Jane Fonda
telephone interview by Stacey Heath
July 25, 2006

This is Stacey Heath. It is Tuesday, July 25, and I'm interviewing Jane Fonda. Hello, how are you?

Fine, thank you, Stacey, good.

I just want to verify with you that you understand the call is being recorded, and will be transcribed for submission to the Walter Reuther archives.

Yes, I do.

Great. Thank you. So, the first question. I know you worked with 925 on the movie, and I'm wondering why you did the movie, and what made you think it could be a hit.

I became friends with Karen Nussbaum, the founder of Working Women 9to5, that started in Boston which is where Karen lived. We became friends during the anti-Vietnam War movement. And when the war ended, she went to work as a clerical worker and began to organize women office workers. And every time I would see her over the years, she would tell me hair-raising stories about what women office workers were faced with, starting with invisibility, with having to train men who—training men who would then go up the ladder past them, when they were stuck on the lower rungs of the ladder; sexual harassment; demeaning things that they had to do on their job and so on and so forth. And after a while, I said, you know, I'd like to make a movie about this. Now originally I saw it as a (chuckles) as a serious movie. But I began—I pitched the idea to 20th Century Fox studios, with my partner Bruce Gilbert, my production partner. The name of the production company was IPC Films. IPC stood for the Indochina Peace Campaign, which was the national antiwar organization that had brought Bruce and I together but also Karen and I together. So it was called IPC Films, and we got the green light from Fox to do a movie about secretaries. Originally it was going to be a—we cut out an article in a San Diego paper that talked about a woman who wanted to kidnap and kill her boss. So we were working along those lines. And then I came up with the idea of getting Lily Tomlin and Dolly Parton--Dolly had never made a movie—to join me in this production. Well now the moment that that idea came to me, I realized it was going to have to be a comedy. So we shifted to another writer-director named Colin Higgins. He had been the writer on Harold and Maude, among other things. He was a very, very, talented writer-director. He's deceased now, unfortunately. When he agreed to do it, I said—he didn't know anything about women office workers, so I arranged to bring him to Cleveland, which was then the national headquarters of 9to5, the National Association of Women Office Workers, which was now being run by Helen Williams and Carol Kurtz. I brought him there, I asked Helen and Carol to organize a meeting with about 30 or 40 women, clerical workers, from large institutions. Because what I'd learned from Karen is that the issues really were really about insurance companies, banks, large companies where there were hundreds and hundreds of office workers rather than small, family-run businesses or something like that. These were all women from very large companies, and they were all ages

and shapes and sizes and races. I asked them to go around the circle and each of them introduce themselves and just talk a little bit about their working situation. And they did that, and Colin took notes, and we recorded it, and then when we'd gone all around the circle, Colin asked the 24 million dollar question, the brilliant question. He says, "Do any of you ever fantasize about what you'd like to do to your boss?" Well, these women started laughing, and they looked at each other, and it was clear that he'd struck a gold mine. And we again went around the room, and these women told the most amazing fantasies about what they'd like to do to their bosses. One that I remember vividly that didn't make it into the film, was she said she'd like to put her boss through a paper shredder, and feed him into a coffee machine, and watch him drip out and drink him.

So Colin went back and he wrote the script. And Dolly and Lily agreed to do it, with all the fantasies that we'd heard from the women. The minute that Dolly and Lily agreed to be in the movie, I knew it would be a hit. I also knew that because it was based in reality, from everything that I'd learned from Karen and Helen Williams and Carol Kurtz and talking to women directly, I knew that there was an audience for this story. I knew that women would respond to seeing their stories up on the screen. What I didn't anticipate was the extent to which the movie would appeal to men, as well. And not just because of Dolly Parton. But because so many people have had bosses that they'd like to do something bad to. So it's more of a universal theme than I had thought. As Karen often said afterwards, and Karen and I traveled the country with the film, showing it as a fundraiser all across the country, to support the local chapters of 9to5. It was so exciting and rewarding to watch the response from the women who would come to these screenings. Like in the scene where I don't know what to do, how to stop the Xerox machine, women would stand up and say, "Hit the stop button!" They'd applaud at different places, and they just went wild! As Karen often said later, once the movie came out, nobody had to explain the problem. The problem was now on the map. What we had to do was figure out the solutions. And that was when the District 925 came into existence and became part of SEIU. So I think, next to China Syndrome, which I also produced, and its relationship to Three Mile Island, I don't know of any other film that had such a direct link to labor history. It was really a movement built the movie, and the movie built the movement. It was a wonderful synergy that has not been replicated since.

When you talk about getting it produced, and pitching it, and talking to Dolly and Lily about it, were those difficult conversations to convince people or to persuade people or tell the stories that got them interested in doing the film?

In the be—yes. But once Colin Higgins came on board, it became a lot easier. Dolly and Lily had the same manager, and he became convinced. Before then, it was difficult, because we really didn't have a lock on a story.

So once you got the movie made, did you feel at the time that it was worth your time that you—

Oh, my lord!

--were really doing something very important?

Yes! It was totally thrilling! It's rare that you have such a sense that what you've done matters. Or what we all did, matters. It was really exciting to--if I'd not known Karen Nussbaum—we're activists! We're social activists. We're organizers. So the fact that there's this—you know, I'm in an unusual situation because I was a movie star and movie producer, but my grounding was in the world of organizing and activism, and that's an unusual combination. And the fact that it all came together in that way and then became a hit was...oh, it was just totally gratifying!

That's great. And looking back now from a distance, I know that the movie just celebrated this big anniversary. So that was a time for...I think a lot of people were reflecting how important it was at the time. Do you also see it as something that changed history, or what was the legacy that you see there?

I think it changed the history of women office workers. And I say that because that's what Karen Nussbaum has told me. I'm not in the office place. But she has told me that it really made a difference. There are still huge problems. Huge problems! But some of those problems have been addressed.

Good, good. This is terrific, thank you. Is there anything you'd like to add?

I can't think of anything.

Ok. I really appreciate your time.

Thank you, Stacey.

Thank you.

END of interview.