

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

JOHN SORBIE

International Vice President

Local 50

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SERVICE EMPLOYEES INTERNATIONAL  
UNION

BY

JUNE FILIPOWSKY

Filipowsky: Could you tell me your name and the position that you hold with SEIU.

Sorbie: Well, my name is John M. Sorbie and I'm a Vice-President of the Service Employees International Union.

Filipowsky: O.K. I guess my first question would be if you could tell me something about your very very first connections with the labor movement; who influenced you to get into the labor movement--maybe it was your father or your family or friends.

Sorbie: Well, first of all, my nationality is Scotch, and all my ancestors have been coal miners in Scotland. One of the things about old country people--and I put it that way to you (and I went to school in Scotland, incidently)--was the fact that the trade union movement was established there hundreds of years ago as, maybe, different than the United States, the...

Filipowsky: It must have been awfully strong.

Sorbie: ....the main subject of conversation in my home, amongst my father and his friends as they came in would be their hobbies, of course, which is racing pidgeons...

Filipowsky: Racing?

Sorbie: Yeah, which I also participated in, was the local union. They were always talking about the union. What is the union going to do? My uncle and my father had both been delegates with the British Trade Union Congress representing coal miners of Scotland in the--oh, about 1900, between 1890 and 1900. So, their whole life--now there were no business agents, no pay. If you were elected as

a delegate, you got your expenses to go there, but their whole--the whole time I remember my parents--my father was talking about the big union; what is our union doing; what are we doing; they were the union. They participated in it--maybe the subject would be, especially in the United States, what are we going to do with that dictator Lewis? He was a dictator. He appointed International representatives, who in turn elected him to office. Now, I didn't come here to talk, but they organized the progressive miners union against John L. Lewis, because they were used to democracy in their old country and they thought it should be here. I'll give you an idea. They called a strike, one strike, probably in the early twenties while we were still in Scotland. Well, nobody went to the coal mine. It was just like it was off limits, like in the military. Nobody wanted to do picketing. One guy went out to pick up some clothes he left at the mine and was fined for just going out there; so, when they had a strike in those days--ah, especially in the old country--there was no reason to picket, they were just off limits; because the unions had organized in our little community (the community I come from is Stonehouse, which is in a colony lineup, they had a cooperative where you wanted to buy your groceries. They had a bank, the miners union owned the bank. The union was involved in all of these fields, that - maybe some of us are just getting into now, over there

years and years ago. So, as far as being in schools of trade unions, from the day I could understand English or Scotch, which is English, all I heard was unions. So, I guess it was a natural when I finally got a job; and incidently, in those early thirties--during the depression--there weren't any jobs. The only way to get a job, you had to know somebody. It's that way today, it hasn't changed any. But, a Scotsman finally got promoted to be the superintendent, so naturally, if he was going to be the superintendent of a Washington university when an opening came open--he hired another Scotsman. He didn't go out and hire someone of a different nationality, much less a different color. My uncles both worked there. My aunt worked there. I worked there and unless we'd have -- we tried to form a union there in '37, and if it would have been successful, I guess the whole family would have got a job working in there. So, that'll give you a little background of why we were union.

Filipowsky: What position did you hold there? What was the job?

Sorbie: I was janitor.

Filipowsky: Janitor.

Sorbie: A good janitor.

Filipowsky: A good janitor.

Sorbie: A good janitor as described from a bad janitor is this. First thing you gotta do is satisfy the customer. I really wasn't a good janitor in cleanliness; but I had every secretary in there saying "You know, that's a

good janitor we got now, he'll do anything you want."

Filipowsky: Ahh....

Sorbie: Now, there's a difference. Today your not even close to janitor. In those days, we worked in the day time and we were....I know I worked for Washington University. I cleaned the Chancelor's office, a fellow named True. George R. True, been dead a long time. His secretary got every janitor fired till I went to work there and I had to give her a public relations job. I had to butter her up. Now its rather difficult to butter up somebody who's a Christian Scientist; who was sitting there (and I saw her one morning) with a broken arm. I said "Don't you think you aught to see a doctor." She says "God's gonna take care of this arm." He did--it grew crooked. You know, it went like that. But you see, I had to get along with that lady because that lady was....I said "You'r — right." I joined her. And that's the way you got to be a good janitor; you had to satisfy the people you worked for.

Filipowsky: Why...why did the family leave Scotland? I assume your parents came here and....

Sorbie: Yeah, the problem was coal mining. Coal mining is a sort of a seasonal thing; it was seasonal there, and ah, there was too much time. They were contracting out the services too at that time. You didn't work for the owner.

Filipowsky: We've had that problem and again to....

Sorbie: Yeah, they were contracting. You worked for a contractor. He paid the owner so much a ton for every bit of coal that

went out of the mine. Now, he also paid the coal miner. There wasn't any of these fancy federal programs, you know...ah, they still had, I guess, some programs, but they didn't have them there. The reason they come here was because lack of work. Not only that but...ah, they really came because there was a lot of...my father, before he was married to my mother, had come out here to see the cowboys and indians in 1905. That was a kind of common thing then. You know, they were reading all about the cowboys and indians. Now just think, he was making \$45 a week as a coal miner....the steamship fare was \$35; so him and his cousin, two young boys....said "Let's go see the cowboys." Then, they got a job over here in order to pay their way back. Why, you couldn't go to Europe for a week's salary like they could....so the reason they came was the work. They stayed here...my father stayed here until after I was born. While he was here, he noticed the implements that had been, I guess, invented by other miners to get the coal out and he said, "You know, if I go back to Scotland with these implements, I could make three times as much money (because its peice work), so we all went — back to Scotland. Well, after three years and every coal miner had these implements....you know what they did, they just reduced the amount of tonage you were getting paid for and then in 1927 he said "Oh....I think we'll go back to America and stay there." For which I'm very grateful.

Filipowsky: Was that to St. Louis? Directly?

Sorbie: Across the river. In Illinois. Illinois has a lot of coal fields. You know, St. Louis is on the boarder between Illinois and Missouri.

Filipowsky: And so then you worked at Washington University?

Sorbie: Yeah, my first job. I had been in a CC Camp (that was a Federal government program) for two years in 1936-38, and these are approximates, now. I went to work for Washington University on January 2, 1937. I joined Building Services Union in July of '37. My uncles had both been delegates in the British Trade Union....both of them were there. My father died; of course, by that time and we were kind of the backbone of the union-- because that's all we knew was union.

Filipowsky: Was that Local 50?

Sorbie: Yes. Umhum.

Filipowsky: It was.

Sorbie: Now the strike...we went out on strike for recognition and we all lost our jobs. Ah, Washington University is a liberal college but it sure as hell doesn't like unions. I don't think its changed a hell of a lot either.

Filipowsky: No...I don't think so. When was that when you went on strike?

Sorbie: September 1, 1937 we went out on strike. Right before Labor Day....right before school started; school would have started about that time, the college.

Filipowsky: Do you remember what your wages were?

Sorbie: Yes. I got paid \$75 a month. Now that was for 9 hours a day, six days a week. You were asked, at least every fourth week, to work overtime during graduations and for all other extra work you perform on Saturday and Sunday. You were not paid for any of that because you were paid by the month, they said. The reason we organized is we felt we ought to get some pay for that. We never got any. In fact, I was rather young so they asked me to be a waiter because the Chancellor would have all these big shots out for a big dinner....you know, of St. Louis. Well, society then. I'd have to be a waiter and we couldn't even; we weren't even allowed to snitch a ham sandwich. That's why we organized. No pay and no fringe benefits. Ha Ha....go ahead.

Filipowsky: So, what happened after you lost the job?

Sorbie: Well I walked picket duty until about March 20, 1938 and I'd been in high school. I'd taken shorthand and typing. Now, very few men take those subjects but I took them at the advice of a teacher. He said "You know that will always get you sittin close to the fire and when you sit close to the fire, you get warm." So I took them. Well, we were walking picket duty and an opening occurred in the union office for a secretary. So one of the fellows said "Hell, Sorbie's a secretary." So they offered me the job and I accepted it. So, instead of walking picket duty every day, I reported to the union office. They paid me \$12 a week. Well, it was better than....that's all they



could. They were only taking in \$200 a week in dues.

Filipowsky: So, that really was your first contact with Local 50.

Sorbie: That is correct.

Filipowsky: And what happened after that?

Sorbie: Well, you see the building services was just getting started. This was the first group they had organized and we were rather successful in getting established with different--the window cleaners wanted to be union, the bowling alley, all of a sudden all of these people we had organized in leagues like you wouldn't believe, wanted to be organized. So, I would make appointments when people would call for the business agent to meet them to organize....and then, of course, I began helping out because we really had too much work to do. And, ah, I felt well, as soon as they get enough members, then there will be an opportunity for me to be an organizer. 'Cause, I always wanted to be an officer, I mean work for a union. Always did. I had an older brother that had also worked for a union, so I had always wanted to be. Well, that's what happened. Now, in those days they would issue you a charter, the International would, to each group. Well, there was only window cleaners, like, had 50 members so I'd go on as an officer.

Filipowsky: That was 50A?

Sorbie: Yeah, 50A. Then we had 50B, C, D, E and F. But they didn't have any membership...you couldn't. It was popular then to put the janitors in the janitors union and the bowling alleys in the bowling alleys' union.

And that's what we did. I sat in on the organizing of the whole--every group, from the beginning up to the present time.

Filipowsky: Which were the toughest to organize? The toughest to convince.

Sorbie: Well, prior to the Taft Hartley, up until maybe 1960, every group practically had to strike for recognition. They were all tough. I don't know, we had a thousand strikes, I suppose. Everyone of them started over recognition. Of course, after that, the window cleaners--they had an annual strike--it was just part of things...I think I like to speak about the window cleaners a little bit; when we organized them there was only one window cleaner in the entire city of St. Louis who wasn't related to everybody else. That's odd. You know there was 40 window cleaners. Thirty-nine of them were related: brothers, sisters-not sisters-but uncles, aunts, in-laws, out-laws, you name it and most of them were from Kentucky. And they weren't exactly the cream of society. So, to organize them we just got to the head man. "Hell yes," he said,"we'll organize." We had a lot of problems with them but they had strikes, too, for recognition. So, I don't think any of them was the.....the hardest bit of organizing that any of us, that I've had to contend with has been the hospital field.

Filipowsky: Where did he go?

Sorbie: That's because they have the expertise and the money to know how to beat you easy.

Filipowsky: About when did you go, were your hospital workers in Local 15 beginning in 1937? Then it was....

Sorbie: Yeah, we organized the city sanitarium and took it out on strike. We were really criticized in the press in 1938 because, you know, the city sanitarium was where all the people were at that had mental problems and we had all the--in fact the patients were helping the patients. We got severely criticized, we eventually got an agreement that the mayor reniged on and we lost it. That was the first venture into the hospital field. Ah, some things happened along that time that some other.... we had public employees but Haskly came in about that time and make an agreement with the powers that be that in the central body, that they were the public employees union and, otherwise, we'd of probably had all of them.

Filipowsky: I know you were talking to Mr. Weinlein about the bowling alleys.

Sorbie: Well,...

Filipowsky: Can you tell me something about what was going on then?

Sorbie: When bowling alleys; we had signed an agreement in one bowling alley. Now, you remember, I was making \$12. Eventually they raised it to \$15 a week, so every night I would call the bowling alleys and I would get a job setting pins that night. I worked in every bowling alley in St. Louis setting pins; maybe only one night, but I

was from the union and I was, you know, front fellow. All the business agents were all going to get 6¢ a game. Well, you know, you have to remember....I don't know if you know what bad conditions were but in the bowling alley we had a lot of people that we would call transient. Some people called them hoboes. Some — people called them bums. But they could only make a night a dollar and a half. Now you could get a hotel in St. Louis then, a flea bag, for 15¢ a night. You could get a meal for 25¢, breakfast for 15¢. You really didn't need....well, this is how they lived. There was at least 800 men working there then as pin setters; worked the same lanes every year, every lane and they'd leave....some of them were carnival workers--we had a lot of carnival workers. When they would leave when the leagues were over at the end of April, they would be guaranteed that lane when they came back in September. Now, if you would be working, lets say on a corner lane like four. Four and five would get--if there was any 'ole play come in, which was extra games--they would get them. They would be charge lanes. You know, so you would have to have seniority to get that lane--which means every day you might get an extra quarter. Now, what I did then and what the union did--remember I didn't do all of this--we got from the bowling proprietors a machine and a half a bowling alley. The

war had started then (about '41), my job was to show people; nobody knew how to bowl even, much less to set pins. I'd show them how to set pins for that machine. I'd say, "You know there's two balls going to come and here's what you do." So, that went on. Of course, after the war they were all mechanized. I often wondered about those old....a lot of them were from good families, those old time pin setters, because they always said there would never be a machine replace me. You wonder what happened to those people. Now just think about this a little bit. The union then. Now this is where I was at. We burried our members that — didn't have people to claim them. We burried a lot of — members. Later on, then, somebody would come. Now, we burried one man named William Farnsworth. Well, we — finally got word from the family and they came from Washington, D.C. There were two real elderly aunts come to claim the body. He was related to some of the, probably the blacks, you know, the well to do family. I always did call him the Admiral, you know, I'd give him some....ah, there was an awful lot of those kind of people that just kind of dropped out of society who really were only interested in a job where they could make a dollar or two dollars a day in order to live. Maybe I had that experience somewhere, I don't know. I know a lot of them, quite a few of them, had spent a little time in college--the kind that's got bars on it.

Filipowsky: Well, were these people interested in the union?

Sorbie: Yeah, they were union. We had a fine union meeting with pin setters. Had 150 come to the meeting and I imagine had a grievance over not getting paid for one game. One game aughta be six cents. Somebody got cheated out of a game. Well, what happened? Well, maybe the desk clerk -- see they got sheets thats numbered -- the desk clerk would be cheating by stealing maybe a sheet that had two games on it, which would have been 50¢ then. Well then they couldn't pay the pin setter his lousy dime out of it - his 12¢. The pin setters was a big group; but, unfortunately, time marches on. Same thing happened with our elevator operators. Who'd think they wouldn't at least have guards on elevators. Hell, you don't see anything like that at all now.

Filipowsky: How did these people react when they went out on strike. Like, I guess, this was in the thirty and fourties. How -- did they live? Were there...ah....benefits from the union?

Sorbie: The union had no money. The union did this for us. Mr. Dwyer was the Secretary-Treasurer. I think he's one of the finest men I've ever known; in fact, I looked upon him....

Sorbie:

he....ah, we rented a flat so anybody that didn't have a place to stay could sleep in the flat; then, they had a grocery bill that they paid every week, like \$40. We'd go down and charge groceries and cook them. I was standing looking out the window one day and I said to the fellow next to me (I'd bought a '32 Cheverolet), I said "Some son-of-a-bitch has tampered with my car, so I flew down the steps. Well, it was a finance company repossessing my car. You know, I lost my best friend. Ha Ha. You know, when you lost your car, when you were young, you lost your girls too! Back then the girls liked the cars, but...ah, they repossessed the car. Well, they knew where we were at...and I just, I couldn't make the payments. Somebody else got the furniture. That happens. The labor movement was a struggle then. They had the sit down strikes in the factories -- no benefits -- nobody had any money. Would you believe that when I got out of high school in 1934, I only went to high school, because my mother said "You'r - not going to go on the streets, you'r going to go to - school." I couldn't find a job. I really believe I thought "I will never get a job, there'll never be a job open." Look at all these grown men with trades that can't get a job, I don't know how your going to get a job." And, my mother was - a widow. Well, it so happened, Roosevelt started a CC Camp

Sorbie: Program and I went to that for two years and then, of course, a fellow that new my father in Scotland was made superintendent of the janitors and I got a job through him. You know, in those days you had to know somebody, you still do.

Filipowsky: Let's just stop for a while.

Sorbie: O.K. You've been listening to me ramble on.

Filipowsky: Every word.

Sorbie: Well, I'll tell you one thing I was going to tell you. I went to a window cleaners hall one night and, you know, the window cleaners were always wanting to belt somebody, you've heard of that. Getting hit. I got hit a few times. I hit a few people. They passed a motion that the next person that hit John Sorbie got fined \$50 and John gets the \$50. I said, "I'm tired of being a punching bag. I don't mind, I'll fight any of you, one at a time, but I'm tired of getting hit." And I did have one little guy up, I was holding him, you know, to keep him from fighting and the other guy said he almost knocked the kid's head off. They were just...they were from Kentucky and they were just...window cleaners just like to fight; like to drink. I got nothing against it, that's up to them, but the reason I wanted it was that I was tired of having to defend myself. I said "I'm a coward; \$50 you can whip me". Well, they stopped you know. It wasn't too amusing at the time, later on it was.



Filipowsky: I was just going to say, if you were reduced to .....

Sorbie: Sure. They'd come to the meeting. They'd get drunk. I went down, see we had a saloon downstairs. I went downstairs one night and a guy told me, he says, "I don't want your members in this, in my saloon from now on." I said, "I want to tell you something." (He was also Marianne people, one of them) I said, "When they leave the union office, and they come in here, they're your customers. They're not union members when they come in, they're your customers."

Filipowsky: Was this in the 1930's or was this last week?

Sorbie: Oh, no. Anyway I had a, ah. I'll never forget. A guy came in drunk one night and he tried to hit Tim and I hit him with every ounce of energy in me, right in here, knocked him down; went through a plate glass window and bounced back. And then he got up. I got him down, sat on his chest. I said, "Now, you get up and I'll mash your head". This is the way we had to do things in those days. There had to be two secretaries that were watching this a fray from one of the other unions that were in the building. Do you know, I guess I could have beat that guy forever. I could never get him, he just kept coming up. And I finally stood on him and I had another fellow stand on him to hold him down until his friends come and took him out. They just wanted to have a big fight.

Filipowsky: Did you go to the union hall. Did you hear?

Sorbie: Well, Friday was always....the meeting was always on the first Friday of the month and that was payday, and they didn't believe in giving their wives much money. She got what was left after they....ah, and I don't think they've changed much. They're just a little more expertise, that's all.

Filipowski: Laughter. Do you want to talk about that some more? Well, I guess we're kind of up to the fiftys and sixties and this is when you were President of Local 50, and

Sorbie: Yeah, I was President of '50 for thirty years.

Filipowski: Thirty years....and it was during this time that, I believe, that Local 80 was merged into...

Sorbie: 118?

Filipowski: Was it stadium workers?

Sorbie: Oh, no. It was 82, wasn't it, or something?

Filipowski: And, then, ah...

Sorbie: Well, that was a public union we merged in, wasn't it?

Filipowski: It was, ah, I can't remember if it was 80 or whether it was the stadium merger.

Sorbie: Yeah, we had a merger with, ah, Tule Auditorium. They were public employees. I guess we've still got them. They don't like to pay dues.

Filipowski: Laughter. And, I guess all the a, b, c, and d's, all were merged in....

- Sorbie: We gradually merged them as time went on. Now, some of the business agents, and window cleaners business agents, has been negelected some, he's retired (semi) but he's still around, Walter Murphy. He'd be a good subject. He was one of the few, one of the head, was a good member. He'd been a buisines agent and a president of the window cleaner's union for years and years. Walter would be a good person. They never talk on one another. They use the term "widen". Wouldn't matter what you did. They'd never talk. (laughter)
- Filipowski: Um, well, then I'm just about finished, unless you'd like to, you know, say anything else about it. We may come back and ask you questions at another time to fill in gaps after this communique.
- Sorbie: Sure. Well there may be something. Any questions your interested in, I...I think, as far as St. Louis is concerned, I don't believe there's a bargaining unit been organized there; that I was involved in in some capacity. I insured myself into it. We organized a school custodians as 50B. Well, you couldn't get recognition. Had a fellow named Quinn on the Board, at first, with the electricians. The electricians union; he was only there to see that he had so many electrical jobs. We all withdrew. We kept it on for years and, finally, a fellow named Mark Eagelton, who was a very personal friend of Mr. Dwyers, was elected

Sorbie:

president of the school board. And Tim knew him so well, we were finally able to get recognition. Mark Eagelton's son is Tom, he's a senator now, and....ah, I wouldn't even talk to Tom about it. He's...ah, I know Jim and I was walking on the street one day when Mark said (we had lunch with him), and he wanted to....he said, "You know, Tim, I wanted to get Tom in politics. He said he wanted to run for circuit attorney, and Tim said, "Well, if you want to be circuit attorney, the first one you gotta go see is John Dougherty. Then, you gotta have enough money to put into every committeeman, a worker," and he did. And, he got elected as circuit attorney. Everybody said, who knows him? We even had....., we elected a Secretary-Treasurer of the union to the Board of Education. That was a bad, that was disaster. 'Cause as soon as he got in there, he forgot about us. But, ah, I think, maybe, there's an awful lot of people that would look at it under different eyes, but, truthfully, if it wouldn't have been for Mr. Dwyer's fine reputation, leadership, skill and ability, he knew everybody....I don't think there was a place he ever went he didn't know everybody. I don't believe the building service would have gotten near as far as they did. Now, I worked for him. And, you know, when you work for a man for thirty years, you can always say....and you can truthfully say to yourself, I've never heard of him doing anything wrong; he lived up to his religion, and he found that your name was Boyle, an Irish

Sorbie: name and you were Prodeasant, well, it'd be off for you.— 'Cause, you know, you should be Catholic. And just because you were, you must fall....well, that was his way. If he found a man that even looked at another woman besides his wife..well, that was the end of him, too. That went for the people that worked for him. Now, he never said it in so many words...but, boy, I didn't. We had one that did, and....oh, he made life miserable for him. "What the hell makes you think your God's gift to women," you know, he'd start off. He really would, but he was a nice person, he lived up to....he was the kind of a people that you like to be around. Now, I'd knock people. He wouldn't knock anybody. He would say they're not worth criticizing. Let's go on to the next subject.

Filipowsky: Um....

Sorbie: But, everybody liked him. I know Mark Eagelton, he thought Jim was the finest. Hell, if he'd a been alive...ah, well, there were just so many things. He only....he done a few things I didn't like. We went up to Jefferson City, the State capital, to get a minimum wage bill passed and he had to leave that night to go back on the train, but one Senator couldn't find a place to sleep and he gave him my bed!

Filipowsky: (Laughter)

Sorbie: When I said, "If you think I'm going to sleep with that hillsman," I said, "Tim, he's a big fat guy." Ha Ha. Well, you know, we had a few drinks. "Yeah, you go up, your out with Bill." He said, "That will be alright, John won't

Sorbie: mind." The hell John didn't mind. Then, he was always conservative as far as the money was concerned, with members, with employees, rather. Because, you know, he always felt that the union had to have their share. Now, I feel the same way. I was a very cheap person to work for because I didn't believe you should rob the members. You know, look at my record and see what kind of money I took, until I went with the International Union, I was starving to death. But that isn't it. If more business agents were working for what their highest members got, there would be less of this business. But the business agents, when they get down to it, if the business agents were working for what their members get, the highest paid member, you wouldn't find all these problems in the labor movement. That's the way I feel about it. Some of the people that worked for me didn't think that. They thought they ought to be getting, you know, six, seven or eight hundred a week. Sure, not with me. Unfortunately. Well, O.K?

Filipowsky: Thank you. Thank you very much.

Sorbie: It's alright.