

**Vicki Saporta
telephone interview by Stacey Heath
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How did you come into women's organizing?

I first worked for the Western Conference of Teamsters when I was a student at Cornell University, and they asked me to come to work for them when I graduated. I thought I was going to go to law school, but at the time I was graduating I wanted to go work for the union. I wanted to be doing organizing work. So I started at the Western Conference in March of 1974, and was an organizer there for a year. At that time, I was organizing mixed units, working with concession workers at Yosemite, and with a variety of workers in Utah. And then the International hired me the following year in March of '75. Their impetus was that they thought they needed a woman organizer because they had just attempted a campaign at Honeywell in the Midwest, which was a primarily female bargaining unit, and they did not have a woman organizer, and they attributed their loss partially to that circumstance. So they wanted to hire a woman organizer. I was working for the Western Conference at the time, and I went to work for the International. Their first assignment for me was a large bargaining unit in Chicago of Blue Cross Blue Shield employees that were primarily white collar women. We were successful in organizing that particular unit. That local went on to organize the University of Chicago and other white collar units. I was assigned during my nine and a half years as a field organizer with the Teamsters to local unions and campaigns throughout the country. I worked with nurses, I worked with flight attendants and other airline employees, but I actually had my greatest success in mixed bargaining units in the South, organizing industrial workers in the mid to late '70s. I then became the organizing director at the Teamsters in August of 1983.

Those early experiences trying to break down those barriers with those bargaining units that were primarily women, or even in those mixed bargaining units, what were those early experiences like?

Now are you talking about barriers in terms of organizing women or barriers in terms of being a woman organizer in a predominantly male union?

I think barriers organizing women. But also if you could speak to the other as well, I think that would be interesting.

I think that in terms of organizing workers, barriers had to do more with the type of workers and the industry that they were working in, versus whether they were male or female. So that I found that it was more difficult to organize white collar workers than blue collar workers, whether they were male or female. But, there were certainly some unique considerations when organizing women. Sometimes you really had to organize the whole family, because if you were getting a woman involved in taking a leadership role on the organizing committee, that involved a certain time commitment. She needed to have support at home, often from her husband and her children, so that they would not

be putting additional pressure on her and would be supportive if she needed to be at meetings and they needed to fend for themselves for dinner or that type of thing. So it often involved organizing the entire family so that the husband and children in fact were supportive of the woman's activity and absence from the home. And I found that that was often a part of organizing primarily female bargaining units.

And what were your relationships—

I used to give presentations about organizing women, the differences involved, and what barriers needed to be broken down. I'm trying to think of what else was unique. I found that when we got women involved in organizing, and when they were committed, you could often count on them to do the more detailed kind of committee work that perhaps wasn't the most fun. When they made the commitment, they were seriously involved in campaigns and made excellent committee members.

Is the sort of presentation that you did, is that something that's kind of out there somewhere, like on the internet, or—

It's in my basement. I did a number of iterations of it and I would be happy to share it. I had a whole presentation about organizing women and the unique things that you needed to consider. I'm just now recalling it as we're talking, and I would be happy to share it.

I think that would be fabulous, yeah, --if that's something that you wanted to also submit. We'd [be pleased.]

People had a misconception, I think, that women were for some reason harder to organize than men. And I never found that to be the case. I found that if they were committed and took a leadership role on an organizing committee, you could count on them. They were very involved in the campaign and played a very key role, whether it was a primarily female bargaining unit, or whether it was a mixed bargaining unit. With that said, white collar employees were often more difficult to organize than blue collar employees, whether they were male or female. If you were organizing, for example, nurses, those bargaining units were primarily women. They thought of themselves as professionals, and they were professionals, and there was the question of whether, as professionals, they wanted to be organized in a union. They were probably one of the most frustrating groups to organize, because they had tremendous bargaining power, in that there was a shortage of nurses. They had the ability to really improve their wages, benefits, hours, and working conditions, and have more of an input into the kind of care they were delivering, which was very important to them. They often were afraid to actually take hold of that power and utilize it. And that was true of nurses whether they were male or female. Also, it was often more difficult to organize white collar workers who had particular allegiances to their bosses, working with them one on one in clerical kinds of situations where they somehow thought it was disloyal and their particular boss didn't want them to organize. Those barriers were harder to break down when you were trying to organize clerical workers that had those one on one relationships, versus a unit like Blue Cross. At Blue Cross there were so many clerical employees and they were doing

claims handling or whatever, and they had the same kinds of problems that blue collar workers faced. There were production goals and they did not necessarily have the one on one allegiances that other clerical units had that we were attempting to organize. So I think that during the '70s, the greatest gains were made at places like universities or in the public sector where you didn't have the same kind of opposition to the organizing campaigns.

What was your relationship to other women doing organizing and your view of 925?

I was initially the first woman organizer that the Teamsters hired at the Western Conference, and then at the International Union. When I left the Western Conference they hired another woman organizer there. There were very few women organizers in local unions that I was assigned to. But when there were, and we were involved in campaigns together, we certainly worked well together. I also was involved with the Coalition of Labor Union Women and was the head of their organizing committee or task force, and we put on two organizing conferences. And that's where I probably really met women in other unions who were involved in organizing. It served as a network for us to basically compare notes and experiences and be a support group for one another.

What was your view of 925?

That initially there was the 9to5 organization that wasn't necessarily organizing women into unions, but trying to organize women to stand up for themselves in their various workplaces, and to highlight problems that clerical workers faced. Certainly the movie 9 to 5 did a lot to raise that kind of awareness in an entertaining format. And that 925 evolved because in order to really make the kinds of changes that you would need to make in these workplaces, you need to really be able to engage in collective bargaining. And so that 925 became the union organizing, collective bargaining arm of 9to5, and their goal was to organize white collar and clerical employees.

Do you think that their aims were realized?

I think that there was an increase in white collar organizing. I think a number of the universities come to mind as the white collar units that were organized. Certainly there has been white collar organizing in the public sector. But I don't think that unions ever really organized white collar employees to the extent that they had hoped that they might. And I think that that includes 925 as well.

And how would you describe the legacy of 925?

I think that certainly the awareness of the problems that white collar and clerical workers were having in the workplace was highlighted. The potential for organizing them highlighted. I think it spurred some union organizing among white collar workers, certainly spurred more women being hired as union organizers, because unions thought that to be successful in organizing women they needed to hire women, and to some extent

that was certainly true. And it also then later opened up room for minorities to also become involved in organizing work to a greater extent.

Alright, anything else you want to add before I turn off the tape?

I'm sure there's a lot more that I would like to add. You're taking me back 30 years... I think that those of us who organized early on in unions, and were the only women doing this in our particular unions, also needed to break down barriers within the union. We always had to be more successful than our male counterparts in order to justify why it was important to hire more women to do this kind of work. And I think those of us who did this early on were successful in opening doors for other women, showing that in fact this was the kind of work that was very well-suited to women. Organizing was always thought of as a male bastion, you were out on the road, people thought there were certain dangers involved, and in certain parts of the country and in certain instances, that was in fact true. But in fact, women were very well-suited as organizers, and in fact some of the best organizers in the labor movement were and are women. They listen—I don't want to be stereotypic, but they do listen well, and that's key to being a successful organizer. They're able to empathize, be compassionate, and then able to actually motivate other women to take leadership roles and to organize. They are effective and pay attention to the kind of details that are important in order to win campaigns. They have a lot of credibility with the workers that they are trying to organize. And you often got women self-selecting in terms of becoming organizers. This is what they really wanted to do, and it was hard to get the opportunity and to get those jobs, and so you often had women who were very motivated and very skilled doing organizing, versus someone's son or nephew, for whom this was an entry level job.

How were women being trained to organize?

At the time I started, there wasn't really a formal training process. We kind of got thrown into campaigns and figured it out. Sometimes we would have a mentor that could help us through pieces of campaigns and strategies, and that type of thing. You can teach people tactics and strategies, but it's hard to teach people how to be an organizer. There are people who have the personality, the skills, the empathy, and the ability to do that. And finding the people who are naturals at this and then training them, is what they later tried to do with the organizing institute that the AFL developed. I'm not sure if it still exists any more, but it was a way to try to identify who had the basic ability, and then put them through a more formalized training program.

Was there something different about the way that women were trained?

I think it was more about how women conducted themselves and their campaigns. Again, not to be stereotypic, we were more interested oftentimes in organizing workers and taking care of the details that you needed to take care of in terms of organizing, versus hanging out in bars and playing golf and somehow thinking that this was a stepping stone to becoming a business agent or something else in the union. Organizing jobs for women were difficult to obtain, and there was always some kind of a trial. Women, who had

other family obligations, etc., would take care of business so that they could take care of their other responsibilities. I found oftentimes they were more serious about the work they were doing and more effective. Not to say that that was true 100% of the time, or that there certainly weren't male organizers who were very committed, effective, worked hard and were terrific. I don't want to, like I said, be very stereotypic here, but I do think that there was a difference in terms of the attitude oftentimes that women brought to this work that often doesn't get talked about.

Great. Well, anything else...?

I think we can end this now, and I actually would like to see if I can find you my notes on organizing women. I used to give that speech all over the country. It changed over the years, but I also used to pepper it with examples of how we did organize people's families and different things that transpired in campaigns to illustrate some of the points that I was making, and I'd be happy to share that.

Great. Thank you. Let me end this tape.