Carolyn Schweir
Interviewed by Ann Froines
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Cincinnati, OH

I'm recording an interview with Carolyn Schweir on September 27, 2006. First of all, Carolyn, I want you to give me a verbal ok that it's alright to record this interview on the telephone.

Yes, that's fine with me.

Ok, and you know we will be submitting the transcripts to the Walter Reuther Labor History Archives, and also you will have a chance to review the transcript before we do that.

Ok.

Just to check it for inaccuracies and so on.

Ok.

Ok, great. So I'll just begin with the first question. Do you remember the story about how you first entered 925? What made you go to that first meeting?

I wasn't really too involved in the original organizing campaign at the University of Cincinnati. I had lots of other things going on in my life and I couldn't go to meetings and things. But I was always a supporter. But once we got the union in and we started the first contract campaign, that's when I really began to realize that this was my life that they were talking about. And it wasn't enough to sit back and sign petitions and wear buttons; I wanted to do something.

Where had you been working in the university?

In the library.

And so, during the first contract struggle, is when you got involved?

That's when I really got active. Like I said, I'd always been a supporter of having a union there, but when I really started to get active was when the first contract was being negotiated.

What were the issues then? What was the struggle? How do you remember that activism?

I remember...925 was always good with sending out newsletters, and where we were on things, and they were talking about the basics: pay, health care, vacations, and of course, fair share was really important in order to make the union strong. And I realized that this involved part of my life and part of my future. It wasn't just a demonstration that I was going to go home from. This was my life, and my kids, and my family. So, that's when I decided that I wanted to get into it.

Had you had any earlier experiences in your life as an activist or organizer?

I was always into the antiwar movement in the '60s and the '70s, the fringes of the women's movement, Earth Day organizing. So, yeah, I'd always been very aware of what was going on around me and sure that these were things that were important to me.

When you say the fringes of the women's movement, can you give a concrete example of that, or...in your life?

I'll just say when I was in college, organizing and joining groups that talked about establishing women's studies departments, for example, or even basic things like establishing child care for women who could go to college.

Did you go to college in Ohio?

I went to college in New York, partly, and in Ohio. And actually in Kentucky, partly.

Were you an office worker at this time in the library or were you a professional worker?

Oh, I was an office worker.

Can you describe some of your own experiences as an office worker which led you to realize that you wanted to participate in the union?

Yeah. It wasn't just so much in the library, but it was in the university as a whole, that most of the women—and that would be from faculty to office workers to the maintenance workers—they were pretty much thought of as...taken for granted, or...sort of like part of the woodwork, and they were not very important, they didn't have any voice in anything. There were no women administrators at the time. And it was just a place where we had been told so long that we weren't important and that we were so nearly invisible that we all started to believe that. And then when 925 came in, and started telling us that we *weren't* invisible, and that we *were* important, and that we had a lot of power if we joined together and used it, that made a huge difference in *so* many different women's lives. And we started to build coalitions with faculty and all the women workers in the university started to coalesce around 925.

That's interesting. [tape noises]. Ignore that. Did the faculty have a union at that time, or--?

They did. They were in AAUP.

But women faculty in particular were interested in organizing?

They were interested in organizing other women. Because they felt that for themselves it was difficult to get tenure. They were not considered...somehow they were not taken seriously. And of course this was in the early '80s. And the faculty were very supportive of our drive to have a union, and especially the women faculty.

When you were growing up, did you have any knowledge or opinions about labor unions or labor struggles?

Oh, yeah, everybody in my family was in a union. My grandparents were immigrants from Ireland, and my grandfather was an ironworker, and not only was an organizer in his union, but he organized other groups of immigrants. And they would...almost every night we'd have people over at our house who were trying to learn English, and he was trying to find them jobs. Yeah, I always had that sense that people had to work together to get things done.

How would you describe your family background then?

I grew up in New York City. My grandparents were immigrants, like I said, and we lived with my grandparents. My father was an airline mechanic. So I guess we were working class people, living in Queens.

Did your mother work in a job outside the home?

Yes, she was a teacher in a parochial school.

Can you describe in some detail one of the campaigns or struggles that was important to you in your early work there in 925? What was that contract struggle like that you were mentioning?

It was really difficult but it was really exhilarating at the same time. Because it was like...people—women and the office workers were like coming out of a shell, and recognizing that they had a power to make a difference in their lives, that they didn't just have to take what was given to them, but they could make a difference. And the struggle to win fair share was *really* important.

Can you describe what fair share is?

Fair share is...for even for those people who decide that they don't want to actually belong to the union, they still have to pay something in order to reap the benefits of having a union, of having a contract negotiated, of being able to have a representative in a disciplinary hearing, of being able to put in for an upgrade with someone who can help them write a new job description for them. If you don't have fair share, then chances are, there were a lot of people who will say, well, I still have a union, I don't have to pay anything. I'll just take a free ride. And it weakens the whole basis of people working together if you don't have fair share.

Now was that struggle for fair share, was that to change a state policy, or was that just--?

No, it was just to convince the university's board of trustees that fair share had to be part of this new first contract. That it had to be a union shop.

I see. Ok. Because I remember hearing about the struggles in Seattle, Washington. They had to actually change public policy to get fair share, because I guess there was sort of anti-union, or open shop union---

I think our timing was really amazing, because it was like the last Democratic governor we've had in Ohio, was Dick Celeste. And he happened to come to the university for something or other. And one of our members, one of our...she was an organizing member, a member of the organizing committee, when he was there, she was able to go up to him and say, "I'm the mother of six young good Democrats. And we need fair share. And we need you to tell the board of trustees to make this happen." And because in Ohio, the governor appoints the board of trustees for a state university, he was able to make that happen. I just thought that was so amazing that she did that. Just walked up to the governor and told him that.

And this presumably was an older woman worker, if she had—

Right.

If she had voting children.

Right.

Do you remember anything about the tactics you used in that first struggle?

Oh, yeah, we used all kinds of things. There was everything from petitions and post cards and people all wearing red on the same day, buttons, stickers, posters, anything to make the movement visible. And we also spent a lot of time building coalitions, with faculty, with students, and with community organizations-- ministers, religious organizations, progressive organizations-- anything that could help us move the university to accept us as a union and to win the first contract.

I understand from talking to a couple of other folks that that was a really long struggle at the University of Cincinnati.

Yeah, I think it was about nine months long.

The first contract, you mean?

Right. The organizing campaign was about six years.

That's what I'm thinking. There were several votes, and...

Yeah, there were two votes. That was very long. The way that 925 stuck with us here in Cincinnati was just amazing to a lot of people.

As you got more involved, did you see anything different or special about 925's approach to union organizing?

What I really appreciated about them was that they understood that this was mainly...95% women in the bargaining unit. That scheduling was always a problem, because so many women had to go pick up children right after work, or go to another job, or take a class, or even just go home and cook dinner. So they were really, really, really good at one-on-one organizing, face to face, and meeting people where they were. They didn't just call a meeting. They actually reached out to people who couldn't make it to meetings, and brought them into the group too. And I thought that was really special.

Do you feel like some of the women working at the university felt their jobs were at risk, to participate in this struggle for the contract?

Oh, yeah, some people were really afraid to like sign a petition or have their picture taken or even to go to a meeting. But nobody got fired, and we were able to convince people that the more active you are, the more out there you are, the safer you are. So I think that people began to understand that being nice didn't get them anywhere, that being strong was something that would help them.

When did you do your talking to other workers? Because you were a full time employee, right, at the university?

Right.

How did that work?

Well, the organizers, the 925 organizers, sort of developed kind of a phone tree for building representatives. So that you didn't have to go out to another part of the campus, you could just try to organize and talk to the people in your own work area.

Did you become a building representative?

Yeah, I think I did.

So you would do it like at lunch hours?

Oh, no, we'd do it all day long. Because, you know, you talk to people all day in your work.

That's true, yeah.

You could find ways to do it if you needed to. And sometimes there were times when you would go into a department where...maybe you didn't have a building rep yet, but you wanted to make contact with some people, and you just like took a break, and you'd go into this department, and then I can remember there was one person who had to like hide underneath a desk, because a supervisor walked into the room, and she was there trying to organize people. But she made it out ok.

Did you assume any particular roles in the union? First you started out as an active member, and maybe a building representative, and then later on . . .?

I became a steward, and then I started to work on labor-management committees, and...actually for about nine months, I left my job and worked as a union rep for 925. Then I went back to my job...and became the president of the chapter at the University of Cincinnati, and I'm still that.

So how many years have you been president?

Oh, my gosh. Feels like a long, long, time. I would guess about six years now.

Did you receive any special kinds of training from 925 as you began to work in these different roles?

Oh, yeah. Constantly. And that was one of the things I really appreciated about the union, was that I got more training from the union than I ever got from the university...I had a lot of one-on-one training and mentoring, from Debbie Schneider, and Anne Hill. They coached me and trained me and made me stretch, stretch out and take on things that I wasn't sure I could do, because they had confidence in me and they backed me up, and I was able to do things that I hadn't really thought I could.

Can you give some examples of that?

I guess public speaking was one. I made speeches in all kinds of places, not just to our members, but to the board of trustees, to other community groups that I would go and make our case. At one time, I gave a speech just before Jesse Jackson gave a speech. It was kind of weird because I [really viewed] Jesse Jackson as sort of my ideal of what a—who could really speak, and make a good speech (chuckles), so I would try to be like Jesse Jackson, and then all of a sudden, there I was *with* Jesse Jackson. (Laughs.)

That's a great story. Were you speaking at a union activity at that point?

Yes. It was the night before we were going to go on strike, and we had a "Keep Hope Alive" campaign going on, and they stopped in Cincinnati, just—it happened to be the night before we were going to go on a strike. And he agreed to come and speak at the university, and I was sort of the opening act, for Jesse Jackson.

Tell me about that strike. Why did you have to take that step?

We've had two or three strikes at the university. This one was about...this was a terrible year for us, they were trying to get a lot of concessions: change sick leave, take away tuition remission, which was the reason a lot of women work at the university, so that they can send their children to college; and they offered 0-0-0 raises, [for] three years. So there was really no alternative except to try to go on strike. And it was really good to have Jesse Jackson there; it really lifted our people up. And we had a very successful strike, and a very successful contract after that.

Do you remember what year that was?

I think that was 1995.

One of the things I have to do is also make a kind of a timeline for 925, so I'm...not that many organizers took a strike, so it's an important event.

Yeah, well we were on strike two or three times in Cincinnati. [It was like this huge]—to try to get office workers to go on strike.

Were you actually not going to work for two or three days, or what did that strike consist of?

Yeah, that's what we did.

But then they came back to the table and improved their offer?

Yes. They did. And we had like...a really cool strike one year, where it started at 10 o'clock in the morning, and we had our stewards blow whistles in their different buildings, all over the university, and so all the office workers started streaming out of the buildings around 10 o'clock, when they blew these whistles. And then we had everybody line up into sort of parades, and we marched through the campuses, because there are a couple of different campuses at the university, and we went through buildings, we had those shaker cans—aluminum cans with pebbles in them, that people were shaking. We had balloons and whistles, and we walked through the campus; it was like the group that went on strike but refused to leave. So that whole day we spent on the campus, passing out information to students and faculty about why we were going out on strike, and then we even took a break for lunch, and one of the concessions there on campus gave us all free beverages, to support the strike. After that day was over, we started picketing at the entrances to the campus. We were really excited to stop UPS and US mail deliveries, and other stuff. Construction workers who were there honored our picket lines. It was just an amazing thing for all these middle-aged women to be doing this, out on a picket line. Even just setting up picket lines and picket captains. And we were out for three or four days. Then we had a mediator who brought the two sides back together, and we were able to finish the contract.

Do you know if any of that is on videotape somewhere?

Yeah, there is a little bit of that.

Somewhere in your Local's possession?

Yeah. I might have a piece of that somewhere.

Because that might be—I don't know if Debbie Schneider or anybody who has donated materials to the archives had a copy of that. Because that sounds like it would be pretty wonderful to include.

Oh, I'm sure Debbie had a copy of that.

So maybe I'll ask her about that, try to follow up on that.

Ok. And I'll look around too. Because I think I still have a copy around too, on the old VHS tape.

Now, this is a bit of a change in pace here. What can you say about the roles and experiences of men as members or organizers—or members or officers in 925, let's put it that way.

We've always tried to be careful to include men. And I know that there are some who feel like this is like a women's group. But there are other men who really accept it and who—I mean, right now, we have our vice-president of contract enforcement is a man. We've always had men on our bargaining team. Yeah, I think...we're all workers, at some point, and that's what matters.

Do you think these men who are active are pretty savvy about accepting leadership from women?

Oh, yeah, they better be.

Yeah, since their president is a woman.

Yeah, well, and just since so many of their co-workers are women. Even now, it's probably—I think we have more men than we used to have. But it's still probably 90% of the bargaining unit is women.

What's your biggest responsibility as president of your Local?

Umm....Negotiating contracts is a big one. What I really feel is important is organizing new people to take my place, and to take the place of...because we're getting to that point where all those people who worked hard on the first organizing campaign are getting to the point where they're going to retire. And we don't have a whole lot of... we haven't done a very good job of getting younger women to step into those roles of leadership. So I feel a responsibility to try to pass on some of that history and some of that drive, to younger women. But it's kind of difficult.

Has the university been more cooperative in recent negotiations?

Oh, yeah.

It doesn't require the same militancy now, huh?

No, it doesn't. In our last contract, we did interest-based bargaining, and we finished the contract in six or seven sessions.

How long?

Six, seven sessions. And that was it... about three weeks.

But that's not a long time, I know.

No. I mean, we didn't even get to have a member meeting. It was over. So, yeah, things have changed at the university. The administration has changed. We now have a woman president at the university.

And she and the leadership of the university accept the fact that the union is just part of the university now.

Well, they—yeah. I mean, they try to treat us as partners.

Do you remember the ways in which the leadership in 925 tried to deal with issues around diversity in the workplace? I mean, including you, obviously, in that leadership. Did diversity with respect to race, ethnicity, level of education, generate any issues for you in your union?

Only that we tried to be aware of those things. So, for example, about 30% of the bargaining unit is African American. So we try—any time we set up committees or bargaining teams or anything else, we try to maintain at least that level of diversity for the committees that represent our bargaining unit. Also, in the early days of 925, it was really nice that whenever we had meeting for the entire bargaining unit, we would always have an American Sign Language interpreter there, because there are some people with hearing impairments. That was always pretty special, that those people were included too.

Do you consider 925, or did you, I guess, since the district no longer exists, a family-friendly organization?

Absolutely. At every meeting, there was child care available. I know I took my kids to the meetings. They even went to some of the protests and things that we did. It was very important that women would be able to participate, and that meant including their families and their children, if we wanted them to participate. And 925 was *so* good at doing that.

You were a member, I think, of the national executive board, too?

Yes, I was.

And how did that work, when you went off to national meetings, in terms of supports for your family, and...

For me, my husband took care of the kids because I had a chance to go somewhere. But...the people who decided that they were going to be on the national executive board were able to make those meetings. And to tell you the truth, in those early days, it was--a lot of these were very young women, who didn't have a lot of family responsibilities. Or it was older women, whose children were older, and who could get away for a few days to do something like that. But it was that group in their late 20s, early to mid 30s, that... well, we just had to come back and tell them what was happening, because that was the group that couldn't make it.

Do you believe that the aims of 925 were realized?

Partially, they were. I think they did a lot to energize women in pink collar jobs or white collar jobs, to educate them about their power and their work. But they had to fold up because of financial reasons. And I would have liked to have seen it go on and on, because the union that I'm in now is not aware of women's issues, it's not as family-friendly, it has a whole different ethic than 925 that I'm very aware of. So I really miss 925.

When District 925 decided it had to end, what kind of merger did your Local face?

We had to merge with District 1199. Which is mainly health care workers, who are a lot of women also. But the leadership of 1199 is pretty male, and...

Both locally and nationally?

Locally, we have hardly any organization any more. I'm sort of it. But 1199 West Virginia, Kentucky, Ohio is what we're in now. And it's about...27,000 people in those three states. And there's just not the same amount of attention or mentoring or coaching to build new leaders within a workplace. It's very...it's kind of a top-heavy union, rather than a member-driven union. Which 925 was, very member-driven.

But this particular district is a part of SEIU, right?

Oh, yes.

Yeah, ok. I mean, there was a merger with 1199 and SEIU some time in the past.

Oh, yeah.

Were you aware as you were active all of these years in your union of other kinds of activism going on in your community, your region? Were there ways in which your union work brought you in touch with that other kind of activism? I mean, other issues, and other constituencies.

I don't know. This is Cincinnati. So, there's not a lot of ...

It's a conservative place?

Right. There's not a lot of progressive things going on. But we try. There's like a women's political caucus, there's a women's bookstore; we were active in like Democratic causes, such as they are here. But there are not a whole lot of other things for us to be active in.

This is a question similar to the one about the aims of 925 . . . what impact did 925 have on SEIU, do you think?

I think it had a real impact on SEIU. It [built] the international union. I think Andy Stern is well aware of the legacy of 925. I think they're very good about making sure that there are women in the high levels of administration of SEIU. And they provide a lot of examples and role models for so many women who part of SEIU. I think that's a good thing. And I think—I'd like to think that 925 had a lot to do with making SEIU the kind of progressive, worker-oriented union that it is today.

Ok, now the final few questions which focus on you as a active member of a union. How would you describe what the experience working with 925 meant in your life? What did you learn about yourself? Another way of thinking about that question.

I learned a lot. I'm so grateful that I ran into 925. Because it really expanded my horizons. It gave me so much training, so much confidence, so much knowledge on how things work, in terms of the legal issues of labor unions, and in terms of just the basic human contact that it takes to build a union, to build an organization. I'm really grateful to 925 for all of that.

Do you feel pretty optimistic about the future of your Local and your union organizing?

I'm not sure, really. I don't know that I have enough support from 1199 to really continue to find new leaders—it gets harder and harder to do that every year.

You mean new campus leaders?

Right. It's like the same old people who are doing all the work. And there's just not a whole lot of support.

What would the 1199 leadership have to do to make it better for you, to help you achieve those goals?

They would have to provide more staff, who would contact more members and develop more committees of people who were interested in things, like and African-American caucus or a women's caucus or a men's caucus, all those organizational pieces that I can't do myself because I'm dealing with grievances, and I'm dealing with all of those kinds of things and I work 40 hours a week.

So you don't get any release time for being president?

I do for union business, which means it has to be contract related. If I wanted to go out and try to meet new members, that would be on my own time.

That's a big omission, if there's nobody helping with that. What accounts, do you think, for their inability to see how important that is for the long term health of the union?

Well, I think, maybe they do it with other units, other chapters, I don't know, but they organize basically nursing homes and hospitals. So that's what they're really focused on. And not so much on higher education or office workers. So they put a lot of their resources into those areas that they're organizing. And they do a ton of organizing.

So their resources are going more into new organizing rather on—

Right and they don't—to me it seems like we lack a balance between new organizing and internal organizing of the chapters that we already have, to keep them strong. So, I don't know. Maybe I'm just getting burned out.

That seems like a reasonable assessment of your situation, given that you've been working so many years there and have to feel this responsibility of passing on the torch to some new leaders.

Right.

And where are they going to come from?

Right. Who's going to give them the kind of background and training and coaching that *I* had?

When does your term as president come up for renewal or election?

2007.

And have you decided yet whether you're going to run again?

Well, I'm going to see if I can talk somebody else into running. But then we go into negotiations again in 2008. So...I don't know. If I can get somebody who will be president, that would be great. I'd love to do something else.

How many total years have you been active now in SEIU 925, now District 1199?

22 years.

That's a long haul... When you said some of the active members are getting ready to face retirement, do you include yourself in that group?

Well, I have a 14-year old, so I have to make sure that...you know, teenage girls are expensive, so I have to like—

Get 'em through college.

Through high school and then directly into college.

Is there anything else you'd like to add about your experience working with 925 and District 1199?

No, I just *loved* working with 925. And I have so much respect and admiration for Debbie Schneider, for Anne Hill, for Karen Nussbaum, of what they created. It's made a lot of difference in a lot of people's lives. And even if 925 no longer exists, I think their legacy goes on, in a lot of us.

That's kind of the message I'm hearing in all these interviews I'm doing. I'm hoping that this project will be part of capturing this wonderful moment in women's organizing.

They were just amazing. The work they did, and their...*wow*, their commitment...They were so inspiring. And *still* are. Even now, when I have to go do something that's kind of difficult, that I don't really want to do, I think, "Ok, I have the spirit of Debbie and Anne with me, I'm going to go do it."

That's a great image. Ok, thank you so much, Carolyn.

Thank you, Ann.

It's been a great interview.

END OF INTERVIEW.