

Andy Stern
Interviewed by Ann Froines
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Today I'm interviewing Andy Stern, president of Service Employees International Union, here in their headquarters in Washington D.C. on November 8, 2005. Would you first describe your position in SEIU.

Sure. I've been the president of SEIU since 1996.

And before that?

I was a member, a local union president, the director of organizing and field services for the union.

What was your first contact with 925 or its leaders?

I think the first contact was—I remember them through meetings at the eastern conference of SEIU where I think they seemed to be making presentations—I still I think was a local union president at the time. When actually did they start?

I think they had a Local 925, starting about 1976 ...

Yeah. I started as a member in '73, and a local president in '78. So I think my recollection is as a local union president, then being president, making presentations at the eastern conference of SEIU. And then the executive board of SEIU.

Were you involved in the discussions when they affiliated with SEIU with their national jurisdiction?

No.

No. You weren't yet organizing director.

No.

Are you aware of or do you have any knowledge of any issues that came up around the time of that affiliation?

Nope.

Ok.

I was a small fry.

I believe that was in about '81 to '83.

I came to work for the International in '83.

Do you have a sense of, when you came to work for the International, of how 925 might have been viewed by other locals in SEIU as this women-led district that had national jurisdiction with clerical workers.

I would say SEIU was really decentralized at the time. So A, there probably wasn't a general feeling, other than I think people felt pride that SEIU was trying something creative amongst women workers. John Sweeney's presidency was sort of changing SEIU from a more traditional union, and beginning to take on some experiments. So A, I think there was a sense of pride that SEIU was working together with a very smart and capable group of women to try to build a national union of office workers.

B, I know that in some of the places where there was organizing going on, particularly in the public sector, there were always questions of 925's role versus the traditional SEIU local union's role. I think 925 in that moment of history had—there was an intersection or integration of women's issues and 925. It was a moment where CLUW and 925—there was an emergence of women demanding a place in their union. And I think 925 somewhat occupied a secondary role in the union of sort of a discussion amongst women about themselves and their own leadership roles as well as the desire to organize more women into the union.

And you began as organizing director in—

'83. '84 officially.

That was the period when SEIU was changing and bringing in new younger—

Yes—John Sweeney around '83 or '84—84 restructured the union. He created a senior leadership team, all of whom were under 40, which was in retrospect almost revolutionary in the labor movement at the time. There were a number of women involved like Jackie Ruff in that leadership group, and Marcia McGill and a number of other women. But it was also just the beginning of trying to develop a national organizing program and 925 occupied prime territory in that development of a new organizing program. Because 925, Beverly Enterprises, and Justice for Janitors, that were kind of the three I'd say hallmark programs of the union.

Beverly Enterprises being the health care workers?

The largest nursing home chain in the country.

What were some of the successes of 925, during that period that you can remember when you were organizing director?

They sort of had the same, I'd say, ratio of success and challenges of everyone else; that they did a very good job amongst public sector workers; they had their challenges in the private sector. I think they had a lot more hope of being able to create a private sector university movement of office workers, and, particularly with the Harvard victory that had occurred around that time, there was sort of a belief that with the office workers in universities we're going to build a momentum for change, as had public workers been doing for a long period of time; and somewhat of a, in retrospect, naïve belief of all of us that universities wouldn't act as badly as other private sector employers. I think they did an incredible job in a number of public sector library jurisdictions. And were challenged in the private sector like the rest of the labor movement.

Was it controversial within SEIU to sort of subsidize District 925 to organize a national local of clerical workers?

Yeah, I'd say two things. One was we hadn't really subsidized much organizing in general; and particularly institutional organizing as opposed to campaign organizing. So where there might have been a subsidization to organize the state workers in Massachusetts or the county workers in California, the idea of sort of subsidizing an organization over a long period of time was new; and then B, an organization that had national jurisdiction was unprecedented.

What was your impression of some of the leaders that you came in contact with while you were organizing director? I guess it would be Karen Nussbaum, Debbie Schneider, others.

Yeah, Anne Hill. Cheryl—

Schaffer.

Right. Bonnie. They were incredibly talented, thoughtful, hopeful group of leaders, and I think they had a real passion for what they were doing, in the sense of seriousness and conviction. I think they added a lot of positive energy to the union.

As you look back, how would you describe what District 925 achieved?

A, I think they found and gave a voice to a lot of women in our union. So I think their contribution was much greater than what they did in their local. But along with a number of other things that were occurring at the same time, sort of creating a cadre of women leaders who were seen in a much different light than women leaders had been seen in SEIU historically. They made a whole series of connections for SEIU outside the union, and increased our more progressive profile amongst community organizations, celebrities like—went along with a movie, which was very different for a janitor's union, to try to get repositioned in a positive, progressive side. And clearly they added members to SEIU as well.

Had SEIU worked with the idea of associate membership before they encountered that, by embracing 9to5 and the National Association of Working Women?

I think the whole labor movement was going through a period at that time about talking about how do we reach out to people who aren't existing members. I'd say 925 was SEIU's first concrete effort to do anything about it.

As a leader of SEIU those years and president now, how do you evaluate this associate membership idea? What is your goal with it...

I think we have experimented with many iterations of associate membership. I think none of them have worked in the labor movement. There is no sustainable, self-sustaining, financially independent, long-term viable associate member organization. I think people still go back and forth between: is it a viable idea? Are we missing the scale, the resources, the strategy to make it work? Is it better occupational? Is it better industrial? Is it better geographical? Should it look more like AARP or should it look more like 9to5 and WashTech and a number of other current experiments look like? I'd say all and all, it's a totally appropriate idea that's not been successful.

So in your opinion it hasn't really laid groundwork for the later collective bargaining campaign?

No. I think the crossover has been... You know, what's been proved by Working America recently is that there's probably a way to build some very loose-knit political organization, although I don't think there's much depth and loyalty of the Working America [to get] the AFL's members to the organization. But at least it's...you could provide a certain amount of output and get a certain amount of input. But, as a bridge to building unions, I think the union movement has been universally fairly unsuccessful.

What was 925's impact on SEIU? You've mentioned some things already.

Again, A, the integration and development of women leaders to take appropriate roles, much more visible roles in the union; B, bringing up integration into other communities; C, having the willingness to experiment on lots of different types of organizing efforts that...we'd had sort of a pretty traditional way of approaching things, and the associate membership, the relationship with the association, public relations, the occupational focus, attempts to use direct mail and phones combined with worksite issue organizing, I think were all contributions to SEIU.

Why didn't 925 succeed in organizing clerical workers in the private sector?

One, I think it's just the private sector. In the end, they were no more or less unsuccessful than anyone else. But I think the hope was that clearly trying to find a different model of organizing working women or office workers, one or the other, because they sort of went back and forth at times between different strategies, and what was the mission, working women or office workers? And in either case, I just don't think they found that

marketing niche, that strategy, that affinity of women overcame anti-employer behavior. I think in all of our organizing we're always trying to figure out, are there ways that add value in getting the work done, not morally or spiritually, but in terms of results. I don't think that 9to5, or District 925, in the private sector, the results seemed to say, did not add the value that anybody had hoped for.

It must have been very disappointing when that Blue Cross Blue Shield campaign had to get called off after a lot of effort went into that.

But like so many things, we just keep learning lessons, and the contribution 925 made which I'm sure they don't appreciate because it's not the kind of contribution you want to necessarily be known for, is just trying lots of different techniques and deciding which theories which are totally logical do and don't work. So the theory that we could use our purchasing power at Blue Cross Blue Shield to leverage a relationship with the employer in terms of neutrality and union recognition is as logical as our theories about using our pension fund investments now to try to leverage our relationships with employers. The problem is, they didn't work. And not that they couldn't work, or shouldn't have worked...at times it isn't the strategy, it's the execution, it's the participation [of]. You have one group of people that want to get something done; another group of people, in the case of the purchasers at Blue Cross Blue Shield who had the ability to get it done... We were never able to appropriately marry the two. I think 925...you can look at everything they've done, and say it was really a thoughtful, far more strategic set of propositions they were testing, than lots of other things that were tested in the labor movement. The problem is, in the end, in the private sector, the results were not substantially different.

What is your view of organizing clerical workers, or women office workers, whatever you want to call them, on into the future? Do you think SEIU will be playing a role in this?

I think we do do that now, but it's more done in the context of a hospital, or it's more done in the context of organizing the public workers in Georgia, or the school workers. I think what so far has become clear, as opposed to carpenters or as opposed to skilled craft workers, who do have sort of a craft identity, office workers didn't see themselves as much as I thought or others thought they would, as a craft. That this was a skill that they were going to perform their whole life, that was something where they really wanted to excel at it, and be...it wasn't like trying to become a master electrician or a software designer. In the end, people who did well in it aspired to actually go somewhere else, but continue in that field. For a lot of the people who were capable office workers, they became office managers; they got into the program work of their organization, or went back to school and aspired...So it just didn't have that same kind of nurse, electrician craft identity that other occupations have had. It was disappointing because you think it should. And particularly amongst universities, you have office workers...at the same time, I think we learned amongst university office workers (it) was a pretty decent job, in lots of ways, compared to other kinds of office work. The tension, the hours, the flexibility was a little bit greater than working at an insurance company, and so people

weren't necessarily willing to risk that for other kinds of work that might not have been as fulfilling.

Do you think the way office work has changed dramatically in the last 25 years with the new technological developments also had an impact?

I think it would have had. I think a lot of the 925 was sort of ended, sort of right when I'd say the dramatic [jump went on]—we were still at self-correcting typewriters and other inventions [laughs]. But I'd say particularly from '95 on, as we've sort of seen, even at our union, a dramatic redefinition of what office work is. Had it not had an effect of identity, it would have a huge effect now. I think people see themselves in all kinds of different ways than just office workers: assistants, advisors, consultants, schedulers, but not as much—people just don't take dictation and type, which was a major essence, and answer the phone, of what office work used to be.

Before it was just paper processing...

Paper processing, exactly, yeah. In the accounting end, yeah.

You've mentioned how one of the contributions of 925 was bringing women's issues at the workplace to the fore, in SEIU. And also producing very skillful women leaders, and brought that voice forward into the leadership nationally, on the national executive board. Do you think women's voices will continue to be heard, without an organization focused on women?

It's a good question. My guess is, in the next year we will have at the top level of leadership, for the first time, we'll actually have gender equity in the union. Since 925, there's been a huge surge, some because of people who were brought in as part of it, the Kim Cooks, Debbie Schneiders of the world. Some just because the union became much more welcoming and focused on promoting women leaders. But with the series of retirements and elections, I'll think we'll have...which is astonishing, in some ways.

I think the issue, not just about women, that 925 and other people have raised, is A, the ghettoization of people in organizations. So in SEIU we have a series of caucuses: African American; women, not really; Latino; gays and lesbians; and there really is a question, have they just become ghettos for people to participate in, and sort of self-sustaining organizations of the same human beings who hold leadership, or are they gateways into the mainstream of the union. That was always kind of a tension with 925, because in some ways, they were a subset of the union, an island or some would say a fortress, in the union. They sort of had a bunker mentality, that people are after us, and therefore we have to sort of hang together, which is the same issue sometimes we face with African Americans: "we don't really have a voice, or rather than fighting to have a voice, we're going to kind of circle the wagons and build our fortress where we're safe." So I think the question in all these issues is, how do we promote people being welcome, comfortable, and being leaders in the union, and not needing to have places for people to go that are not gateways. That are kind of ending points as opposed to stops along the way.

And the second issue we have at SEIU amongst women leaders, is because we have so many successful women leaders, you'll today not think as much about their responsibility to bring other women leaders along. Because it's sort of seen as if you can make it as a woman in SEIU because there are so many national officers and local leaders, and I know the women leaders of SEIU have been having that discussion. Because I think 925 did a much better and more thoughtful, significant, and important job mentoring and thinking consciously about developing women leadership. The current women leaders of SEIU do, and in particular the higher level ones who have quote made it, [that] they're really not making their contribution to mentoring and helping bring other women along. There were a series of meetings of the last couple of years—board meetings of just the women leaders of the union—to have that discussion. It's almost as if sometimes success creates an attitude of "I got here on my own so other people could," as opposed to, "Everybody needs somebody to help them along."

Some of these things are very deep-seated. Kim Cook shared a story where in her local executive board, it's 60% women, 40% men. Nonetheless, she said, in the meetings, the men do most of the talking. And she's sort of struggling with what she, as the woman president, should do about it. It's precisely an example of what you're mentioning. She said it's very easy to just continue on, and yet she has this memory of 925's legacy and wondering how she can grapple with this.

I think 925 really was the most thoughtful effort we ever had, and sustained, about bringing women into leadership, mentoring people, consciously pushing them. I do think there was a moment where, because there were lots of questions being asked about 925, I would say appropriately, others might say inappropriately, that people then sort of circled the wagons rather than say, "You know, this isn't working in the private sector, and people have every right to ask questions about what was our purpose and where are we going. We didn't want to be three local unions of five to ten thousand members each. That wasn't really the contribution or the strategy. We were trying to build a huge opportunity for women office workers and working women, to find a way to change their lives. What value are we adding?" And I just think as things got appropriately more introspective and questioning, people sometimes can retreat into a safer haven, and say, "People are out after us, therefore we need to circle the wagons."

Was it ever expressed by 925 leaders that SEIU leadership should give them more time and more resources to see if they could make it work?

Yeah. I think there's always a question of how much time and how much more resources, and whether the measures... There's a constant debate we have in our own union all the time, which is, what's a legitimately long enough time and amount of resources to invest to be successful, and when are you just fooling yourself, because you're on a sustained death march. We've been on many sustained death marches in many industries and amongst many kind of workers, but, it's somewhat like bad relationship, you sort of don't see it til it's over, that you really weren't getting it. So there's always an inclination of, let's throw more in and let's add on. In the end, it's just judgment. I think in retrospect,

even more clearly, if you did 925 over again, you would really want to focus them on the private sector.

You would really.

Yes, absolutely. It would be worth it. To figure out how to organize private sector workers of all different kinds is the challenge of the labor movement. And what 925 did incredibly well at the University of Washington or Cincinnati or the libraries, just was not unique, in the end. It was important but not unique. The unique contribution they tried and were not successful and yet I completely honor them as I honor many people at SEIU who try to develop the right kind of strategy and the right kind of thinking to organize people who really need help which are private sector workers. On the other hand, for people that want to not just be on the cutting edge of experimentation [laughs], who want to succeed and want to run an organization and don't want to be spending their life asking for money and defending themselves ... there's also a desire to try to build enough membership.

They were under pressure in a way to get members...

Exactly. And I think in the end, that was the union's mistake. To make the pressure to be on getting...because it also brought them in conflict—like in Chicago—with existing local leaders, who say, “I can organize these treasury workers...”

Cook County

Cook County, right, “I could organize them without 925.” Or other people who said it just was good organizing, had nothing to do with the unique advantage of 925, they were just very good organizers. They could have done it for the public sector, they probably could have done it for the hospital workers, nursing home workers, because...they were an incredibly talented group of people. But again their uniqueness was what they were searching for and I think the union was searching for. I think the union had a history for a long time, not just ours, but other unions, of losing patience quickly. On the other hand, there is a point at which we are an institution and not a social experiment that's trying to build, to change, people's lives, which means we have to have power and we have to have members to have power, so there is a point at which things need to be re-altered or re-distributed.

In retrospect, if 925 was here today they would do nurses.

They would do nurses?

Yes. Absolutely. That is a 98% women-dominated occupation. They're incredibly capable and strong women leaders who are willing to be trained, take the time, very career and professional-oriented, very much experience their power as women, not as nurses, but women nurses, and just have huge potential. And if 925 was here, we'd reinvent them as the national nurse union, because I think it is a place we found where sisterhood strategy, tactics can actually be successful. And no one's still figured out the

office worker conundrum, and as you said, the nature of the jobs has changed so much, you'd almost have to rethink...it'd probably be more like insurance or more like universities and not imagining, quote, office workers, or some large occupational definition that I don't think people identify with.

What are the issues for nurses?

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START of SIDE B**

There's clearly [salary]—there's clearly a—these are all lawsuits we'll be doing so I have to be thoughtful of how I say this—there is evidence that there is collusion amongst employers to hold down wages of nurses in markets. There is clearly a question to be asked, would that happen if they were men. And quote providing for their family, and all the things that we thought maybe went away at some point in history. But in a medical world where male doctors particularly tend to have a very dominant position in most hospitals, in the medical side, it's really amazing that nurses aren't making \$150,000, given the shortage, given their skills, and given the need. There's the women's movement to be had, not just a professional movement to be had, amongst nurses. And if Karen Nussbaum was here--because there's no one better at articulating a vision for women and engaging women—I'd send her out and have her become the new president of the SEIU nurse union. Because it is a women's movement about to happen, and the leadership potential—because these are people who stay in their profession for a long time. They're not aspiring to be doctors and they're not aspiring to be social workers, they're aspiring to be health care professionals. You just can feel the power when you see all these women together. There's an outrage...it's like a voice to be found on their part.

Final question—anything else you'd like to add about the legacy of 925 that you haven't said.

No, I just think...SEIU incredibly benefited by their passion, their vision, their difference; forcing us to deal with issues about trying different things, things about growth and change and national organizations and investing long term, not short term; and clearly they produced an extraordinary number of leaders, not just at SEIU but...At the same time I think SEIU wasn't really prepared to really think about, as we are now, having failed at so many things until we got 'em right, how to keep re-strategizing and re-thinking, until we got it right. That's what I meant about whether it's nurses or...there was a role for that group of talented people, and the passion they had about giving women power...there's still a role, in SEIU. We put pressure on them to institutionalize themselves as an entity, right, but then gave them all kinds of responsibilities of running an organization, which at the time was the only way you could get status in the union as well. I think in the long run we lost what they had to contribute by having them do what we did with everyone else, which is force them into an institutional role, and not have the patience until more recently to just rigorously try to figure out how to do things

differently. I wish they were around now, you know [laughs], to do it. It made an incredible contribution but their time is now.

That sounds like a good description of a living legacy to me.

Yes.

Thank you very much.

Thank you very much.

END of INTERVIEW.