "National Council of Senior Citizens News," which is basically a pro-labor pitch on a lot of the issues. They can spread those newspapers around in the reading rooms of the retirement villages. So we get more than UAW people. We're not touching UAW people, we're touching retirees, period.

PFLUG: Well, then too, the problems you're working on aren't just UAW problems.

BERNDT: No, they're not just UAW problems, they appeal to all retirees or people with similar problems. When we hit the trail for politics, as we did in the Carter campaign, our people in the retirement villages were making speeches for Carter. And

these were not UAW meetings, these were retirement village meetings, mobile home community meetings. These retirement villages are very large in many places and small in others, but our people get around to these things and many of them are trustees or other officers inside of these organizations, so that we do have an impact.

So when we tried on the Carter thing for size down here, the retirees were leading the parade. Especially when you get into the National Council in Miami, for example. We don't have a lot of UAW members living in Miami, but you've got a lot of retirees organized by apartment buildings in the National Council. If you have 200 apartments in a building, they have a club of the National Council. They have their own meeting room, they have their own officers. Now, the National Council did cooperate with us on the Carter campaign, so we were able to touch a lot of retirees in Florida. They got on the bandwagon for Carter and we carried Carter down here.

PFLUG: It was his win in Florida that kind of put everything together for him, too.

BERNDT: That put the South together for him too. When Florida went, you found Georgia, Alabama and the rest were starting to look around at Carter. He started to look pretty good. Then we tried to assure our friends up North that he couldn't hurt them in any way. He wasn't anti-labor. So we were able to get the machine rolling up in the northern part of the country, too.

I found when I came down here that Florida people who are longtime residents have a peculiar position. Once they elect a sheriff, for example, they never — no matter what the sheriff does — would start a campaign against him, because he was the sheriff and they bowed and they kowtowed to him while he was in office.

PFLUG: So once you got elected, you had it made.

BERNDT: When I came down here, I found that to be the truth. In meeting with the executive secretary of the teachers' union down here — a young guy, 32 years of age, who was very liberal in his thinking — I found out his problem was he had two anti-labor people on the school board and an anti-labor superintendent of schools, who was giving the teachers a rough time. So I suggested to him that we form a coalition of the NAACP, the retirees and the schoolteachers and we'd be able to change the composition of the school board and the school superintendent. He wasn't sure it could be done, but I assured him that at least we'd make a stab at it and see what could be done, because nothing was being done up to that point and they couldn't remove these people that had been on the school board for many, many years. I happened to be a life member of the NAACP and thought that I was in a position to go talk to the president of the NAACP, knowing that he certainly had black teachers in the structure here in Florida. So I talked to him and we agreed that we would let the executive director of the teachers' union name the two board members he wanted to replace and who the replacements might be as well as the person he wanted to replace the superintendent of schools. So we started a campaign and as a result of that election, we took the two out of office and we replaced the school superintendent. We showed them what could be done with a coalition.

PFLUG: That's a pretty powerful group of people you put together.

BERNDT: And, of course, it was difficult trying to talk to retirees about the school board, since they didn't have any children or grandchildren in school here. But we were able to approach them on the basis that these people were anti-union and were

stopping the teachers from having their union operate. And one of the school board members made a public statement that he was opposed to arbitration in any form. His decision could not be questioned by anybody. Well, I used that with our retirees and they understood that one. If you couldn't take anything to arbitration, then you were trying to be king of the hill and you ought to be unseated. So, whether you can get people lined up behind you all depends on how you present the issues to them.

Shortly after that we had an election of delegates to the state Democratic convention. So I talked to the other two coalition leaders about fielding a slate of delegates instead of sending the regular people they had sent to Democratic conventions, the old timers. I'd pick retirees, and the NAACP would pick their people, and the teachers would pick their people and we'd run a slate. They held the election at a big county-wide meeting. I sat there and typed up slates, which we cut up and my wife stayed outside the door passing out. And here come the retirees on crutches and canes and everything else to the meeting to vote. And we took eight out of nine delegates. I heard one of the old county-line people say, "I don't know who that woman is outside, but she's passing out some slips of paper to these people and I never saw these people before in my life." These retirees coming out of the nest to come down and do what we asked them to do, because in my monthly letter I had said, "In Lake County we have an opportunity to elect some pro-union people."

PFLUG: Well, back to when you were regional director. You were director when the Perfect Circle strike broke out in 1955.

BERNDT: Oh yes.

PFLUG: That was a tense time to say the least.

BERNDT: That was a very rough time. We had an Auto Council meeting, at which time the delegates reported on the problems they were having with management trying to bring in scabs through the line and sending office personnel out in the factory to work and everything else. So they asked if we could work out some day in the following week to have a demonstration of solidarity between all the local unions in the area, a mass picket line around the place to show everybody that they had support outside of Newcastle, Indiana. I pointed out that I had a board meeting starting on Monday of that week and I wouldn't be able to be there. They said, "Well, it isn't necessary that you head it up. We're just going to have a mass demonstration and a march."

So I sent my assistant in to represent me and I went on to the board meeting in Detroit, only to find out — I got a call early one morning at the hotel — that during the mass demonstration early in the morning, the company had brought in people with guns who were firing at the people in the march line and some of our people who live out in the countryside had gone back to their cars and gotten their squirrel rifles out and started firing back! There was a war going on. I spent most of the morning on the phone in the hotel room and then when I got to Solidarity House, Walter, who had heard about it on the news, wanted to talk to me immediately. I told him that I had been in touch with our people down there and I was trying to head it off as best we could, because there just wasn't time to get a plane and get back down there and head it off myself. When people are firing at each other you don't wait for an afternoon flight to take you back to Indianapolis.

By the time I got to Walter's office, they had a TV picture of my assistant on top of a car telling our people to go on home and disband and break it up, because the state police were carting guns out of the shop at that point. We got pictures of two six-foot long tables just loaded with shotguns and rifles that the company had brought into the plant. They had brought them in by helicopter, along with all kinds of ammunition. I told Walter there was no point in going back, since they were disbanding and the reps were coming in. I'd called my secretary on the phone before she got to the office and told her to call every rep within 50 miles and get him down there and tell him to run everybody home that we could possibly get away from there. Get them the heck out of that place, because this was total open warfare and they were outnumbered by the number of guns they had in the plant. Plus you had the state police on their side. Of course, our people had turned over some cars in the gateway too, and they were using that as a shield against the guns. Some of our people were hit with buckshot. We had four or five people taken to the hospital for gunshot wounds, but they were thankful that it was a matter of picking buckshot out of them and stopping the bleeding and infections and that kind of thing. There weren't serious injuries.

PFLUG: How were you finally able to resolve this business so that the next time they showed up at the gates, there wasn't shooting again?

BERNDT: They had court orders holding us to a limited number of pickets per gate, of course, as a result of this. So we tried to shut things off at the supplier end. We were able to curtail a lot of it at the supplier end and we started cutting down their business quite a bit. We finally were able to get the people to the bargaining table. They had a shake-up in management too, because the older people who ran Perfect Circle were really

anti-union. In fact, the president of the corporation had even run for the state Legislature as a state representative and was one of the instigators of the right-to-work law in Indiana. They would take the menial job of a part-time state representative just to be in a position to cast a vote and run the labor union into the ground. When they started changing personnel in the plant, we were able to get other people at the bargaining table to be able to put it back together.

Of course, we had people in Congress who wanted to have an investigation of the whole matter. We were called up before the Senate committee and we had to appear in Washington on this whole matter of plant gate violence and all that stuff. I had to appear before the Congress too, even though I wasn't there at the time, because they said I had ordered it and then skipped town to avoid responsibility. Of course, I don't set the board meetings; they were set months ahead of time.

PFLUG: One of the other things that happened when you were on the board was that the company where you started, Studebaker, folded.

BERNDT: Studebaker ran into difficulty probably in 1953 with a design problem, which lost them money. Studebaker also made some very bad mistakes when they came out with the first small car. They marketed it through GM instead of building up their own dealerships. They wanted to get this small car out on the market real fast, so they cut a deal with General Motors to put these in their showrooms and sell them, because General Motors had no small car. At the point General Motors saw these small cars were moving, General Motors then started to produce a smaller car and of course, the Studebakers went in the back end of the garage and the General Motors car went on the showroom floor. So

Studebaker didn't prop up the dealership end at all. At the point General Motors started outselling them in small cars, we had Studebaker dealerships going out of business.

So the whole thing was just one error after another and floundering around on the part of a small corporation. They said in the press that our labor rates in South Bend put the company out of business. I directed a letter to the editor in which I pointed out that I would take the 1962 figures for the corporation (which was the year before they closed — they closed in December 1963) and deduct the total labor costs from the operation, and the corporation still lost money.

PFLUG: Even if they hadn't paid anybody.

BERNDT: If they hadn't paid anybody at all in 1962, they still would have lost money. So their problem in 1963 was that they had about two million unsold cars on hand, and had they gone out of business in 1963 in South Bend, they would have had to buy back two million cars. So what they did, they moved to Canada in 1963 to get around this contract with the dealers. They got around the buy-back clause and moved the operation to Canada, and they lasted up there roughly six months before they folded. But then it was a different setup, a different organization, outside the terms of their agreement with the United States dealers. The dealers were left holding the bag with a lot of cars for which they had no parts. Under the law, the corporation had to maintain a parts warehouse for ten years. So they moved that from Canada back to the United States after they closed the Canadian operation, and they put back to work some of the oldest people we had in line of seniority in the South Bend plant. They maintained the parts depot for the required number

of years — I think it had eight years to go after the Canadian operation shut down — and then they closed it up.

PFLUG: One of the things you hear now when companies are threatening to go out of business are concessions by the workers. Was there any discussion of Studebaker people taking lower rates to try to keep the company going?

BERNDT: No, because prior to 1962 we had already gone from piecework to day work. We'd done away with the piecework plan.

PFLUG: So you'd already made a concession.

BERNDT: We'd already gone off of piecework, we'd already gone to day work, and our rates were all pretty much in line with General Motors rates. It might have been a penny off here or there per hour, but basically we were in line with General Motors rates. So far as productivity, I don't know how that would have compared, because you couldn't compare the Studebaker operation layout with what General Motors might have had. General Motors might have had a more compact operation. Studebaker was operating with buildings that were . . . Well, one building they were using, my uncle worked in it in 1919 when it was an upholstery shop for buggies. When you use those kind of buildings — five-story buildings — against a one story building . . .

PFLUG: It's going to cost more.

BERNDT: It costs more. And their body shop was six floors high, and then they had to ship them across to the assembly plant, which was a four-story building. So you have the fender painting and all that stuff over on that side with the chassis division and you ship the bodies over there and they're assembled over there with all the component parts

being made over there, like the hoods and the fenders and all those things, put together over there. These two body shops in the final line were about half a mile apart. They finally designed a runway from the sixth floor of the body shop over to the fourth floor of the chassis division a half a mile long, which they put on top of the buildings, on top of the engineering building — it went across the street there. Except they never thought about what would happen if anything broke in that half a mile of tunnel. Well, everything stopped; bodies were choked up in the tunnel. That happened time and time again.

PFLUG: When they finally did close up shop, what protection was there for the retirees and their pensions plans and so forth?

BERNDT: At that point we only had a $2.50 per month per year service pension. That's all the pension amounted to. A 30-year man was getting $75.00 a month. But we used the formula that was available for the dissolution of a pension fund and we bought annuities for everybody who had retired and continued to pay them their pension for the rest of their life. Then we took the next bracket, from 60-65, and assumed they were taking early retirement. We took their years of service and gave them an annuity payable at age 65 equal to what the early retirement pension would have been. Then we got down to those under 60, put together a formula of age and seniority and came up with a figure based on that and divided up the rest of the funds that were left among the people who were left. I was one left. At that point I had 36 years of service with Studebaker, for which I got $1,100 and no pension.

PFLUG: So then you just got a lump sum payment.

BERNDT: Lump sum payment of $1,100 for 36 years service. And that's the only way you could handle it. That washed out the funds. In this group under 60, there was one fellow who was 59 years of age with 45 years of service and got no pension.

PFLUG: He put in 45 years and he got nothing?

BERNDT: That's right. He went in as a kid, as a letter carrier in the shop, a delivery boy on an hourly rate and he stayed with the corporation and he got no pension. I had 36 points with the formula, so he would have had 100+, which means he got about $3,000 as a cash settlement for 45 years of service. The international union sent him to Washington, D. C. to testify for the Pension Reinsurance Act as one of the shining examples of what can happen when a corporation goes out of business, and he was one of the best witnesses we had in Washington.

PFLUG: I can imagine. In addition to the impact on the employees, the closing must have had a big impact on South Bend itself.

BERNDT: It did have.

PFLUG: How many people were working at Studebaker at this time?

BERNDT: Studebaker had a high of 22,000 during the war, but a regular work force of about 8,000. What we did really in the region, we made up an ordinary job application form. We added one more clause on the bottom, "How far would you travel for a job like this?" We had all the laid off employees who were under 60 fill them out. I asked every rep I had to find out who was hiring in the area and what classification they were hiring in. Ford at that time was hiring a lot of skilled trades people in Indianapolis. They had just started their Ford plant in Indianapolis. George Jones was my assistant at

that time and he was also a skilled trades representative in the region. So he went through the Studebaker skilled trades group to see how many skilled trades people were laid off. He took that group of job applications to Ford and Ford looked at them and said, "All right, bring this guy and we'll talk to him."

So I don't know how many we placed. We must have placed 14-20 people in Ford's. We placed some in Chrysler in Kokomo. We placed some in General Motors in Kokomo. We placed some with Ford in East Chicago, which is right on the border line there between Region 3 and 4. But we placed them in all kinds of shops, wherever anybody wanted them, that is those who would travel away from South Bend. Some of the people said they wanted a job right in South Bend, which was impossible.

PFLUG: There weren't any jobs.

BERNDT: There weren't any jobs in South Bend, so they had to find a niche someplace in some other line of work really. Elkhart, for example, with the trailer industry would hire, but they were mostly unorganized and the rates were real low. Some people felt, well, they've got their family up there and they've got their house up there, so they'd take a lower paying job if they could get in. But a lot of the trailer companies wouldn't hire them if they knew they were Studebaker, because they figured they were union people and they didn't want to hire them. But we placed an awful lot of people that way, all over the region.

We did this for other plants that went out of existence. No matter where a plant went out of existence in the region, we would use this dummy application form as though they were applying for a job. We didn't know where it was going to be and they didn't

know where it was going to be. But the bottom line was, "How far are you prepared to go to get this kind of a job?" If they said they'd go anywhere for a job, then we'd look for it anywhere in the region. If they said anywhere within 50 miles, then we'd kind of check with the reps within 50 miles of that town and see if any plants were hiring anybody. We had closings in the southern part of the state, too, so we took the same application blanks down there.

PFLUG: How many people were affected by those closings?

BERNDT: Oh, my God. We must have had six or seven thousand people affected down there. The corporation [General Motors] said they would take anybody in St. Louis that wanted to go. But we had a lot of people that traveled, stayed there for the week and came home for the weekend. They'd have joint car rides, five guys would ride together and head out every Sunday night for St. Louis and stay there in rooming houses for the rest of the week and on Friday night head back to Evansville again and stay there. They couldn't sell their house in Evansville — like South Bend, you couldn't sell a house. Who was there to buy it? Nobody had a job. Real estate values really plummeted when that happened and if you move to another city you're in a bind, because you have to pay the real estate prices in that city.

PFLUG: Well, while you were on the board, the UAW split with the AFL-CIO, when Walter Reuther pulled out.

BERNDT: That's right, we did.

PFLUG: What were your feelings about that?

BERNDT: Oh I was for the split, because I could see in Indiana, in all of our political campaigns, AFL representatives would attend our meetings, they'd give lip service, but even in the Birch Bayh campaign, they didn't work at it. When the campaign was over we found they had most of the materials still laying around; they had never put the material out for their members.

We found that in the building trades, for example, a business agent owed his jobs to the contractor. A business agent for the building trades, electrical workers for example, 3% of a worker's wages went for his salary. So if he had fifteen workers on the job, that made a lot of difference. These guys would get in an argument for one or two people on a job saying this guy belongs to my local and not to your local. They wouldn't even be on speaking terms. I said to one of them one time, "Arguing about one or two people — if that's all it takes to get you to quit your darn arguing, I'll give you that many people. What difference does it make?" And one of the business agents said to me, "Ray it makes a difference whether I drive a Chevrolet or a Cadillac." So this was their total involvement, and if the contractor was a Republican, they wouldn't go against him because . . .

PFLUG: He was the one doling out jobs.

BERNDT: He was the one hiring people. They wanted him to hire as many people as he could and they wanted to be on good terms with him because that meant their salary was increased. I raised this with Walter, I said, "These guys, you can't get them involved in political action, that isn't what they're interested in. They're interested in their status of living, they want to know how good they can live. They're interested in how many people they can get to work for this contractor."

So this is what you've got in the building trades, and that's why the hard hats are going for the Republicans, because they're told, "You want a job, the contractor's a Republican, you'd better not be a Democrat, because he's probably never going to bring you back on the next job he moves to." You've got to go from job to job.

I was for getting out, because they were not carrying their share of the load. We were paying in the total per capita tax and they were not using it to help. Frivolous spending of our money on their part, as far as I was concerned. We could have done ten times more with that money than they were doing with it. We were cutting corners to pay that per capita tax when we could have been spending that money ourselves.

PFLUG: Some people have said the real reason for the split was a personality conflict between Walter and George Meany, but I gather you think this other matter . . .

BERNDT: Oh no, it was frustration on the part of Walter, probably because he couldn't get Meany to move. I had the same frustration with the AFL people in the state. Now, in the state AFL we outnumbered them, because we had put together a committee of steel and auto, so we could dictate the offices. But we tried to tell them, "You want people on the board, you get together with your own group and you come up with one name. We are not going to get in your international union and decide who's going to be on the board. If you can't get together in your own international union and come up with one name for the executive board of the state AFL, we'll just bypass your international and move on to the next one. We've got the votes to do it. Now, that's the only time we're going to use the votes against you, but if you get your heads together and come up with one name, we'll put

the full power of our coalition together and we'll put that man on the executive board for you. But we ain't going to name your man."

Now, we made them toe the mark on that one. They stepped up to it then, they quit their fighting inside their own international unions and solidified themselves on a lot of cases. But we had this constantly, that these guys would give lip service at a meeting, go home and do nothing about it. We'd go home and work our tails off, only to find out they weren't doing anything. When we had to start thinking about cutting corners financially, they're sitting on a pile of money we had given them and they weren't doing anything with it.

PFLUG: That you could use for something else.

BERNDT: Oh we could have used more money. As I said, I had to go back to the well two or three times to get an extra $10,000 for a campaign. But they didn't do anything good in the Birch Bayh campaign. They didn't help to the extent they could have helped. I got help from the Communications Workers, by giving us the gals. They took care of the gals' lost time and paid the gals to sit there at the telephones at the TV station, things like that. Outside of the CIO people, the AFL people didn't do much.

PFLUG: By the time the question of re-affiliation came up, you were retired.

BERNDT: I was retired at that point. I understand that the delegates from Region 3 voted against going back in by a vast majority. They were still of the opinion that it wasn't working down in the local.

PFLUG: It still hadn't changed.

BERNDT: Things hadn't changed at the local level enough to warrant them going back in to give their money to the people again to do the same thing they had done before. While there seemed to be some cooperation, more cooperation at the top, there just is an inability in the AFL structure to carry it out, because each one is a warlord in his own district.

PFLUG: And if they don't want to move, nobody can move them.

BERNDT: You can't move a business agent if he doesn't want to move. There's no way you can move a business agent from the top. Now, if a rep in the UAW didn't want to move, Walter could remove him.

PFLUG: He could move him back in the shop.

BERNDT: You could move him back in the shop, but you couldn't move a guy back on the job who was a representative of the Electrical Workers, something like that, a business agent. You couldn't move him back. I don't care who you were — the president of the Electrical Workers union. He was represented by the people that paid him 3% of their wages and they defied you to touch the guy they elected. So if you wanted to take him . . .

Let's take, for example, what happened in Cleveland. Pat O'Malley was our director in Cleveland. He was head of the AFL-CIO Council. At the point we withdrew from the AFL-CIO, Meany sent an order down for them to remove Pat O'Malley as chairman of the AFL-CIO Council. The AFL-CIO told Meany to blow it, they wanted Pat O'Malley to be chairman.

PFLUG: This was after the UAW withdrew?

BERNDT: After we withdrew. They then sent a guy in, Meany's personal representative came in for a mass meeting and he made the pitch that Pat O'Malley couldn't be the chairman of the AFL-CIO Council of Cleveland. So the motion was made to retain Pat. The representative jumped up and said, "I want a standing vote on this one. I want to see who's in favor of that kind of motion." Unanimously, everybody stood up. He didn't get one vote out of those 800 delegates who showed up that night. So that's what they can tell you at the top. So Meany had no control over the AFL and neither did the presidents of the AFL unions. So Pat finally, at Walter's request, withdrew on his own later.

PFLUG: Meany couldn't force him out.

BERNDT: They couldn't force him out because even the AFL didn't want him to go. Pat was a pretty good hand-holder and could quiet things down. I had lunch with Pat one day, we were sitting in the lunchroom there across from the courthouse. One of the county officials came in and Pat stopped him and introduced him to me and then he said to the guy, "You had a meeting last week and you had a non-union movie operator there. I don't want to ever see that again." He said, "All right Pat, I didn't know it happened and it will never happen again." Pat said, "Next time you have a showing using a projector, we want a union projectionist there." He said, "I'll take care of it." So Pat settled the problem of the movie projector just while he was having lunch.

I was basically opposed to them going back in, because I could see in Region 3 that they weren't doing the job, they just hadn't done the job.

One of the other things that happened while I was director — we saved the Gene Debs home in Terre Haute.

PFLUG: You were a key person in putting that together.

BERNDT: Yes. Of course, the Socialist Party in Indiana was really behind the drive to maintain the Gene Debs home. I was in the drive on the basis that Gene Debs was really the father of industrial unionism. So we were putting together a coalition of people from the industrial unions. AFL, again, didn't participate too much in that one, because Gene Debs was a socialist. They didn't want to be stuck with being labeled a socialist or playing ball with the Socialist Party in Indiana. I put together primarily the CIO people in Indiana on that and finally convinced Emil Mazey that we ought to be putting some money into it.

They were to close the deal at noon on a Friday or Saturday, I forget which, but the bank was open. The house was to be sold, to be torn down and moved away by noon, unless they come up with enough money. I got that check Friday afternoon in the mail. Saturday morning I drove over there and got there at 11:00 and we had enough money then to buy the place. I then went to Mastick Asphalt Company in South Bend, who made outside siding, and negotiated with them to get some vinyl siding that looked like board siding to refinish the outside of the house so the appearance would be decent. The university made us all kinds of offers for that house, to move it on any other site but where it was at, because it was right in the middle of the expanding university. We refused to move it.

PFLUG: And it's still there.

BERNDT: So we had Birch Bayh get a resolution through the Senate making it a national foundation.

PFLUG: They couldn't move it then.

BERNDT: They couldn't move it. It has a plaque on it. It's under the national parks. Now the back yard is fenced in with brick, and we have a labor garden back there; busts of various labor leaders down through the years are enshrined in the garden in the back of the house. The house holds a library of all the labor books that you can possibly get your hands on.

PFLUG: Don't you have a Roy Reuther room?

BERNDT: Oh yes, we have a Roy Reuther room.

PFLUG: When Walter was killed in May of 1970, the board had to find a successor to him. You were still on the board at that time.

BERNDT: I was still on the board at that time. We had two people in mind — Doug Fraser and Leonard Woodcock, both of whom had been assistants to Walter at one time or another. It came down pretty much to what I did — I guess the vote was pretty close. With Leonard's background in General Motors (which was a large segment of our union, and I had nine General Motors plants in the region), I just felt the union would continue right in Walter's path dedicated to the same set of principles. I was sure that Doug would have been dedicated to the same principles, but he had not had the same exposure that Leonard had. Leonard had come to my region, you know, with nine plants. Lord, I had nine locals that were looking for Leonard to be the president. I had three Chrysler locals looking for Leonard to be the president.

PFLUG: You mean for Doug to be president.

BERNDT: For Doug to be president. I just thought that our future would be just as well handled with Leonard in there as it would be with Doug and I voted for Leonard. I had nothing against Doug, because I had traveled with Doug on a trip to Europe a year prior to that. We had been to Zurich and other places together as a labor committee delegation. I had nothing against Doug. I know that Doug had gone back and become a regional director, but so had Leonard and Leonard had been moved up to a vice president. I just thought that at that time, it made sense to put Leonard in. Of course when Leonard came out of there, I was totally in favor of Doug going back in there.

PFLUG: Succeeding him as president.

BERNDT: Succeeding Leonard. Same as I was in favor of Bieber taking over, because I'd known Bieber from way back in the early days when he was working for Kenny Robinson. Then he came on up through the ranks and became assistant to Kenny and became director there. I recognized Owen Bieber as having the same kind of basic humanitarian traits that Leonard had and Doug had. So I was certainly in favor of Bieber taking over. As far as I could see, our people would benefit by Owen Bieber heading up our union. So, for the last three presidents, I have been very happy with the succession.

PFLUG: The union faces some tough times these days.

BERNDT: Yes, it's unfortunate that Owen has to fall heir to the kind of problems the union is facing. I fault our union in one area. I think our basic fight in this country should have been — it would have been a tremendous fight, I don't know if we could have ever won it . . . Our basic problem evolved from . . . You can take funds out of this country and put them in any other country in the world. Now, you can't come from Canada

to the United States with unlimited money. You can't even come from Africa to this country with unlimited funds; they regulate what you can take out.

PFLUG: But you can make it here and take it anywhere.

BERNDT: You can make it here and take it anywhere in the world and exploit anybody else. I thought, since we are the only country in the world that permits this, we should have made this one our basic fight — to stop the exportation of American dollars for use in exploiting workers in other countries.

PFLUG: Because it's come back to haunt the American worker.

BERNDT: It does. Even in the early days. When IUE went to the bargaining table with GE, GE asked them not only to set aside their request for a wage increase, but to take a wage cut. They said, "We can't compete with Japan." But one of the IUE guys on the committee, who I knew, had in advance bought a GE radio, and right on the carton it said "Made in Japan." He had it with him and he takes it out of his briefcase and sets it on the table and says, "This was built with the profits we helped you make in the United States. That's why we're not going to withdraw our request for an increase here. Because you got the profits, you went over there so you could get it done for cheaper wages."

And we're now getting people finally to understand, because even in Japan they're asking the Japanese workers to reduce their wages. They're confronted with Mexican wages, Korean wages. What about Spain? Our delegation went to Spain. At the auto plant there, not a single car in the parking lot. Not one guy could buy a car. The company sends a bus out in the countryside and picks up the workers and brings them in. Every car made in Spain is for export.

PFLUG: And that's what the American worker has to compete with.

BERNDT: Now are we going to relegate the American worker down to the lowest denomination in the world? That's what we're talking about. So we should have made that fight early. I have suggested to I don't know how many thousands of people already to try to get this out on the front burner, because we've got to stop this deluge of funds going out of this country. And then on the other hand, these same people come back to the government and get exonerated for the first $75,000 of salary they make outside the United States. They pay no taxes on the first $75,000 of salary they make. That doesn't apply to the American worker. So they get it coming and going. It's something that shouldn't be done. But I'm one voice in the wilderness.

PFLUG: Well, it sounds like in many ways you've been a successful voice, though.

BERNDT: I don't see the organization I can put together now to fight this battle.

PFLUG: You can't get your caucus or coalition put together?

BERNDT: No, I'm not in a position down here to put together any kind of coalition to really put this in front of the American people. They've got to stop the flow of American dollars going to foreign countries and the exploitation of workers in foreign countries, because what they're doing is exploiting the workers here by driving them down to the lowest denomination.

PFLUG: As you mentioned yesterday, it's already happened in areas like Orlando where they have a lot of part-time people working for minimum wage, no benefits.

BERNDT: Oh yes. The Reagan administration says, "The last quarter we've increased 500,000 jobs in the United States." These are not full-time, 40-hour-a-week jobs at a decent earning rate. I'll give you an example: My son was laid off at General Motors in Indianapolis. He tried everywhere to get a job in Indianapolis, and of course with the layoffs in General Motors, there are no jobs available in Indianapolis. He even tried for a while for a dishwashing job, but they said he was overqualified because he had some part of a college education. He finally wound up in a bookstore as head of the receiving department in a bookstore. He was in charge of all books coming in, cataloging the books and everything, for which he got a dime over the minimum wage. But he was listed as a regular, part-time employee. Every Monday in reporting for work, he was told how many hours he was going to work that week. Some weeks as low as 27 hours a week, most weeks the most he would get was 39 hours. He never got 40 hours. Nobody working for that bookstore gets any insurance coverage, no sick pay, no holiday pay, no fringe benefits whatsoever.

PFLUG: No nothing.

BERNDT: They are all temporary employees. As I told you yesterday, two years ago the Orlando newspaper printed on the business section a list of about 15 different companies or plants — Sears, bookstores, some small manufacturers — and the number of employees they had I would say as a guess, if I can remember what the figures are, something like ten to one, part-time employees outnumbered regular employees. So, at the point the cost of insurance or other fringe benefits gets prohibitive, the small manufacturer

or the retailer will lay off full-time employees and start hiring part-time employees, who get nothing. So I am of the opinion that these 500,000 jobs were all part-time employees.

PFLUG: I think you're probably right. Well, that concludes my list of things. Anything you wanted to add to this tape?

BERNDT: Only this: If anybody contemplates working with retirees or any other segment of our union, I think they have to look at the structure. I think they have to look and see what they can organize, how they can organize the thing to function. As I said yesterday, I will not vote for a resolution, no matter how good it is, unless in my mind's eye I can see the mechanical way of implementing that resolution. If I don't see the machinery out in the field to implement a resolution or a program, then I'm against the resolution, because you've got to first establish the machinery. Now, we in the UAW have established machinery for the retirees, in my estimation, by setting up the retirees councils under the auspices of the international union retirees councils. We put one in Las Vegas for example; we don't have a local union in Las Vegas, but we have over 250 retirees living in Las Vegas who have a council there. Las Cruces, New Mexico — we don't have a local union there, but we have over 200 UAW retirees living there. We have a council there and we're taking care of their problems. We can't get into every area, but we certainly, with this kind of a structure, can get within shouting distance of them. No other union does this, and the sooner we can make other unions understand what they could do, we can then set up a chain of retiree councils by international union, which together could handle anything.

PFLUG: Look at the force you'd have then.

BERNDT: We could handle even steelworkers in our center. The other bridge for retirees, as I see it, is the National Council of Senior Citizens. They have the ability to organize non-union people, people who maybe never had an opportunity to join a union, who are just thrown together with union people by virtue of where they live. If we work through the National Council, we can join hands with non-union retirees, and we can be that much farther ahead. That's why I'm on the Executive Board of the National Council for Senior Citizens as a retiree now, because I believe this gives us another avenue by which we can get to the non-union retirees. And so I've been working with the National Council of Senior Citizens as one of the board members-at-large. This gives me a little bit more work to do.

PFLUG: What are you doing in your spare time?

BERNDT: Well, for my exercise and recreation, I walk the golf course three mornings a week starting at 6:30 in the morning when there's nobody else around, and I get between three and four miles of hiking up and down hills and that's my exercise. But I'm home in time for the retirees to get in touch with me by 10:00 in the morning. I can keep on going for the rest of the day.

PFLUG: Well thank you so much for taking the time to . . .

BERNDT: I don't know if I've added anything that might be helpful to somebody, but I hope so.