

Neal Culver
Interviewed by Ann Froines
Seattle, Washington
May 11, 2005

I'm interviewing Neal Culver, a senior computer specialist at the University of Washington in Seattle, May 11, 2005. Neal, tell me your first connection with 925, how you entered the organization.

Shortly after I came to work for the University of Washington in the administrative data processing department, the higher education personnel board decided to eliminate the job classification that I was in. A delegation from what was then the classified staff association came down and talked to us in that job classification. And one of them was Sharon (), who eventually became the first chapter president from this Seattle chapter of District 925. That time coincided with what I would refer to as the Reagan recession of the early '80s. Things were very bad for state employees here at the University. The state had terrible budget problems and it was very evident to me that classified employees needed strong representation, not just as a union on the campus but for lobbying and things of that nature and dealing with the higher education personnel board. So when I received a newsletter that the Classified Staff Association was going to become a part of District 925 of SEIU, I was very elated and immediately joined. When they bargained their first contract, I ran for the spot to represent my bargaining unit on the first contract negotiations committee. I lost. (Laughing) But the person who won, who I think was also the person who urged me to run in the first place, quickly withdrew in favor of me, and so I became a member of the bargaining team as of about the second bargaining session which we had with the university.

Was this mid-eighties?

It must have been about 1983 or '84. I think probably '83. So that was my first association with District 925.

So you really had a role in it very quickly

Yes, I did.

At the level of struggling for a contract. What were some of the issues in that first contract negotiation that you remember?

Well, the whole thing was kind of an interesting exercise in that all you could do basically under the rules that existed at that time, you couldn't really bargain for anything very significant under the contract at that time. So basically what we were trying to get was essentially get the important elements of the higher education personnel board rules placed into a contract and to get a steward system set up and to handle grievances and to develop a grievance procedure. As limited as our negotiating rights were, the university

was extremely negative, and it took us well over a year to negotiate that first contract. When we had been negotiating with them for over a year, they decided to say, "Oh, we didn't realize we were negotiating with District 925, we thought we were negotiating with the Classified Staff Association." They demanded that we go to the HEP [Higher Education Personnel] Board and get it clarified as to whether they were actually bargaining with the effective representatives of CSA. We ended up having a sort of reaffirmation vote to clarify it to the members of the bargaining unit, who they were bargaining with, which I think we got something like 92% of the votes or something like that. It was typical of a very hostile relationship from the beginning with the personnel people from the university.

Did that change over time? After a number of successive contracts, did they come to accept that they had a union here?

Well, yes, they did, eventually. It was not just a case of having a hard time dealing with the university. It was also a hard battle dealing with the higher education personnel board, which was essentially always engaged in dealing with the university and the colleges and so on in the state as if they were partners. And the unions, which were principally us and the AFSCME [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees], you know, Washington State...

Public employees?

And the WPEA, Washington Public Employees Association, and the Washington Federation of State Employees was the AFSCME entity. There was also some representation to there from the trades unions and so on and from the nurses unions. It was kind of a hostile atmosphere with them too.

Had you had earlier experiences as an activist or organizer in your life around other issues?

I had been involved in the Democratic Party since before I was eligible to vote technically in Washington State and I had participated in some organizing against the Vietnam war. I had had a political interest all through my adult life and actually from considerably before I was an adult. But I had not been in--while I had signed union cards for one or two other jobs that I had, nothing materialized from that. I was anxious and looking forward to becoming part of the labor movement.

I gather the union fended off the termination of your job description.

Well, we actually didn't. Actually, one of the first things I did... I was the steward for my area and they used to have, under that system, what they called special pay. We'd been reclassified and when we went to that new classification, we no longer had the special pay, which was a fair amount of money. I can't actually remember how many steps it was. I think it was at least two steps, which would be like 5 or 10%. I think maybe steps were 2.[5]% so it was about 5%, something like that, and that was going to

go away and we were going to be redlined, in other words, we wouldn't get raises until the state gave us raises to get up to that. I was asked to go to a HEP board meeting and speak on that subject. The late Patra Leaning and Judy Mars, who was a staff person to the HEP board, and I made a trek over across the water to Bremerton, to Olympic College over there, and went to the HEP Board. I spoke to the HEP board and I think I came pretty well loaded for bear, and I was pretty much finished with my presentation to the board and I saw them nodding approvingly. So, I shut up and sat down, and actually one of the people from management there who also had spoken before me, some of our positions, the things that we said, kind of dovetailed. So between the two of us, we made quite an effective case and they gave us that. So, my first experience in that respect was a victory for the people in my bargaining unit. And while the university tried to take exclusive credit for it, it was pretty evident that the presentations we had made were actually what carried the day.

How many people were in your bargaining unit?

At that time there were probably somewhere in the neighborhood of 80-100, something like that I would imagine. We were one of the smaller ones, the data processing unit, but actually they had been, I believe, one of the original founders of the Classified Staff Association. So they were kind of longstanding. In terms of gender, they were pretty equally distributed.

So this might sound like a latter part of the story but it might be useful to put it here. Was there a point at which, then, your kind of work became professional and reclassified as professional staff?

Some of the work changed a bit. Technological change goes on and you sort of have to roll with it in many respects. I don't think what I've done is actually altered all that dramatically but it was significant enough that they gave us quite a lot more money, and unfortunately one of the realities of the university still is that the professionals and the management class take pretty good care of themselves.

Are professional staff organized at U.W.?

No, they aren't. They have a professional staff organization but they aren't really...

Not a collective bargaining group.

They aren't a collective bargaining group. But because the lobbyists and various assorted people that represent the university, they, like I say, take pretty good care of themselves. So the rest of the staff kind of rides along and we have gotten some raises that the classified people didn't.

Growing up, did you have any knowledge of the labor movement or participation in labor struggles with your family or anything?

Yes. My grandparents on my father's side, early in life, my grandfather voted for Eugene V. Debs [Socialist candidate for U.S. President, 1900-1920] all five times that he ran. You may be familiar with the quote by James A. Farley from back in the '30's there, when he said there were the 47 states of the Union plus the Soviet of Washington.

I wasn't, but that's a good one.

I don't believe my grandfather was in the IWW, but I think at least one of his brothers was, and my grandmother's brothers, a couple of them, were in the IWW.

Did you know this growing up or did you learn this kind of later in life?

Yeah. My grandmother lived to quite a ripe age. She died shortly after turning a hundred. She had been active in school affairs and stuff like that. She was on the school board and so on over in Kitsap county. Even though that was a non-partisan job, she was probably one of the highest elected Socialists in the state at the time. My father was also in the '40's and '50s a member of the automotive machinists union...worked at the Kenworth Truck Company here in Seattle. I remember growing up when they did not have a very harmonious relationship with the Kenworth Truck Company, which belongs to an entity called Paccar. I remember when I would have been ten years old, the summer that I turned ten, they went out and that was 1959, my dad went out on strike on Memorial Day weekend and he didn't get back to work until after Labor Day. They ended up having to take exactly what the company's last offer was before they went on strike. I think that was kind of poorly timed because they were in the recession that Nixon claimed cost him the election in 1960 and the company just wasn't going to give very much. My parents basically had all their savings wiped out by the strike, and people that worked with my dad there, that were other people in the union there, lost cars and houses. It was a pretty harsh introduction to the world of labor negotiations in the private sector at least.

Can you describe in some detail your increasing involvement and election to lead the union?

Well, I started out after a year or so, I was on that first bargaining team and I started to be active on the committee. I was asked to do the political stuff for the elections. I worked on the 1984 elections of the legislature and where we had a committee that went out and canvassed and stuff like that.

For sort of pro-union candidates?

For pro-union candidates, exactly. Then, we ousted the Republican governor, John Spellman. And got Booth Gardner elected governor. Actually, we turned in a respectable vote for Walter Mondale. I think Mondale got 47% of the votes in Washington State. And we got some good legislators back in that year. So I helped with that and then I helped when we did Lobby Day and stuff like that and we had a legislative committee and I was a member of that and worked on that. After I had been involved in that, I was

asked to become a member of the policy board. I was on the policy board for quite a while. I had never planned on running for actually an office in the union, in part because there have certainly been enough males, White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant males, elected to union offices, and so I thought it was appropriate that with the overwhelming majority of the membership being women, I was content to be in the position that I was. But I was also being asked to do different things, so eventually I was asked to run for vice president of the chapter. By that time, after I figured I had that much of a commitment to as many different areas of the union at that time as I had, I did that and I got elected. So, I was the vice president and I believe at that time I also started to take over some of the functions that we'd been previously doing with staff. We ran a union shop campaign and everything we'd done up until that time had worked. I mean, every time we asked the membership for something on the campus here we got it. And then we stubbed our toe pretty badly with the union shop campaign. They weren't ready for that and we didn't have enough to bargain over. That was kind of the bottom line there. Unless you can bargain for wages and...

They didn't have a big enough stake, I guess.

People didn't feel they had enough stake. After that, our membership started to decline. We'd peaked at around 1400 and some. Actually, we'd started to go down slightly before the union shop election and then after that we had some dues increases to kick in. Every time we had one of those, if we went up in dues 5%, Pam MacEwan used to say, "Well, if you look at it, every time we go up 5%, we lose 5%." We were starting to get a little pinched for money, so to use the paid staff that we had more effectively, and I worked third shift, or graveyard shift, so I could do things in the daytime that other rank and file members couldn't do. I used that time to do other things for the union. One of them was that I took over the representation to the higher education personnel board where we'd previously had both a staff person and a member going to the board meetings. I took over, kind of both those functions. The HEP board did a clerical class plan review where they reviewed all of the clerical classifications and I got involved with that.

Was that essentially job descriptions?

Right. Job descriptions. Washington Federation of State Employees had sued the State of Washington for sex discrimination and they had won in the early '80s there.

Was this the comparable worth struggle?

Exactly. So as part of the settlement of that suit, they had put into effect a system of comparable worth job evaluation. They had the Willis system for determining – they had a point system to rate jobs. When they did the clerical class plan review and it gave us an opportunity to go through this Willis system and apply that to the new job classifications, new job specifications. I represented us on that committee. It was a blood bath between the Federation and us, primarily, myself and the Federation member and one of the staff people from the HEP board and the personnel people. There were, like, three personnel

people, three union people and one staff person from the HEP board who was basically the fourth member of the ...

By blood bath, you mean locked in struggle every single session?

Yes, unfortunately I was never able to bloody any of their noses literally. A couple of the people that were on the committee from the University there, one of them from the University I would have liked to have popped a couple of times in the nose. The staff person was extremely hostile to us and we had a major battle to get significant increases, but we succeeded ultimately, and for most people we got a lot more money.

Did that help the employees see the union as a kind of necessary thing?

Yes, it did. I think we certainly tried to emphasize that. One of the things is that whenever you do something like that, there's inherently winners and losers and some get more and some less. One of the classifications that were very numerically prevalent in our clerical bargaining unit were program assistants and coordinators and the supervisors. And they didn't do as well as the secretaries did. The senior secretary supervisors and so on in our unit went up like five ranges... that's a lot of money. We didn't do nearly as well... the University really fought because they wanted to hold down the pay for the program coordinators and assistants. We went to the Board, we appealed the results to the Board, and they redid it. When we redid it, they still managed to suppress large increases...

**END of SIDE A
START of SIDE B**

...supervisors who were also in our unit but a relatively smaller number, they gave them significant increases in pay. (Laughing)

Do you think that was conscious divide and rule or was it just moneysaving?

Moneysaving. Moneysaving.

So was there some bitterness, then, on the part of some of those people those who didn't get...?

Well, yeah, yeah. And you had people who were secretaries who had not supervised people and some of them went down because they were not supervising. But eventually things... sometimes the people that you get something for think, "Well, I had that coming anyway," and if anybody loses anything it's, "Damn those guys, they didn't fight hard enough for me." But on the whole, I think we did pretty well by the clerical bargaining unit and that was a victory for comparable worth, and basically a victory for the union.

When you were talking before about working in the political realm and lobbying in the state legislature and so on, were all the unions in the public employee unions

kind of doing that together? Was 925 leading the way in [spearheading?] these political issues?

Well, in many respects, as far as advancing the cause of workers in Washington State, there were issues where the AFSCME, the Washington Federation of State Employees, were very positive and where we saw eye to eye. Then there were other issues which we didn't necessarily see eye to eye on. One of the things that we diverged considerably with them over for quite a number of years was collective bargaining. I mean, we always wanted to bargain with the State for wages and benefits and the Federation was very contented to stick with the board system where they could lobby the legislature, where they could send their delegate to the HEP Board or the other entity which handled the other non-higher ed employees, the State Personnel Board. That's what they wanted to do. They really did not want to bargain collectively over wages and benefits. They saw themselves primarily as a lobbying and getting them elected type of thing, whereas we wanted to be the bargaining agent for the workers and thought that was the best way to get things. Eventually, when in the early '90's there, when the Clinton election first came in, we had Democratic majorities in the legislature, Democratic governor and the Federation finally said, "We're for collective bargaining," but they failed to get everybody behind a single collective bargaining bill. They made such a botch of the whole thing that the only collective bargaining bill that got passed was the one which we put through which enabled us to opt out of the State personnel system and bargain for those issues with the University.

It was just a bill that applied to the University and not to the other...?

It actually applied to anybody who chose to go for it, but only one chose to go for it. And they tried, the Federation tried to kill our bill many times. Susan Johnson was our lobbyist at that time, who was an absolutely wonderful lobbyist and had wonderful relationships with many of the key legislators. I remember Kim and I went to a committee meeting there and the Federation was sure they were going to kill our bill that night. [Nita Reinhart], who was a state senator, she primarily dealt with the financial committees, was a major player at that time in the legislature. She was a close friend of our lobbyist and very strongly supportive of our positions and she came in there and told them, "You're not going to kill that bill tonight," and we got it passed. And had we not gotten that bill passed at that time, which eventually led to us getting the agency shop here in the University and bargaining a contract that included union security provisions, we were not going to last. We would have had an erosion in membership. The cost was dragging the whole district down. We could have put up a long, big struggle for a long time, but it would have been a downhill struggle. But once we got that through, bargained that first contract, and got it ratified, I mean from then on our existence here was insured and it strengthened the whole District 925.

Yes, because it must have become one of the biggest locals, right?

We immediately showed a considerable increase and our clout legislatively and otherwise was enhanced.

Were you president during any of this period?

Yes. I was president at that time. I became president when the incumbent president there, that I was elected with, resigned and left the University. Then I took over and was interim president and then I was reelected or actually, elected on my own by a narrow margin the first time and then the second time I was reelected again. Then later on, I stepped down and moved on. I wanted to be more active on the District 925 board. I was elected to be a vice president for the Western region on the District 925 national board.

So, that campaign which you've just described was, in a way, one of the most important campaigns in the union and you were involved in the leadership at that point?

Right. Right. I think that was one of my greatest contributions to the union was working on that and it was very satisfying to ensure the continued existence of our union and to strengthen it and win that election... very intensive opposition. And even though the University had to agree to undertake that kind of bargaining, they had to agree with us to do that. We both mutually supported that bill in the legislature. When they saw the opposition to the contract because of the union security provisions and stuff rising up from some of the employees – while they supported ratification of the contract and so on - sometimes they were not the most helpful of allies.

Why did some of the union members oppose this?

Well, it wasn't very often the union members that opposed it. When you're not in an agency shop, it's mostly the people who were not members and didn't want to pay any dues.

Even though there were provisions that should have guaranteed them some kind of security they didn't have before and so on, they still were anti-union.

Right, even though it was getting them more money than any other state employees. It was really to my way of thinking a no-brainer. We had provisions where they were more than getting what they were going to be paying in dues where they were getting bonuses after a year or so, where they got cash bonuses. It was a good deal. It was a good deal.

Did you receive training from the organization at different points when you were involved in these different capacities? Either formal training or on the job training?

We did trainings. A lot of it was on the job stuff. I mean where we learned from experience as we went along... what worked and what didn't work. We were pretty lucky. We had good people, very dedicated staff people. For instance, our lobbyist that used to be paid for by all the SEIU locals here in western Washington did a tremendous job for us. She had relationships with key legislators, was respected and we got a lot of bang for our buck out of that.

That's good. You mentioned earlier you had reservations about moving forward as the formal head of the union as a man. Was there anything in your experience as president of the union where gender became an issue at all, which you remember?

Well, basically all of the key issues which we were supporting, you know, the fight against sex discrimination and pay discrimination, you know, I strongly supported anyway, and they were so blatantly obvious to anybody that I don't think it was ever much of an issue. I was in a position where I was able to carry the ball forward. When we got somebody there, which I felt would be a good successor, I voluntarily stepped aside. I was kind of unique on our national board. When we had our last meeting, Debbie Schneider pointed out that of all the men they'd had on the board I was the only one over years that they hadn't tried to get rid of. (Laughing) Which I took as about the best compliment I ever had, actually.

Now after these years of organizing experience how would you characterize the values that 925 represented as a union?

Well, I think that I'd characterize the values...I think for one thing particularly when everybody started out with District 925 there was a lot of idealism, a lot of optimism and kind of a spirit of we didn't know what we couldn't do yet. And it took us a while to find out what we could do and what we couldn't do. But overall, I think the ideals of the organization in being a voice for underrepresented, underpaid, primarily women workers, we continued to do wherever we were, really, we did a good job and we did the best job and tried to be as congruent with our original ideals as when we started.

And they used a lot of creative tactics, too, right?

They certainly did. I was

Were you always comfortable with those tactics?

Sure.

Can you remember some anecdotes?

Actually, I thought one of the best ones, one of my favorites actually was not from us but it was I think at the University of Cincinnati where somebody - seems to me it involved a fish - and putting behind a refrigerator or something like that where it got hot - a dead fish - and did not smell very good for the non-striking people. I remember reading, we had a great big petition, we had them all connected together so you know it was 60 feet long, or something. We had a meeting scheduled with the Executive Vice President of the University and we brought them all in there and presented them to him and we had them all strung out 50 feet or so and...

Instead of in a neat pile.

Right. (Laughing) That was fun.

Were you part of that one-day strike they had or was that just for health care people? I'm getting the story from different perspectives.

Well, I don't believe I was in the one-day strike. I think that was actually after I had left.

How did 925 in its meetings and trainings deal with issues of racial and ethnic diversity both in the workplace if they came up there and in its own staff? Are there discussions that you remember being part of in that?

Yes, it was one of the things that we would have like to have been more... to get as good a minority representation on the board and in the leadership positions was certainly one of our goals. And I don't think we were always as entirely successful as we would have liked to have been in getting that involvement. Sometimes I think you can get a little bit, whether you like it or not, getting people who feel comfortable in moving into a group they see or perceive as being predominantly White and getting people who are willing to do that gets to be a chore. It's hard to find people who can do that. I would have liked to see us succeed in getting more minority representation on the board, although we did have some good leaders over the years who were minorities, but percentage wise I'm not sure we were as successful.

Did you consider 925 a family friendly organization in the sense that when you were working actively with the organization they acknowledged the roles and needs of parents?

We certainly tried to be as family friendly as we could be. At times, we even tried things like day care. I mean we had people who took care of kids at meetings and stuff. One of the ironies that you have when you have an organization like this where you rely on volunteers and where you get your activists, a lot of them turn out to be the people who have, say, small children. It's harder for them to participate to the degree that you'd like to see them participate because, just as they have daycare problems at work, those problems don't go away after work. At one time, I think, we did a survey, or something, on the number of people who were single parents in our union here and here in the University the percentage of people who are single parents as a percentage of our membership was really large. I can't remember the figures but it was a very large number. When you get into that situation, it's really hard to get people to give up time with their children. I mean, we had people who did that but probably not as many, I mean it certainly wasn't our intention but...

Was that ever an issue for you in your work?

I was single until several years ago, so I've only been married for 3½ years...

You were a prime candidate [for the union people] (laughing)

When I finally got children, the baby was 34 and weighed 250 pounds so...

Do you believe that the aims of 925 were realized?

I think our original goal was to have clerical workers represented from coast to coast, in public and private, in large numbers and that never happened. Did we get more of a voice for women on SEIU's national board? Yes. John Sweeney gave attention to us and that was good. That's why District 925 went to SEIU. I think we succeeded in that. Everywhere we really were in numbers, you know the Boston area where we had bargaining unit, Cleveland, Cincinnati, and here at the University of Washington. Everywhere where we were able to get a real toehold I think we did a very good job for the people that we were able to represent. But being able to expand, you know to get large bargaining units in other cities, and so on; you encountered the same obstacle the labor movement has encountered as whole. Basically, you know, this is my personal opinion but I think that the decline of labor movement, while it became accentuated in the early part of the Reagan administration when he showed everybody how easy it was to break unions--he started out his administration by going after the air traffic controllers--but really, the organizing atmosphere that prevailed in the 1930's when they were under the Wagner Act and where the Norris-LaGuardia Anti-injunction Act were in effect and then post Taft-Hartley, it took the management side almost 40 years to fully realize the impact of the Taft-Hartley. That was a really bad thing. We're still, you know with the current hostile administration, which are probably the most hostile to working people of any administration we've ever had, even more hostile than Reagan, who was not very friendly, you know, it's tough. We were going and trying to push the stone up more of an uphill incline than we anticipated.

In the years 925 was growing and you were so active, was other activism going on in this community with workers and low-income people? What was the context for 925?

You know, this is a pretty progressive area. I mean it always has been one way or another.

It certainly has a rich labor history.

Certainly has a rich labor history. Some of us used to do a little presentation on labor history here that we used to give to some of our members because we were aware of it. Many people grew up in the post war era didn't have the sense of labor history or whose parents were not connected with the labor movement. We tried to instill some of that history by talking about what the Longshoreman strike in the 1930's on the West Coast here and organizing at GM with the sit down strikes in the Detroit area in the 1930's. Jobs for Justice was very active here. We participated in a number of coalitions and community activist groups.

Did you ever, yourself, do some of that talking about labor history?

Yes. Yes, I did. My part of our little show there that Joan Weiss and I originally did, was on our staff—

END of TAPE 1, SIDE B
START of TAPE 2, SIDE A

... here at some function. It was a lot of fun and very inspiring. It was very hard not to get emotional when you see the extent of the sacrifice and commitment that people had in those days. Today, we seem to live in a period where people voluntarily vote against their own economic interests, which I think is probably unique in the history of the Republic. In the 1930's, people, supposedly, the bulk of them, probably didn't even have high school educations and yet they had a much clearer perspective on what was in their economic and social interests as opposed to today. It's kind of an appalling paradox.

Do you have anything else you'd like to say about the importance of the legacy of 925? Of course it's not really finished here, (laughing) it's just starting.

Right. I hope the legacy of 925 is that eventually, by keeping the beacon alight, we're going to again at some point get back to an atmosphere, in this country, when widespread organizing can be accomplished again in more than just the public sector because let's face it. Most of the gains we make in the labor movement are either in states where you're dealing in the public sector or the semi-public sector and private industry is really hard. Hopefully, one day we're going to be able to get back to the atmosphere where we can again broaden our organizing abilities and get more people and hopefully these jobs that District 925 had represented that we can really do the job that we started out to do. Every original goal or ideal that it embodied, they were all valid in my opinion and they deserve to be ultimately implemented.

Have you been following the recent debate within the AFL-CIO led by Andy Stern about the restructuring of the labor movement?

I'm glad to see that he's doing that. When we were at the international convention in Pittsburgh I remember he announced that we had become the largest union in the United States so it's appropriate that we, and also the one that was consistently growing, that we take the lead in rejuvenating the AFL-CIO. You know, in my lifetime, when I was a kid, my dad was going through those strikes back there in the 50's, early 60's, we were looking at labor force and organized labor was 30-32% of the workforce. The AFL-CIO, when it said something, it packed a lot of clout. We had power and of course we all know all the demographic and economic changes that have transpired that have... the decline of manufacturing industries and automation and so on, which have reduced the labor, the forces of organized labor, plus moving from...

Globalization...

Globalization. Initially, even before that movement from the north to the south where they had the so-called Right to Work clause. Look at the population of New York State. My wife's from Syracuse and in the 1948 presidential election New York had 47 electoral votes. Today they're down to something like 33 or something like that. New York City's population is, I believe, the largest that it has ever been. So the population of upstate New York, which is largely industrialized, industrial cities like Buffalo, Syracuse and Rochester, the population of those, has been decimated.

It's all been shifted down South.

It's all been shifted away. Initially, it went down south and ultimately right out the door completely.

What did the experience of working with 925 mean in your life as you have looked back on it?

Well, it gave me the ability to work at something where my job has never. Even though I'm somewhat better paid than I was, I never have found it terribly interesting. It enabled me to pursue interests, which I found personally very fulfilling, was an avenue of self-expression, gave me the ability to actually do something for other people, help contribute to the community in a positive fashion. Equally satisfying, it gave me an opportunity, in kind of a negative sense. Where workers and people we represented were being bullied by abusive management and unsympathetic and what I would call real knuckleheads in some of the personnel boards and things that we dealt with in the university's administration over the time I was involved in the union, I was able to give them a hard time.

I can kind of see by the look on your face that you ...[]

I find that personally very satisfying. I think the one time Kim Cook and I met with the guy who was president of the alumni association, who was an attorney who had been associated with the Longshoremen's union. His father had been president of the local or something and he had represented them as an attorney and so on. When they started the Harry Bridges Chair here at the University, Labor Studies chair, and they put a statue of Harry Bridges in the [name of library] Library, he was kind of astonished to find the campus unions were not very well represented in terms of their participation in that. It came to light that we went and talked to him and said the unions here have problems in dealing with the administration and President Gerberding (). And Gerberding, when I was president of the union would never meet or speak with me directly. Kim and I conversed with the executive vice president, but because he didn't like some of the guest editorials I had written for the University of Washington paper and stuff, he didn't like some of the positions that we took. He didn't like us and me in particular and I'm very proud of that. He didn't realize who I was, the alumni guy, and he says "Well, isn't that guy kind of a cheap shot artist," as Gerberding had described me. So, you know I'm kind of proud of that.

(Both laughing)

Did you confront him with who you were at that point?

Well, yeah, we let the guy know and we assured him we weren't cheap shot artists but that the administration who professed themselves to be very liberal politically were not when it come to dealing with their labor unions.

We had a kind of similar experience at U. Mass. Did you feel when you realized you were going to be made professional staff - I don't know if you realized it or you applied for it - did you feel like you were going to miss 925 and that camaraderie?

Well, when I moved into that position just as 925 as a national organization was dissolving.

And your most recent involvement had been on a District board.

Right. So, I kind of went out with District 925's existence. But was I conscious that I was going to miss being in the labor movement? Yes. I have definitely missed it and I have missed the associations I had with, you know, not just the people locally here that were active in the union. You know, I've stayed friends with some of them, Linda Roberts, who's on your list there, she's about my closest friend so we've stayed close, but I've tried to maintain a little bit of communication with the other people. I miss the people in the Boston area. Actually, my wife and I went back there, year before last, and spent a lot of time with one of the people I met back there who worked for the city of Medford.

Oh really, who was that?

Marlene.

Oh, I don't think I know her.

I don't think she's as active as she was.

Because I lived in Somerville which is right near Medford.

She lives in Somerville and I know that area well.

Since this is also a story about you and not just about the union, did you find something to substitute for that activity in your life? I mean, do you do other kinds of political work? I guess you've got a family now.

Yeah, I have a family and I haven't found a good substitute for that. We have a lot of animals to take care of.

Like what? Llamas or something?

No, we have three dogs, three cats, a parrot and two visiting birds. One cat got hit by a car last October and had to be fed through a tube until January because her jaw was all wired up and she became a \$5,000 cat and required a lot of attention during that period, which kind of took me out of the political campaigns for the first time, I think. I'll be honest. I really miss my role in the union as a labor activist. I enjoyed it immensely. The diverse number of areas in which we were involved in the community – campaigning for friendly politicians, lobbying the legislature, and negotiating contracts here with the University and trying to play a role in the labor community as a whole in the area – you're touching on a lot of interesting areas.

Tell me little bit about that. I mean, you've talked about the conflict with AFSCME over the collective bargaining unit, but you mean things like in a labor council of some kind?

Yeah, we tried to develop more of a presence in some of those areas. I don't think we ever got as good an involvement like at the County Labor Council meetings as we perhaps should have when I was there. But, overall, we participated in a lot of the events that were going on. You know, we did stuff with the Diane Sausney's (sp?) union there that represent the nurses, you know, the health care wing of SEIU.

Oh, I see, that's a different local.

Right. SEIU's so diverse that there were interesting things going on with the other locals and stuff. Mostly, in terms of being involved directly, though, where we'd participate directly in picket and stuff like that. Mostly, it was in conjunction with the health care side.

Now, is SEIU one of the most vibrant unions in the Seattle area?

I would say, easily.

And it gets in the paper, what it's doing. I suppose they were quite active around the fall elections, the 2004 elections around here.

Right. They actually attempted something pretty bold in that they supported a candidate for the legislature against one of the incumbent Democratic committee chairmen there who has not been, to my way of thinking, as supportive as she might. I think that was a bold move and fell a little bit short and gave her quite a run for her money and might pay some benefits down the road.

Can't take them for granted anymore.

Exactly. It's important to stay on these people and let them know the working people are still around and that public employees deserve a fair break in the state.

The optimism and idealism that you spoke of that 925 represented early on and throughout its history, are you still able to feel that, to summon up those feelings in this era? That's not a fair question, is it? (Laughing)

Well, in terms of the idealism, support for the goals that we started out with continues. I must confess that at times I feel like I made a big mistake when I was a college student back in the early '70s, the Vietnam War was still going on, and I could have gone across the border to Canada in protest and gotten in there. I didn't pass my draft physical for being underweight so I never seriously considered moving to Canada, but when I see how reactionary the United States government has become, I consider this current administration to be the worst in the history of the Republic. When I was in college, it used to be assumed that President Harding was about the worst president that the United States ever had. But, subsequently, after doing a bit of study on Harding, who actually had some positive results to his administration in that he negotiated an arms reduction pact, comparing him to the current administration I would jump at Harding in a heartbeat. You know, it's hard not to feel very discouraged at this particular time when you see the demographics. The places where the other side is strong are the places that are growing. And the places, like I said, where we are traditionally strong, like Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania and the West Coast, I guess, being somewhat the exception to that rule, have lost population because of the industries which made them progressive or contributed to that, the labor movement and so on, have been destroyed. It's hard to be optimistic but at the same time since we are stuck here, we might as well do all we can to throw the rascals out at the next opportunity. Eventually they will keep some historical perspective that they will get ousted again and that eventually, I think, there's hope that an enlightened public might toss them out and get us back on track as a nation again.

Learn to vote in their self-interests as you said.

Yes. What a tribute to the propaganda skills of the other side that they are able to get people to vote against themselves on economic issues where people vote on social issues supposedly and not on economic. I think that's unprecedented in the history of the nation.

OK, that sounds like a good place to stop.