

INTERVIEW WITH MARCHEL SMILEY  
August 26, 1981

Q. When did you first come to the Washington Hospital Center?

A. I began working at the Washington Hospital Center in October of 1973. I have been employed there from that point up until January 1981.

Q. What job did you do there?

A. I came in 1973 as an orderly in the Unit Services Department and I worked in that department for three years up until 1977. At that point I transferred to the out-patient department. I was still classified as an orderly but my responsibilities and duties were increased more, closely to a technicians position, but my classification was an orderly and I worked in that position until January 1981.

Q. What happened in January?

A. In January 1981 I took a year's leave of absence to conduct union business and I'm still on that year's leave at this point. In our contract, it is provided that union officers can't take time off to conduct union business and since our major contract was to be negotiated this year, I took off '81 and I supposed to return in January '82 or notify them that I am not returning at all.

Q. Normally, your position is not a full-time position?  
Your union position?

A. Oh no. That is not mandatory in our local's constitution.

Even though it can be done, it is not mandatory that that in fact be the case.

Q. What is your position?

A. I am the president of the local union.

Q. How long have you been president?

A. I have been president of Local 722 for roughly 18 months. I was elected in February of 1980 for a three year term and I'm serving about midway through my term at this point.

Q. How did you first become involved in the union?

A. My first experiences with the union was in 1973 when I came to the Hospital Center, there was an organizing drive underway and one of my friends, close, personal friends, who was the first president of the local union was a part of that organizing drive. He in fact, convinced me to take part in bringing the union in. So, in 1975 the union was voted into the Hospital Center. I ran for the one of the Executive Board seats in the first election as an independent candidate, but I did not win. So at that point, I became a shop steward for my particular section. I served as a shop steward for one year and after a year, I was elected to the Executive Board of the local union. Then in February 1980 I was elected president. So I have been Chairman of the Civil Rights Committee, Chairman of the Constitution Committee; I have been a member of the Contract Negotiations Committee for the contract in '78. I have had



classes at the Old Federal City College Labor Studies Center in labor administration and shop steward training, collective bargaining, arbitration preparations and I was elected president in 1980. In the interim, I went to school to study paralegal--I took a paralegal study course, a two-year program offered by the U.S. Agriculture Department Graduate School and I did that primarily because we needed to know more about the law--more evidence in terms of arbitration provisions, more technical knowledge, which saved the union a lot of money, in terms not having to go to an attorney to do very small things, we can now deal with those things ourselves. I have been gung ho in terms of the union since 1975--up until the point that I was elected the president of the union.

Q. When you first heard about the union, what did you think about it?

A. I'm from the South--in Georgia and Georgia as you probably know is not a unionized state. But I was very much involved in the civil rights struggles around school busing, school desegregation when I was 15 and 14 years old. I have always wanted to try and help people receive justice and equality in terms of the American system. The union gave us the opportunity to do some of that on the job. We fought for the workers to have guaranteed rights that couldn't be violated whenever arbitrarily by management. And in that sense, it is still a similar type struggle. We fight for a union contract which lays

our rights and we can go to court and in fact, have those rights enforced. It is very similar to the struggle we were involved in the South during Jim Crowe and that was the primary reason that I wanted to be involved with the union because it did give us the opportunity to address many of the concerns that we had in the workplace; the workers at the Hospital Center were predominantly Black. They were given a very low chance of advancement, promotions; in the service sector 99 percent of the people were Black and they were suffering--we were suffering as workers. We had no rights. We were overlooked for promotions; wasn't given any consideration in decisionmaking, there were no Black administrators, you know, we were in a bind to a large extent. We were underpaid. The union was a mechanism by which we could address a lot of those problems. And something that I can look back on in my older years and say that I had a part in bringing about change in the metropolitan Washington healthcare area. I was committed to trying to do the best I could to bring about some changes and the union gave us that opportunity.

Q. You feel that you have brought about some changes?

A. We have definitely brought some changes. Many people can now walk around with their head held high. We instituted seniority provisions guaranteeing them certain rights and better wages; more input into the city making on the job education assistance, people to go to school and to increase



their education. We put an impact on healthcare in the area because we went from the Hospital Center to organize Childrens Hospital, National Medical Center. We are in the process now of trying to conduct and organize the campaign and some other local health facilities. We have put a very big--we have left a very good impression about how we feel and we've really changed a lot of the mechanisms in terms of healthcare workers. Now people look up to us-- we are the highest paid healthcare workers private in the metropolitan. The Hospital Center is the place that many healthcare workers want to come because of the fact that we have had the union for five years and we have the best wages; we have a contract, we have guaranteed rights. Many hospital workers in other facilities don't have those benefits. The Hospital Center is looked upon as one of the major healthcare institutions on the East Coast.

Q. You said that when you first came there you became committed to the union because of civil rights experiences. Did you know anything about unions when you were in the South?

A. When I was in the South, I didn't know anything about unions. I don't think I even never anyone who was in a union, personally. I'm from a city called Augusta, GA and it is not an industrial city--it is more or less a city which is annexed to an Army base. The biggest

employer in the area was the Army or the Federal government. and those people now organize--there was no industry that I can recall that was an organized industry at that point. Even now Georgia is a right to work for less state. I didn't know anyone in my years in the South that had ever been in to a union--a trade union--ever. I don't remember anyone who had been unionized. So when I came here, I had no concept of unionism.

Q. Was there any personal experience that you had yourself-- or that you saw someone else have at the Hospital Center that made you really decide to support the union?

A. Well, a couple of experiences--one was when I first got to the hospital--when I was first hired at the Hospital Center there was an orderly that worked with me. He was accused of stealing some patient's money and they called the Metropolitan police. and they came in and they roughed him up and took him to jail and accused him of stealing \$10 from a patient. After we, the members of the orderly crew, we were very outraged at how they conducted this. Also they took this man out of the hospital in handcuffs; though the lobby--you know, just with no respect for his personal privacy. He was not guilty of anything, he had not been proven guilty of anything and they terminated him. We investigated it, we talked to a lot of different people and we found out that he hadn't committed the crime that they were accusing him of. In fact, a nurse later on admitted that she was the one that had taken his



money from him. But we had no way to address those problems. We had no union--we had no way to address that--we just let the Administration know that we knew that it was wrong, but we had no way to enforce it. He had to in fact, go through civil courts in order to get his record cleared and to get them to pay him money for damages. But he had no way to address it on the job and that one incident really helped me come to the conclusion that the union could do a lot of things for us. It was way that we could resolve problems more speedily. We didn't have to wait two years to get on the court docket. We had an arbitration provision that let us resolve our problem more quickly than we could have done had we have to go to the DC Human Rights Office or some Federal agency to address the problem. That particular incident along with the discussion I had with the organizers who came in--it is very interesting that now, Gerry Shea who is the healthcare coordinator was one of the people who was in our organizing campaign at the Hospital Center. Many different people and having had a chance to talk to them and having had the chance to have seen things happen like this particular incident, having talked to people who was 15 and ten year hospital employees talking about how they had no rights and the different things that had happened previous to my coming to the Hospital and they had no way to redress their grievances. And then coming

from a background whereas we had fought to keep our high school from being closed, it was a very similar situation. It lead me to believe that the union was a vehicle where we could readily address many of the problems that we had.

Q. In terms of Solidarity Day, you will be going to Solidarity Day and I assume to protest some of Reagan's policies. How will Reagan's budget and policies affect healthcare and hospital workers?

A. It really has...President Reagan's budget proposals which have been passed have two or three affects on healthcare. One of the first affect is the fact that it will deprive many people of the right to have healthcare or to have decent healthcare. Being a community organization, we are concerned more than with just wages that we receive on the job. We also are concerned that the people of this city and of the community which surrounds our workplace have the opportunity to get quality healthcare. So with the cuts in Medicaid many people will be thrown off those roads. And if you can't afford to go to private physicians and many people will become more sickly because they don't have healthcare. That's the first thing. One of the next things is that many jobs in the healthcare sector will be eliminated because of the cutback in Medicaid. Hospitals will always say that because they have less revenue, less patients, then they will need less workers. So we see



that across the spectrum across the nation, there is going to be layoffs in the healthcare industry and that is going to affect us indirectly as well as directly.

Q. Will it directly affect any jobs at the Washington Hospital Center or Childrens Hospital?

A. I am sure it would affect some jobs at Childrens Hospital Center probably before the Washington Hospital Center. Childrens Hospital is the only childrens' hospital in the metropolitan Washington area and is mandated to see patients whether or not they can afford to pay. So therefore, a large percentage of their income is from Medicaid and Medicare and by mothers being cut from those roads, they can still go to the Hospital and be treated but the kids can even if they can't pay. So therefore, Childrens would be losing revenues and I am sure that they will be the first one to say that they have to lay off people. The Hospital Center is in a lot better financial shape as a private hospital, it doesn't have to see people if they can't afford to pay. They will be going more to a private oriented patients and cutting back services they provide for Medicaid patients. It will hurt them a lot less.

Q. What about in terms of the Washington, DC area? The District--you've talked about how it is going to affect the hospitals, how is it going to affect the people in Washington?

A. Oh, it's gonna have a very...a big impact on the citizens of the District of Columbia being as though we don't have Home Rule--being that we receive so much money from Congress every year in terms of an allotment with the blocked grants that Mr. Reagan has proposed it is going to force many organizations to fight among themselves for little pieces of money. The city is going to have to cut back services, gonna have to cut back sanitation, the city also runs its own hospital--the city hospital--DC General Hospital and many funds from DC General are going to cut back. They are almost exclusively dependent on Medicaid revenues to operate their hospital and the city as a whole is going to suffer because of the budget cuts; maybe not as much as some other places being as we are in the nation's Capital and the Federal government here. But we may not suffer because the Congressmen live here too so they want to make sure that the streets are safe; they already want to increase the Police Department, they are making you know different...

Q. What about specifically in healthcare in terms of-- it sounds to me that the people are gonna have less access to the healthcare people are gonna be sicker?

A. Right. The people are gonna be sicker--the community diseases are going to increase. It's gonna go undetected. Many of the medical positions in the DC Government are not being filled. Mothers on nutritional programs are



being reduce, prenatal services are being reduced. The city already has the highest death rate and these cuts won't help that any. Healthcare is going to be something that only people with money is going to be able to afford to have. Unless you want to go to DC General which you might have to wait two or three in order to been seen, but it is basically coming down, just like the country for the rich and the powerful will receive the best available and the poor will receive what's left over. It's no different from the budget cuts. They affect the rich more favorably than the poor and it will be the same with healthcare. If you don't have money, if you can't afford to pay to see a private doctor, then you may not get any healthcare. You may have to just fall out and die before they will see you or give you some kind of treatment. The hospitals are going to be about making money and they're not going to be under any obligations to see people for free and they are not going to do it. If the city government don't force them to see these people, as a result of them not paying city taxes, then they're not going to do it. They feel any community or social obligations. Most of the hospitals are run by private corporations and the bottom line with them is the return on the investment. So they are going to be about making as much money as they can with no social consciousness of providing healthcare to the people that need. So it gonna affect a great deal.

Q. One last question. Why do you think Solidarity Day is important to participate in?

A. I believe that Solidarity Day is important for working people both those unionized and those who are not. We have to demonstrate--we still have many friends on Capitol Hill. The only thing about it is that our friends are outnumbered, they are afraid in largeness to speak out on certain issues because they feel or they are being told that the country is moving to the right. We need to show those comrades that they do have support among the people. We need to show Reagan that he did not have a mandate to cut back on social services and cause this economic hardship on the needy and the poor. The President of the AFL, Mr. Kirkland has come out publicly and announced for this demonstration and the nation will be watching to see the turnout that results. And if we don't have a good turnout, labor is going to be the laughing stock of the country. We can look for even more right wing, anti-labor legislation coming from the White House and the Congress. So it is very important to the labor movement as a whole and we have to come out, we have to get our families to come out, our friends, both union members and nonunion members because they are working people and they suffer just as much as the unionized workers suffer. And we have to show Mr. Reagan and his friends on Capitol Hill that the nation is not going to sit back and let him change programs that it took 50 years to put in



place overnight without a fight. I encourage everyone to come out to Solidarity Day to bring your family and your children, announcing it in your churches and your social associations, civic groups, we want the biggest turnout as possible. I'll be there and I'm sure many members of my local union will be there and we look forward to seeing everybody. Everyone is invited.