

Anna Burger
Interviewed by Ann Froines
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I am interviewing Anna Burger at the national headquarters of the Service Employees International Union in Washington, D.C. on November 8 of the year 2005. Anna, first tell us what your present position is here.

I'm the secretary/treasurer of Service Employees International Union. And I'm also the chair of the Change to Win, which is a new federation of seven international unions representing six million members.

OK. Now what was your first contact with the organization 925 and its leaders?

I believe that it was as a local union activist. I come from Pennsylvania. I was a state worker, a member who was a social service worker, and an activist. I think it was probably at one of our first SEIU women's conferences that I ran into some of the SEIU activists of 925.

What were those conferences, actually? That's the first time I've heard about this.

It was a long time ago. I'm trying to remember but I think that we had women's conferences in different parts of the country and I think it was in Connecticut where I first ran into some of the women who were then part of 925 or the beginnings of 925. I think that was where Jackie Ruff was. I think Karen might have been there. I'm not sure. I just remember the image...actually, there's a photograph around here someplace that was from that women's conference where women had climbed up and made a pyramid.

Made a pyramid?

We climbed on each other's shoulders to form one of those human pyramids because we were women who were tough. (Laughs) ...I think that was the first time I had contact with them in person.

Can you say a little more about the purposes of those women's conferences within SEIU?

It was the first effort to actually bring women together and provide them some form of networking, leadership-training opportunities.

I see. So, because you were involved in another local you wouldn't have been involved in those first discussions on forming Local 925 in Boston or in bringing 925 into SEIU?

I'm trying to remember what year that was.

Well, the national jurisdiction for District 925 was begun in '81 and completed by '83.

Right. So, I was in Pennsylvania. I was an officer of my local, and I was secretary/treasurer in '81-'83. I actually got on the executive board at SEIU, I think, in '84 so I would have not been in the national discussions about it. I probably would have just read about it or heard about it.

So did you hear about it? In other words did you hear about any sort of reaction within SEIU about granting this jurisdiction to 925 to organize clerical workers in particular?

I think there was a lot of excitement from a women's perspective that we were forming an organization that was focusing on organizing women, women clerical workers, but women workers in a different kind of a way. So, I think that there was the kind of swirl thing was an excitement at least on the part of women activists.

And were there some other changes and reforms going on in SEIU about this?

Well, yeah, I mean in 1980 John Sweeney had been elected president which began some changes in terms of how we thought about ourselves as an international union. You know I come from Pennsylvania and our local at that time was called the Pennsylvania Social Services Union. The SEIU was a tagline more than anything else. So, even though we had been organized as an SEIU local back then, lots of locals had lots of different names, numbers, mostly names, different colors, different whatever...our locals were very autonomous, we were very independent from each other. The international was a very small operation. It was really in the '80's with John Sweeney coming to leadership that we began to form more of an international structure and support network. It was also when the world was changing dramatically and so employers were getting larger and more powerful even in public service, which I come out of public service. The governors were getting together through the National Governor's Association and coming up with strategies to take workers on. So there was a whole movement going on, beginning in the country, whether it was for janitors that used to be mom and pop operations all of sudden being contracted out at first and then regional and then eventually national. The same with nursing homes, you know, all of a sudden they were going from mom and pops to big chains with Beverly really coming into power. And so there was a time in SEIU when all of a sudden what the international could do and how it could begin to network and really think about larger strategies, was happening. Our research capacity was expanding, our support for locals in terms of strategies was expanding and in 1984, I think it was, with the creation of our divisions. So, all of a sudden there was a focus on workers by division, with 925 being focused on [one] classification. That was an effort to say, "How can we think about clerical workers as a whole?" as opposed to in different places so I think it kind of was the appropriate timing of that. We were also having discussions with 1199, the national union of hospital workers, about merging. So there

was an excitement and, I think, about bringing people together and really focusing on large groups of people in a different way.

I'd like to ask you a few things about your own involvement in the labor movement. You were president of your local, you said, and were also secretary/treasurer. Can you say a little bit about your early experiences organizing a union for social services workers?

I graduated from college in 1972, and the union just passed collective bargaining the year before, and so the local was really new. It was a statewide local, we represented social service workers in the state network.

Were you affiliated with any international union?

SEIU. In Pennsylvania, there was struggle that went on between AFSCME (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees) and SEIU in terms of organizing public workers and we got a law passed. And there was an agreement worked out, that's between Jerry Wurth and George Hardy, about how we would divide up the bargaining units. We didn't have agency shop at the time. We had maintenance membership so it really was going in and trying to organize workers. And there had been pockets of interest in organizing, but there were some parts of the state where having a state job was one of the best jobs in your county as opposed to other parts of the state where it was one of the worst jobs in your county. So, trying to build a union out of lots of people with different interests was an exciting opportunity. I was a rank and file activist for seven years. I was on the executive board, was a member organizer for a while organizing other workers before I kind of took the plunge to full time work. And, in Pennsylvania, which was the birthplace of a lot of the industrial unions, we were seen as those weird public workers and were social workers, too. So, trying to engage with the labor movement was not always easy. I ran for office in my local. When I ran for secretary/treasurer, actually when I ran for president, one guy ran against me saying that they should elect him because "you need a man to make the hard decisions," but that he would hire me to run the union. The good news was the members were smarter than that and they elected me and not him.

Hard decisions... (Laughing) I was going to ask a question about that. I mean weren't a lot of the union members, in fact, women?

In our local we were majority women. We were not totally women because we also represented the unemployment offices. And in the unemployment offices in public service there was veteran's preference and so huge numbers of former military in that network. So it was really an interesting mix of folks in our union.

Do you remember was there any controversy that you heard within locals of SEIU about giving 925 this national jurisdiction or focusing on clerical workers?

I am sure there was a huge amount of questioning from some of the old guard about why we would care about this at all. But I was in Pennsylvania so... and there was nothing like a statewide... at that time locals could organize anything they wanted. So, coming up with a local that had national jurisdiction for a classification was unheard of in SEIU. Any local company could organize. If clerical workers wanted to organize in their janitors local, the janitors local thought that they could organize anybody, right, so, it was a totally new way of looking at things.

After '84 or so when you began to work in SEIU nationally can you say a little bit about the difficulties, or maybe not difficulties, but problems and issues SEIU had in accommodating these changes you've described. Weren't there a few others trying to have affiliated organizations, or whatever, community relations, work with other community organizations?

Well, we were organizing a lot, we were going through a time that we also affiliating onto other workers and so there were a huge number of public workers that that had been independent associations that were beginning to come to SEIU. Local 1000, which was the California State Employees, {Affiliate?} 503 had already affiliated I think, they probably came in the late '70s, early '80s but there were a number of other public workers who were independents who came in during that period of time. I came to Washington in 1990, full time. I left my local. I did state council work for a while and then I came to work as John Sweeney's assistant for programs and services. And one of the programs and services that was in our department was a new program... we had local union services, we had member services, we had a number of them but the whole issue of trying to figure out how to have an associate membership was a big and growing thing. My role in the associate membership was actually through a department I was managing, and trying to figure out how we actually do this. And, so, 9to5 was both 925 and 9to5 and trying to figure out how you could build a network of women who are office workers before they were ready to be interested in a union. And how to help when they became interested in a union connect them to being able to organize. And, so, the associate membership program was something that was seen as a vehicle for giving clerical workers who were interested in some sort of support something to grab onto, a real service, and then be the link so that when we organize, if we could organize them into a real union, it would be the basis for that as well.

Now, were there other kinds of associate membership groups, not just clericals?

Yeah, now Judith McCullough... I assume you're going to interview her... was the director of that program and so there times when we were talking to the psychologists, the social workers, the phlebotomists, I mean, we had the phlebotomists as one group. There were a number of professional associations that were interested in SEIU. Because of our lobbying efforts, because of our policy work, they thought that we could be a vehicle, as an association would be a vehicle, for giving them more strength and support and that their members would be interested in belonging not only to them but to us because of other services that we could provide. There was effort to really go out and try to figure out whether there were other kinds of groups of workers, like what we were

trying to do with clerical workers, who would be interested in being connected to SEIU and a union, but not yet members.

What was your impression of some of the leaders and activists you've known in 925: Karen Nussbaum, Debbie Schneider, and others that you may know whom I don't know?

There were a lot of them. A lot of women, who were incredibly smart, incredibly committed in trying something new. In the labor movement to be those three things was unusual sometimes. Women were kind of breaking through in the labor movement, at least in our union, and maybe not so easily in other unions. And so, all of a sudden, there were some really smart, creative, women who were really trying to think about things in a different light than we had approached them before, which was exciting...and hard.

From your perspective, then, what was 925 able to achieve?

I think that they really struggled but I think that one of the things, when I look back and think about what the experiment was, what people were trying to do, what worked and what didn't work, I think that you wonder now in the world of technology and the internet it would have been easier. But trying to be a national organization, to link up small pockets of women clerical workers and give them a sense that they had a larger voice and also try to be a network for clerical workers wherever they were, whether there was one worker in one small town in South Carolina or five in someplace else was very hard because you were doing it through phone and mostly through mail. I also think that there was a strategy we were trying on how to connect workers on the ground and we didn't have a strategy for how do we take on the industry as a whole. And I think that we can't empower women workers whether they're clerical workers or other workers without having an industrial strategy as well. Looking back, I think that one of the struggles that we failed to confront back then was that to give workers hope, to have them really want to engage whether they're women or men, whether they're immigrants or native born, they'd have to have hope that what they're joining can make a difference in their lives. I'm not sure that we were able to lay out that vision because we didn't have a strategy about how we were actually going to change their lives in big ways, other than maybe in small ways.

Sometimes you really understand 925 trying to come up with a strategy for trying to take on the corporation beyond just going worker to worker, like find their weaknesses and do a public campaign. But that's not exactly what you mean.

No, I think that was more about taking on the boss to show that corporations could be bad and women need to have a voice but I don't think it really was trying to figure out what was the way to take on a corporation or an employer in a larger way and have them really say that "we're going to give women a voice" or the workers a voice. So, I don't think that that really... I mean there were lots of surveys, there were lots of ways of giving women a voice by having their "worst employer of the world" or whatever award. There was lots of stuff like that that would highlight bad bosses but it was highlighting a bad

boss without a real strategy about how to change the workers' lives on their job with their employer. But it wasn't just 925 that was struggling with that. I would say that it took us all a lot of time to think about how we really empower janitors. You know when we were trying to reorganize janitors, it took us a while to think about corporate strategies and how to do things differently. I think that that's true of health care workers as well.

Can you say in a kind of abbreviated form how the corporate strategy worked for janitors?

Well, I think with janitors it really was trying to think about who were the employers, how were they connected, what were their driving forces in the market. One thing I do think we believe is that to be able to change workers lives we have to make sure...we can't drive their employers out of business. With the janitors what we did realize was that if we looked around, like Washington, D.C., and only organized two contractors and raised the standards there, those contractors are going to be out of business in a month as soon as they get their 30 day notice because there's a lower priced competitor someplace out there. So our strategy really was to put the pressure on the big contractors, to organize them, to hold them accountable for what was going on in the city and then try to organize the majority of them all at one time so that we could raise standards and not put them out of competition, make them uncompetitive with each other. So it really was trying to figure out who the employers were, what their weak spots were, how to highlight those weak spots, how to understand that we were trying to go after all of them at one time, not just one of them at a time, and organize the workers at the same time.

OK. Were you connected in any way with any particular campaign that 925 launched that you remember much about?

I would say that it was mostly indirect.

What was 925's impact on SEIU, in your opinion?

I think that 925 had a positive impact about bringing creative women into SEIU at lots of different levels. It put a focus on women workers, even though it was about office workers, it also put a focus on women as workers, what their needs were, what their interests were. I think that it also raised the floor for women activists in our union, regardless of whether they were in that union or not. I think that there was a spotlight that was put on women workers that was very healthy for our organization, for our union, for our activists in a broader way. I think that it did make some of our other unions think about their own women members in a different way and what their interests were. Our ability to focus on family medical leave, pay equity issues, and a number of other issues came out of that as well. So, I think that it was not just about what they did as a focus on organizing clerical workers. It also, I think, was something that spread across the unions about women workers more broadly.

You sort of touched on this already quite a bit but I'll ask it again in case some other ideas come up. Why didn't 925 succeed in organizing clerical workers in the private sector?

I don't think we had an employer strategy. I think it's also very hard to organize one classification. I'm not sure that clerical workers really think of themselves as clerical workers. And that the bond is as clerical workers. I think that their bond is they, depending on what work sector they work in, might have a different kind of grouping that they think about. I don't think that we had a strategy for actually changing their lives that they believed.

And this phrase you're using, "changing their lives," are you saying that because you think that's what workers need to feel is going to happen for them to sign on to a union and get involved?

Today, people, workers, woke up this morning and they worried about how they're going to get their kids to or from school in between their two or three jobs. They worried about if their kids get sick, were they going to pay the rent or were they going to pay the doctor bill. Some worry about whether they were going to be able to eat breakfast or pay for bus fare. So the struggle for people and women who are juggling lots of different things and sometimes, many times, lots of different jobs, is that they want to be able to figure out how they can have a better life for themselves and for their families which means how do they get a decent wage, how can they have health care so they can stop worrying about it, how can they have a better standard of living. And I think that they do look for a union for that and that we need to have a strategy for delivering that. And, so, I think that a strategy that is a loose network, that is going to maybe make life a little bit better around the edges, that they're going to get discounts or whatever, is not enough. It's not enough. I think they really do want to believe that there is a strategy there for actually improving the standards on the job and in their society. And in their own lifetime. So, I think one of the problems we had in general was, we didn't really have the strategy, sometimes, to convince the workers that we really were going to make their employer, that we were trying to organize, make a difference.

Were you involved in any of the discussions about disbanding District 925?

I was a member of the senior staff of SEIU; I was John Sweeney's assistant for programs and field services by that time so I had taken over the field operations as well. Yeah.

Didn't the disbanding happen after he moved over to president of AFL or did the discussions ... (both talking at once)

It was before.

I see. And what were the issues that you remember coming up in those discussions?

I think that it had been very hard and it had been not very successful. We hadn't actually organized large numbers of office workers so there really was a looking at what worked and what didn't work. And whether having a national union with pockets of workers all over the country, that was not self-sufficient and probably could not be, was a good strategy. So I think it was trying to really evaluate what was working and what wasn't working, what were the obstacles in the way and trying to figure out if this was right strategy to continue.

Debbie Schneider did describe to me in her interview some of those issues very coherently. I didn't ask her, and should have, whether the question came up from anyone in 925: could we have more time and more resources. In other words, was that ever evaluated as far as ...

Oh yes, there were a lot of issues about the resources. A lot of the financial support for 925 and 9to5 came out of the budget I managed and there was a huge issue about how do we keep on...because the local, itself, was not self-sufficient. It had an office in Seattle; it had an office in Ohio. I forget where else it had offices... in Boston. It had pockets of workers in different places, right, so, there was a small unit here, there was a small unit there, there were clusters in different places. They tried to figure out different ways of being efficient and effective, which was very hard. It was hard to govern, it was hard to manage and it was hard to figure out how it was ever going to be self-sustaining.

Which is the goal of every local?

I think that the goal was to be self- sustaining. Our goal was to be able to put resources into, not the infrastructure, but to be large enough so that you can organize more workers, bargain better contracts, provide better services. It was having a very hard time getting to the basic level of "can we pay our bills and keep our lights on without other support." As a small local, I don't remember how many members it had at the time, having a national jurisdiction without a focused strategy about how they were going to organize and a strategy about who they were going to organize, not just how but who, made it very difficult.

By "who" you mean specific targets, not just clerical workers ... (wording muffled)

Right, and specific targets in specific areas.

Is there anything else you'd like to add about the legacy of 925? What constitutes its legacy?

You know, I think I do wonder now, as we kind of now are in the age of the internet, that as you watch what Move On was able to do, when you watch as Dean was able to do through his campaign when he reached out through the internet to young people, whether there are different ways of looking at organizing groups of workers for different purposes...that we if we had had that available then, if there would have been a different outcome. And we, in SEIU, experiment with Purple Ocean which is a...

Which is what?

Purple Ocean is our effort to, kind of, build a grassroots support for some of the issues that we're working on, understanding that some people will never have an opportunity or want to be actually part of the union--but they might want to be part of a movement--whether that could be a platform and a vehicle for reaching out to occupations as opposed to around issues.

As a women leader of this new national union effort is there anything else you'd like add about how you view women's leadership, your experience as a women union leader all these years?

Well, I think that, in SEIU, we've had space to step up and speak out. I think that 925 helped that because we've brought in lots of young women all at the same time. And there were other women, because of the public sector, who were in our health care organizing, that were coming up and were able to engage in a different way. I think that if you look around the labor movement, in SEIU we have more women in all different levels of our organization. We have women in national office, we have women at local union offices, we have women highly represented at our executive board. I think that some of that comes from 925. I mean, you look around the rest of the labor movement and you don't see that, and you wonder if we had been more successful or we had been able to spread the enthusiasm with other unions whether we would be in a different place. But, I do think though, with Change to Win, our union partners are very focused on understanding that the people we're organizing now are women, are people of color, are often times immigrants, and that organizing them into the union is one step. Organizing them to be part of our leadership is as important and that we need to figure out how to do that more effectively. I think that we have the opportunity to do that. I think that we can see that, just like in the '80's and '90's, SEIU stepped up, in terms of being much more open, in terms of leadership of women and people of color. I think you're going to see the next generation be, through the Change to Win unions, doing the same thing.

You know, it would have been more appropriate for me to mention this in the middle of the interview but would you say that one factor in the difficulty of organizing clerical workers in the '80's and '90's, particularly in the private sector, had anything to do with the sort of increased and more sophisticated efforts at union busting?

Yeah. No, it's... That's why I said that I think that we needed an industrial model. We needed an employer strategy, which is why we needed it for janitors, why we needed it for hospital workers, why we needed it for clerical workers, because I don't think that many clerical workers thought that their employers wanted them to have a union or a voice, right? And, so, if we didn't have that, I don't think that they ever really were going to believe that they were going to get a voice. We needed to figure out a way to have a strategy, take them [employers] on, and a believable strategy that the clerical workers believe that it would win. But they were clearly anti-union, and continue to be.

OK, well, that covers my ten. Anything else you'd like to add?

I don't think so.

Thank you.

Thank you.