

**Geri Palast
Telephone Interview by Stacey Heath
July 14, 2006**

Geri, if you could go ahead and just say your name for me and spell it.

Geri—G-e-r-i Palast P-a-l-a-s-t.

And I want to verify with you that you do understand that the call is being recorded, you can hear the beep, and that the recording will be transcribed, you'll have an opportunity to review that transcription. Once you review it, it will be submitted to the Walter Reuther archives at Wayne State University. And you're ok with all that right?

Yes.

Great. Ok, good. I think you've had a chance to review the questions—

Briefly

--I emailed to you, good, ok. What was the unique value of 925 in creating a political agenda on the Hill, around worker rights, from the perspective of SEIU?

The value of 925 was extraordinary. The moment in time in which 925 came into SEIU and formally into the labor movement was the early '80s. And we were at a moment in time when there was a real shift both politically and economically in what was going on in the United States. From an economic point of view, we were really seeing in broad relief the shift from manufacturing industries to the service industries, not only in the economy as a whole but also in organizing the labor movement, membership in the labor movement, which today we see what the consequence of all of that has been in the twenty years later. Which actually, if you look at the split in the labor movement, it actually reflects that split. But at that time, it was as if services didn't exist. It was as if women workers didn't exist in terms of a policy point of view or the labor point of view. We were in an extraordinary position being a service union as opposed to an industrial union, of really rethinking how women were viewed in the labor movement. If you look at how women were viewed in the manufacturing unions, if you look at the UAW or Steelworkers, you see that they created sort of women's departments and women auxiliary organizations. But they weren't seen as part of the mainstream of the union. When you look at service workers, what you saw was in fact that at least half if not a majority of the union and the potential membership of the union was female. And that part of the role of 925 was not simply organizing clerical workers, but really was beginning to rethink how you viewed women as workers and as union members and as equal partners if not more so. So that was one piece of it. As we really looked at the policy agenda, it took us a while to fully grasp how to best utilize that. We'll talk about this later. One of our initial efforts was to look at the early versions of computers, video display terminals. But the more important issue that arose was really looking at working family relationships and the changing role of women in the workforce, and therefore how labor policy, family policy, union policy, economic policy had to change in America.

The most significant manifestation of that was 1984, we, SEIU as a leader and at that time the only union sat down with a number of women's groups in rethinking the whole issue of how you address leave related to the birth, adoption, or illness of a child. Previously, the world had viewed this as—the world of the United States, which is of course backwards in this kind of policy area, had really been about maternity leave. It was about thinking of women as mothers. It wasn't thinking about the family as a unit and two-worker families. What we were able sort of in trying to think through an economic analysis was to consider what we really needed as a family policy and a labor policy. So, first we can say, the workforce was changing, that at that point it wasn't quite half but in the 40%, that more and more women were working; most of them were working not out of choice but out of need, although you had women in the workforce both out of choice and out of need; and that that number was increasing and that what used to be for working people, you had a single breadwinner, you basically needed a second breadwinner to stay alive and to be functional as a working class and middle class person. The second thing was that in that respect, you really needed to think about how do we take care of our children, and not only our children but our parents and relatives, and, this is something that was extraordinarily important, that the United States had never had a policy on sick leave that applied for workers. So in re-crafting so-called maternity leave, we made a very important policy judgment that we really wanted to abandon the maternity leave approach and develop family medical leave. That was something that addressed both parents as equal partners in the family as well as the workplace, that provided for medical leave, that meant a sick person could actually take off because they were sick. Not because just their child was sick. And we also considered the broader family unit. When you think that it took nine years to pass the Family Medical Leave Act, when you think that that was the first bill signed into law by Bill Clinton, when you realized it was the first labor standard that was passed since OSHA in 1970, and that there has subsequently not been another labor standard passed in the United States, which is extraordinarily abysmal from a labor policy point of view, you really realize, that 925, as an institution, as a working women's organization coming into the labor movement, was critical in what has become a sea change in the American culture as well as the economy. So that's at the economic level, the labor policy level, and really in terms of culture.

In addition, we were riding the wave in the early '80s of the recognition of a gender gap in voting. And up to that point, people really did not pay attention to women voters. And in 1982, during the Reagan administration, in the mid-term election during that point there was a huge turnover in terms of the Congress moving in the Democratic/progressive direction. And the hot analysis at the time was that it was the gender gap. That it was the women who made a difference in that respect. So all of these factors came together. But again, 925 was a critical element not only in the history of SEIU or the history of the labor movement, but really in the history of the United States.

Well!

How's that.

That's awesome. I haven't heard it put quite so perfectly before. That's great.

Not only that, it's true!

Yeah, I love that. I know! So, could you also tell me about the work that you did with them around the VDT campaign, the video display terminals?

Ok. First of all, I start out by saying that was many, many years ago. So my recollection of all of the facts are fairly limited.

As I indicated, when 925 first came into SEIU, we were really trying to actively think about what were those issues that were unique to women office workers, and how could we develop an agenda that went along with that. And at that point, it was at an early point of the introduction of computers into the workplace. Looking from this vantage point, it's hard to believe they were not on the desk of every manager. It was really a new form of secretarial work, for the most part. Today, this is an issue that's very widespread.

We also didn't know that much about computers. We didn't know very much about the health effects, we knew something about ergonomics, we thought we knew something about radiation, but all of this was fairly new information. But we did think that it was a way to begin to look at issues of the new workforce, and the women workforce. So we did launch a national campaign to try to get health and safety regulation for video display terminals which did have—it was not national legislation, but it was a national campaign designed to get state and local legislation passed. Because it was, I think, a first effort in this area, I think it was extraordinarily important in raising issues about computers in the workplace. It was a predecessor, if you will, to the broader issue areas of the regulation of ergonomics generally, repetitive stress injuries generally, and to something [that—it just] became a much larger issue. So again, from my perspective and my limited recollection, most of its importance was that we were pinpointing a new issue of women in the workforce, we were pinpointing a new issue about new technology and how it's dealt with in relating it back to traditional labor issues; and thirdly, we did have some success in some cases in getting—I know that there were a number of local ordinances passed, and I think there might have been a few state ordinances that were actually passed with respect to regulation but it was a precursor to greater policy debates and a broader field of regulation in the area of ergonomics.

Could you just say a little bit about where you were in all of this, what your role was, how you fit, and what the timeline was maybe?

Roughly. [I have] to go back. At that point, I was the legislative director of SEIU. I think it was, my recollection is it was the early '80s. It was the first time that the national union actually took on what I would say was a 925 clerical workers' issue as part of a national agenda. At that time John Sweeney was president of the union, it was something that he spoke to the nation about. So I think our role and my role in particular had to do with giving national heft and prominence to what we would say at that point a women's labor issue as part of the priority agenda of a major labor union.

Great. Final question: what was the value of 925 in doing politics differently?

I think going back to my initial discussion about how 925 played a role in changing the agenda at many levels of both the nation and the labor movement, and talking about how 1982 was the signature year in terms of the recognition of the gender gap in terms of how we mobilized women to really add to the progressive core of voters that would elect people that would then vote correctly on labor issues, I think it was extraordinarily important because for the first time, we had in the union a force of women who had as part of their job to organize women not only as workers but also as civic participants. And that we had a women's vote project. At that period of history—now we have women's vote projects all the time. But at that point there were not a lot of women's vote projects. There was one set up at the Democratic National Committee; the labor movement for the first time—and this was not everybody in the labor movement but certainly the SEIU's of the world--really understood that you needed a special focus on women workers, and certainly Karen Nussbaum and Jackie Ruff and all the various people in 925 were a critical element of the political program at SEIU as well as the legislative and policy operation. And doing turnout for women, [doing] materials for women, gathering women for special rallies about issues on women, all of that stuff was being done in a way that it had not been previously done. And I think it was, again, laid the groundwork for what has become...you would now not have a campaign without that. And it's hard to believe that just 20 years ago, you might not have had that as a normal part of a campaign.

Is there a particular campaign, or can you remember a story or incident, or does anything come to mind?

I think all these different things merge together. They're not (chuckles)

They don't really stay distinct.

Yeah...And I'm sure Karen has addressed a lot of this in anything that she has said, but with each campaign we usually had posters. Or we had t-shirts. Or we had special events. Certainly, fast-forwarding to family medical leave, which of course was my life for nine years, which is why I can remember it in very deep detail, when we launched, and I didn't say this in the first question but it is relevant to all of this, part of the family medical leave campaign was, it was one element of a broader campaign, which was a campaign called Solutions for a New Workforce. Solutions for a New Workforce campaign was launched in 1987, leading into the 1988 presidential campaign. And for that effort, [the union/unions] did massive polling on the issues. And the issues that we articulated as Solutions for a New Workforce which was a new New Deal, was family medical leave, child care, health care for all Americans, and what we then called increase the minimum wage. It pre-dated living wage campaigns. But it was essentially that complex of issues. And we cast it all—it was all cast as part of advancing this image of the new workforce with women at the top, and John Sweeney and Karen wrote a book called Solutions for a New Workforce. We used the poll, we did briefings around the country, we did briefings with political leaders, and this we fed into the organizing the political campaigns in 1988. As part of the political campaign, I believe it was in 1987, the plant closings bill was passed. It was a bill that gave notice to workers, 180 days notice to workers, prior to a plant closing. And when we were selling family medical leave and the new workforce agenda, we sold it as sort of the plant closings for women. And in 1988, we got Michael Dukakis who was then the Democratic candidate, to actually make family medical leave a part of the platform. That was the first time

something like that had happened. And this was all about speaking to women workers. And that when we organized women during that period, we organized them with this agenda. From where I sat, I can't remember one event versus another, whether we—I'm sure we had very specific rallies and other things, I just can't pinpoint a particular event. But I do think from a strategic point of view, it was critical in making this part of a broader presidential and senatorial and congressional agenda.

Great. Wow. It sounds like you did some terrific stuff with them.

We did. It was terrific.

Is there anything you want to add before we end?

I can just underscore what I said at the outset. Which is, sometimes there's a moment in history where everything comes together. And I think this was a place where Karen Nussbaum as a leader, 925 as an organization that was there at the right place at the right time, coming into the union at a moment in time when the economy was changing and that there was—I don't think the leaders of the union understood when they integrated 925 what it actually meant for the union. I'm not sure that the union ever fully gave 925 the credit it deserved. But the fact that the organization was there, that the time was right, that Karen was a very inspired and in the best sense opportunistic leader, and the fact that I think the introduction of women into roles in the labor movement, like that I was a—I was a woman in my 30s, who was running a legislative and political department of a union. That wouldn't have happened at another time. So I think just, you had the right people and the right issues in the right moment in time, where we could sort of ride a crest, and we were actually able to change the culture because all those things came together. And I only wish we were in that moment in time right now. (chuckles)

I can imagine. Yeah. All right. Thank you so much.

I hope that was helpful.