

Carol Sims
Interviewed by Ann Froines
December 7, 2005
Cleveland, Ohio

I'm interviewing Carol Sims in her office in Cleveland, Ohio on December 7th, 2005. Now Carol, tell me the story about how you first entered 925. What made you go to that first discussion and that first meeting?

Well, it was talking about change and I was interested in change. Actually Anne Hill at that time was staff rep for District 925 and we were in an organizing drive for the workers there at Cuyahoga Community College. And so I went with another friend just to hear about what was going on.

You were an employee there?

I was employed there, yes, as a cashier, for about 10 years—7 years part-time and 3 years full-time.

So you went to this first meeting and what was that like?

Oh it was—Anne Hill, I guess, she was very moving, talking about the organizing drive—how workers can empower themselves to affect their working conditions. It was a little moving because it was a lot of...you could hear other workers' stories. And so it was something I wanted to do.

What had been your experiences there as an employee—had you felt the lack of rights and respect, and what were the issues that you saw were important back then?

Well it wasn't that I felt like something had happened to me, but I felt there were other co-workers, you would hear stories about paternity leave and maternity leave and you know, just different things going on. And you felt really bad for the employees because they were denied time or they were terminated without having a hearing. So there were things that I thought that the employer was...that they were doing that were very unfair.

Were you involved in that first organizing campaign?

Ah, yes, actually I went around, talked to workers about coming to meetings and, you know, demonstrations and leafleting and...so yes, I was involved, [did a great deal]--

Were you on the committee, the org...?

I wasn't on the direct committee as an organizer, but I did have a very good friend that was part of the organizing committee, and she sort of brought me along and I just brought other workers along with me.

Had you ever had any other experiences earlier as an activist or organizer, before you got involved with this?

No, not at all.

Not growing up or anything like that?

No, I always considered myself a leader, so I've never been a follower. I've always been a leader, so I've just... No, but I've never really been involved in anything at that level, prior to.

Tell me a little bit about your family background. Did you know anything about union struggles or labor struggles growing up?

Yes. My father worked in a steel mill and he was a union steward at the time. And so he would always take us to union meetings and the union Christmas party every year. But my father died when I was very young. He actually worked for Republic Steel—it was called Republic Steel and now it's LTD or—and really I think it's out of business here in Cleveland. And he was also a retired Army. So I did hear a lot about unions, growing up in my household, coming up. My mother was a private-duty nurse and she belonged to a union. But it was not a big affiliation for the nurses, but at that time she belonged to a union that covered the nurses.

Since one of the other threads that sort of led to the formation of 925 besides the labor thread was the women's movement thread, did you ever have any awareness or involvement in any kind of women's issues or organizing as a younger woman?

Not really, except when the Equal Rights Amendment came out for women. I was involved with that a little bit but not a lot. I think I became more involved after I became a employee of 925.

In women's issues?

Women issues and doing more.

Can you describe one or more campaigns or struggles that you were involved in as an employee at []? Or at—?

At Cuyahoga Community College, yeah. Oh, my goodness.

Is there any one that particularly stands out for having exhilarating or painful moments for you?

No. I'm trying to think. I can't really remember... This is over 20 years now.

How long have you been working for 925 and now--

Since 1984.

So most of your actions that we'll be talking about were after becoming a union organizer, more so than that?

Yeah...More so than that. [laughs] Yes.

OK. How did you end up getting a job here? What was that like? What were your decisions? What did you have to think over before you decided to...

Oh... Well, I was a single parent with one child, and at the time my best friend took a leave of absence. She worked at Cuyahoga Community College as a marketing and recruitment specialist. And she decided to take a leave and go work for the union. It took us awhile to get a contract. It took us from 1980 till probably 1984 before we got our contract. And in the contract there's a clause where we could take a leave for up to a year to work for the union. So she took the leave, and in the middle of her leave her job was reclassified; it went from a 4, like a grade 4, to an 8. So she returned back to the job, and at the time she recommended to Anne Hill that I should take her place. So I interviewed with Anne Hill, and at the time we were considered international staff with SEIU. And I interviewed with some folks out of Washington and they asked me to come on board. So I really had to think about it, being a single parent, but I felt like this was an opportunity, number one, to make changes. This was an opportunity to help other people empower themselves to make the changes. And as a single parent, the organization was more, I don't know, friendlier. By being a single parent and trying to do the work, you know, we could bring kids' backpacks to meetings, and so it was more, to me, more progressive than most places to work, just being a single parent so...

So you felt they'll understand that sometimes you have other obligations.

Yes.

So what kind of training did you receive at the beginning, or was it all on-the-job training?

I actually went to the organizing institute—the George Meany Organizing Institute. I spent a week there, and just a lot of on-the-job along with some outside training. But mostly, you know, shadowing or being mentored by Cheryl Schaeffer and many others in the union that had a very strong background in organizing and also bargaining.

What was your first big organizing event as a staff person, or activity? Do you remember that?

I remember going to Chicago to help organize the state employees there. I was there for three months working on that campaign. I think at the end it was just the jazz of winning

that just sort of... Once you win one organizing campaign and you get that under your belt, you think you can conquer the world. So it was working in Chicago doing that and working with—I was working with Debbie Schneider along with a lot of the other leaders there. So it was a *great* opportunity to learn a lot there.

And what kind of state workers were you organizing?

They were clerical on up to professionals, I think, at the time.

And in Cincinnati?

Uh huh.

May I ask what happened with your family when you were doing that?

Well, with my family, my mother was alive at the time. We were able to fly home every other weekend. There were times I would bring my daughter with me and they would supply babysitters. To be honest, they were very...you know, it was very flexible, along with the fact that there was daycare allowances set up for us. So if we had to provide or get a babysitter or something, that 925 would pay for a babysitter. So it was always, like I said, very friendly when it comes to being a single mom.

What did you learn about yourself at the beginning of your work then in 925? Do you feel like you were learning new things about yourself?

Oh yeah. I learned a lot of things about myself. At first I was very—and still I think I'm a little bit quiet—but I was able to...take some direction in my life. I was a little confused. I was a parent very soon, you know, very early. I was 16 when I had my daughter and that's the only child that I have. And I think I had sort of lost all of my directions in life by starting early, and just not grounded in any way. And I think 925 helped me ground myself and focus on something that I felt was pretty important to do.

And then they have these big networks, right, locally and nationally, that you participate in?

Of the national working— Yes. Yes, the opportunity to work with Karen Nussbaum, the Working Women's Association...So it was a great opportunity to do that.

What were some of the more difficult things about union organizing? When you came back to Ohio and you started working, you helped people organize unions...

Well, what was really hard was turning the "No's" to "Yeses," you know, the cold knocks on the door, just walking up and...It's like at first you would think you were selling a product, but it was way beyond selling a product. It's more or less what you believe...you know, what you believe in in your heart is the right thing to do and being able to talk to people about it. So I think the hardest part was convincing the "No's" to go to the

“Yeses.” And whenever you would accomplish that, then you would just feel like you had one more notch in your belt, or, you know, that you were able to convince somebody that this is the right thing to do for them, so...

Tell me a little bit about some of the places you worked as an organizer here in the Cleveland area.

Oh!...I worked not only in the Cleveland area but in Ohio. University of Cincinnati, I remember going there working on the organizing drive for months. And then we would go back and...I went back one other time to work on the post-contract. And that was really hard; it took years to get that contract done. We did billboarding early in the morning. We would be standing outside on the corners of the campuses with big signs. “Turn your computer off at 12 o’clock, come out and have a power lunch meeting.” So we did a lot of different things—really enjoyed that. You know, sometimes people say, “How do you do it?” You know, “How do you work the hours that you work and still enjoy what you do?” But whenever you come out— Whenever it’s all said and done and you get a contract and someone comes out and says—and tells you, “You did a wonderful job. Thanks a lot,” you know, that’s the satisfaction of it all. But, I worked on Cuyahoga Community College where I’m from, Portage County District Library, Willoughby East Lake Public Library, Cleveland Public Library, Cuyahoga County Public Library. Almost every campaign that started out after 1984 I’ve worked on and helped organize.

What is your job title now? Is it still “organizer” or—?

We’re called administrative organizers. And actually, as of January 1, I will be a coordinator for SEIU 1199.

And what will that entail?

Actually, I was—

Trying to find out?

Yeah, I’m trying to find out. But it’s a little bit of everything. It’ll be some supervising along with some organizing and bargaining, so...

So a lot of the work you do is sort of representing the union with workers when there’s already a collective bargaining unit.

Yes. Yes.

Do you want to say anything more about the leadership in 925? Did you perceive them as a special kind of union, or how—?

Well, I really...925 is something I will never, ever...or is not something, but an organization I will never, ever forget. Because we helped a lot of women empower

themselves. Whether it's within their organization or their chapter, or just on many aspects of the labor movement. We were involved with FMLA, we were involved with—I can't remember all of the different things, but I do remember that at the time in working — What we did, we worked in the same office as the Working Women's Association. So we would hear a lot of things going on over there in that office, workplace violence or domestic violence, or you name it, was going on. And we worked jointly, either trying to get legislation passed, or to make sure that it was in our contracts. Sexual orientation was one. There were just many different things. Actually there were a lot of things that I learned *a lot* about—different issues and problems and workplace problems. If I had to start all over again, I mean, I don't think there's anything that I would say I'd do differently.

You're really glad you took those steps and became a union organizer.

Yes. Yes.

What can you say about your own development as a leader? You said you grew up kind of knowing you had some abilities as a leader, but can you say anything about how you'd look at that now?

I still consider myself a leader. I don't know. I really don't know how to describe it now, but I think I have developed a skill where I analyze things more; it's not such a closed door on certain issues. And I allow people to make decisions. I don't know. It's just— My father told me early on that, you know, you have to be *for something*. So it's always been like that for me. So I've always tried to be open-minded and deal with whatever.

Do you consider yourself a shy person, or someone who has no trouble speaking up for what you believe?

I have no problems speaking up for what I believe. I think outside of that, I'm pretty quiet, you know. It's just like, if it's something I'm just not for, you know it. You know, I'm not very shy on that end.

What would you say about the roles and experiences of men in 925? Since it's predominantly a women-led union and—

I don't remember.

Any issues ever come up about that?

No, some of our men, like in our chapters or something like that, would always say, "Oh, it's a woman organization," or "It's a gay organization," it was always titled in some way that it belonged only to women or lesbians, or you had to be a lesbian to work for 925, but that was not true. We did have some leaders out of our chapter, male leaders, and they got an opportunity to get involved and realized that it's not just a women's organization. Plus they had the same problems, you know. They were male single parents trying to

raise their kids, and so there were a lot of the same problems—adopting kids and looking for time off to spend with their adopted kid. And so there were a lot of issues there.

Could you tell me a little bit about what you think might be some of the special tactics or strategies of 925, as maybe compared to other unions, in your experience?

I think what happens now is that, in organizing, I think it happens so fast, where when we were 925, we would probably plan it out just a little longer. spend more time on conversations with individuals. And I think, more organization, I think, you know. We would chart it out. We would assess and then reassess. So I think we spent more time on it, which I *think* is much better than just trying to go in and just do a campaign in 30 days and then assessing, and it's over with.

Why do you think it's better that way? The former kind of organizing that you take the time to talk to people—why do you think that's better?

I think it's better because you have to have the conversations; you have to figure out what's wrong, what needs to be fixed. And that takes time. That takes time, communication, education—it just takes time to bring people together, to get them onboard. You may have one group of employees you meet with one week, and each week you need to build the group and add on. So it depends on the size of the unit. But I do think that it takes conversations, and you have to have the face-to-face—be able to have those face-to-face. And that's a little time-consuming.

Are you contrasting 925 when you say, “Now we try for campaigns in 30 days,” to 1199 and the larger local?

I think the larger local, it's pretty fast—it's done pretty fast. I'm not sure of all of the assessments. In 1199, the organizers are somewhat separate from the administrative staff. So it's not like a joint project for us, normally. 1199 organizers organize the new unit, and then the administrative organizers are brought in after their unit has been organized. So we're not that involved with...the ground-up.

I see. Do you believe there's anything special about the way women organize as opposed to men? Do you think there are women's way of organizing?

I think so. You know, I want to say we're better at it.

That's ok. Say whatever you think.

[laughs] But I do think, yeah. I think because we believe it takes time, and I believe men think, “Oh, we'll just go in and knock it down and it's over with,” you know, “we'll get it done.” It's like the macho way of bargaining, versus “You talk too much as a female to try to get it done.” I still think that's somewhat the philosophy or the belief that they can, you know... Organizing is usually, I think, it's dominated by the males.

I mean, you could say, right, that you're building a different type of organization when you do it that quickly, and then the numbers, kind of, accepting all the leadership from the union...

Uh huh.

Whereas you described what 925 tried to do, it seemed like you were *developing* leadership.

Yeah.

Would you say that's fair?

I would think so. We would have time to get to know people, to develop them, yes.

How did 925 in its meetings or trainings deal with issues around diversity in the workplace, racial and ethnic differences in the workplace or among its staff, and with the question of discrimination?

Well, I don't know, you know. Like I said, I started back in 1984. I was assigned units—and I'm African-American—I was assigned units that I would never see anyone that looks like me. I *still* work in units where I have never seen an African-American on staff in any of my meetings. But I have never felt like I was not wanted. So I don't know. I know, coming on board, when I was interviewed, I was asked in my interview if I could work with a diverse group of folks. And I said, "Yes." And did I have any problems with traveling to the West Side or the East Side, and it was like, "No." And so that's the role I have played the whole time, and never questioned it. And it's never been an issue—that I know of—in 925. I've never known it to be an issue.

An issue in the sense of a problem?

Yeah.

What about when you were organizing in a place like Cuyahoga Community College, which I assume has a pretty diverse workforce.

Uh huh.

I don't mean you personally, but people in general, organizing there—do they try to develop leadership among all the different types of members?

Yes. They do. They do. We have on our executive board now, maybe four African-American...and the majority... I think we have a diverse group when I look around, yeah. It's *pretty* diverse.

So you don't really remember any specific anecdotes around...?

It was always, “Make your leadership look like what your membership looks like.” So that was the sort of the rule. Just try to be sensitive about it and make sure that if you are developing a leadership group, that your leadership group reflects what the membership looks like.

You’ve mentioned quite a bit about how you consider 925 a family-friendly organization.

Uh huh.

So I don’t really have to explore that too much. Now we’ll sort of move on to the legacy-type questions. Do you think the aims of 925 were realized?

[pause] Yes, I think so, some, because we had Karen Nussbaum at the time and as the leader of the women’s organization along with the union. I think she fought for recognition for women and women’s rights along with many of the other staff, along with the issues and the International staff. So I think we’ve always had a spokesperson with the International to make sure that our goals and our commitments were met. So I just think that we’ve always had a voice there. And Karen was not shy at all about making sure that those issues were heard.

How did you feel when you heard that 925 was going to be merged and effectively disbanded here?

Saddened....When I heard, I was very saddened by it, knowing that we would be moving into a different type of organization. I mean, we were lost—you know, as staff, we were totally lost. And so.

There was quite a difficult period of adjustment then, in trying to get--

Very difficult.

--integrated into this new culture, and so forth.

Yes, it was very difficult.

Were the reasons for it being done explained sufficiently?

I think it was explained sufficiently. I think we were just...it was change. It was about change; it was just hard to adjust to change, I guess. But it was *really* an adjustment for us.

What other things might you say were important in the legacy of 925? Do you think that it had an impact on SEIU as a whole?

Oh, yes, I most certainly think so. It allowed for women to become leaders, even in the

SEIU, as in their top leadership. Debbie served on the board for many years. There were a lot of top leaders—coordinators, directors, directors of organizing. There were secretary/treasurer women, minorities. I do. I think it opened the door for a lot of things for us, yes.

Was there anything that disappointed you about working with 925?

Nothing but the change.

END of SIDE A

START of SIDE B

You've described it as a very meaningful experience in your life.

Yes. I don't know of anything else to say. I guess the opportunity to know a lot of folks, a lot of the leaders, to be able to understand just what a union was all about, what it's all about to be a union member, to be on staff for a union. I got *all* of what *I've* learned from 925, and that's not so bad. [laughs] Yes, that's not so bad.

What kind of work are you doing right now, Carol, exactly? You mentioned that you're kind of going into a transition in your job.

Yeah. Basically I still have the same chapters that I've had in the past with 925. And I have some additional chapters that I've never worked with before—mental health and nursing homes and other things that we didn't represent at that time. But what I'm doing right now is the same—organizing, still doing basically bargaining contracts. We're now doing our own arbitrations where in the past, with 925, we didn't—most of the staff didn't, I should say.

Who would do the arbitration?

Well, we had attorneys at the time. 925 had an attorney and he would do all the arbitrations. But right now we are responsible for arbitrations. We're still doing a lot of leadership development and trainings, grievance trainings. So basically some of the same things.

What part of all that you described do you like the best? I mean, what's your favorite part of your job?

My favorite part of my job is actually relating to the members and grievance handling. I love to do the grievance part of it, the four-step grievance hearings. And I *love* dealing with the members.

Do you feel optimistic about the organizing that's going on now? And 1199 and SEIU in general?

Ah, yes. Actually the numbers are going up. We are getting campaigns. We are *winning* campaigns. So the numbers are going up. But the issues are changing, or the problems with each chapter— they're a little different now, you know. Dealing with public sector employees—and that's where the most of my time has been spent, with public sector—we now have a lot of private-sector employers. And with a lot of the wins lately, they've been nursing homes. So that's a *whole* new realm of problems there, so...It's entirely different dealing with public sector and going over to private sector, so that's a change.

But you're not doing much of the private sector?

Well, not right now, no. The only private sector I have right now is a mental-health facility.

And what's the big difference between the two, would you say? Organizing in the public sector versus the private sector?

Well, the public sector, I think that you have ways to put pressure on employers—through public sector, through public campaigns, most of it is public fundings, whether it's federal or state. And in private sector, it's...the rules change. It's *harder* to get contracts, it's *harder* to embarrass them in public. And there are no rules to the game, I think, in the private sector so, you know, it's not like you can walk in and ask for information, like under public employees, it's public information. You have to do battle over just to get *information* from private-sector employers, whether you have access to them, can just walk in and have a conversation. You know, I just think the rules are *entirely* different, public versus private.

When you're organizing in the private sector do you think you're asking people to put their jobs more at risk, too?

Oh yes, most certainly. Most certainly.

And there aren't the same protections?

No. No.

With this new job that you'll be taking on, what will be some of your new duties as you understand them?

Well, I will have a team of workers, and I will help run contract campaigns for my team. I will also oversee their day-to-day activities, along with that I'm...My actual chapters will be reduced from nine to four chapters, so that I'll free up more time, to actually be out in the field with my team to work on their campaigns. Contract campaigns, whether it's training, whether it's labor/management, or arbitrations, and I will assist them in getting it done.

So in other words, the union is recognizing your expertise at this point and your

experience, and hoping that you can transfer that now to—

Yes! [laughs]

--a lot of people.

Yes.

Does that seem like a big challenge?

Yes. Yes. I'm a little nervous about it. Yes, it is a big challenge and it's something that I'm actually looking forward to doing, but I'm also...a little nervous about it, also.

You touched on—this is my final question, Carol--you touched on this already a little bit, but what keeps you going as an organizer? What do you draw on in yourself, inside, to do this work? Because, as you mentioned, these are challenging times.

Well, what keeps me going is that every...I think it's the jazz of winning. It's sort of like, when you complete a campaign and members walk up to you and say, "Wonderful job, great contract." Or, you know, "I know it's not the best times, but good job," even if they can't say "a good contract." But most of them— I don't think that there's a worker out there that hasn't said, "Good contract." You know, and being able to win grievances. I mean, there are some losses, but to be able to win.

I think that's what keeps me going—that there's always something new going on now. I have a new unit also, a mental retardation unit, and it's a pretty sizeable unit that I have right now, and now I'm dealing with *entirely* different issues, *entirely* different discipline. And so it's just learning. I don't think I could ever walk in and say, "Oh, my work is done for today," or, "I've completed everything," or, "I've heard everything that I could hear." Every *day* you learn something new from this job. I guess that's what keeps me going, and the people that I work with. I think we sort of lean on each other to keep each other around. You know, it's hard to say you've been around 24 years. There's very few folks you can walk in to—cause some people look at you like, "Are you crazy?" And it's, like, "No, I do enjoy the work that I do." I may not always enjoy, you know, some of the things that come down, but I do enjoy the work.

Do you feel like you get a lot of support from your co-workers and from the union?

Most certainly. Most certainly. Most certainly, oh yes. If I couldn't lean on Anne Hill and a lot of the other workers here, I don't think I would've made it.

Some of your co-workers say they think of you as a mentor, so—

[laughs] I don't think I could've made it, you know.

You're obviously providing support to others.

I don't think we would have made it without each other. We had a *very* good team, *very* good relationships at 925. And some of those relationships have carried over into 1199, so, that's the good part.

Anything else you'd like to add about the legacy?

No. I don't know if I answered all the questions.

No, everybody's story is the way they see it. There are no right answers.

OK. [laughs]

Thanks very much.

Oh, thank you.

INTERVIEW ENDS