Oral History Interview with Lou Mleczko

June 19, 2013
Walter Reuther Library
Detroit Newspaper Strike Oral History Project

Lou Mleczko, Interviewee

Lou Mleczko was born July 16, 1947 in Highland Park, Michigan. Mleczko graduated with a degree in journalism from Wayne State University in 1969. Following stints at the *Macomb Daily* and the *Akron Beacon Journal*, Mleczko worked as a journalist at the *Detroit News* beginning in 1971. He was involved in the organization drive at the *News* by the Newspaper Guild in 1974, and subsequently became deeply involved with the Newspaper Guild of Detroit, including serving as its president. Mleczko and the Newspaper Guild led the opposition to the joint operating agreement between the *Detroit News* and the *Free Press*, as well as being involved in the later negotiations and strike.

Andrew Hnatow, Interviewer

Andrew Hnatow is a PhD student in the History Department at Wayne State University. He is a member of GEOC/AFT Local 6123.

Interview Location and Other Notes

The interview took place in an office of the Walter Reuther Library on the campus of Wayne State University with a Marantz PMD660 recorder.

Hnatow: This is Andrew Hnatow interviewing Lou Mleczko on the 19th of June, 2013, at the Walter Reuther Library in Detroit, Michigan. So, to begin with, can you just say a little bit on your own background? Where you're from, your family background, so forth?

Mleczko: Yes. Until I was eleven years old I grew up in Hamtramck Michigan, and my father was a Polish immigrant who settled here after World War II. He was a sailor in the Polish navy, which was assigned to the Allied navy during the war and that's when he met my mother, who was a Detroit native and who was born and raised in Hamtramck and that's where they settled in at after the war ended.

When I was eleven the family moved to Warren Michigan – a new home, which was new in the area at the time, Eleven Mile and Hoover, and I went to Centerline Public Schools and graduated in 1965 from Centerline High School. From there I was an undergraduate student here at Wayne State University where I studied for four years and graduated with a Bachelor of Philosophy degree with a journalism major in 1969. And from that point on I've been working full-time in the newspaper business as both a reporter and then working for the Newspaper Guild of Detroit as a union officer.

Hnatow: And was there any union involvement in your family before you were involved in a union?

Mleczko: Not much. My father belonged to the UAW. He was an auto worker who worked for the Ford Motor Company. He was a die setter and was assigned to various plants in the Detroit area. And while he was a member in good standing and strongly supported the UAW he never

really took an active role in any union activities or union positions. My mother worked full-time as a cashier and teller for the Internal Revenue Service and that she did her entire career here in the Detroit area. So there was no, uh, specific union activism other than both members of my family being very supportive of organized labor in general and my father especially. I still remember as a little boy when he was out on strike in the early- or mid-1950s against Ford Motor Company and at the time he worked at the Highland Park Trim Plant – it was called the Trim Plant, on Manchester and Woodward Avenue – and I remember walking the picket line with him. That was – I vaguely have recollections of that. But beyond that, he was just a rank-and-file member.

Hnatow: You mentioned you went to Wayne State for a degree in journalism –

Mleczko: Yes.

Hnatow: Can you give an overview of your beginning interest in the career of journalism and how you ended up at the Detroit News?

Mleczko: Okay, well, as I mentioned I was interested in newspapering as a high school student. I took a journalism class in my sophomore year and liked the experience. And the following year I became an editor with the *Centerline Cub*, which was their modest little student newspaper. I was the sports editor, and – I was a jock: I played football, baseball, I was the captain of the football team at Centerline High School. So I was big into amateur athletics then, but that was where I first got my interest and then in college I decided that was something I wanted to pursue.

I was terrible at math, cause, originally when I was younger I had a great interest in meteorology and the weather, but I bombed in physics and some of the advanced math degrees and I knew that I had no future doing that, so journalism and newspapering was my interest at that time.

Hnatow: Going from Wayne State, what was your first entry into the world of journalism from there?

Mleczko: Well, actually, when I was still a student at Wayne. One of the things I really liked about the journalism program here at the time – it was a small department, it was based in Old Main, only had 3 full-time professors, but they were outstanding in teaching you the basics of being a professional journalist. They ran their classrooms like a newsroom. Professor Robert Highton, who was one of the professors I had, would regularly conduct press conferences – have you writing stories on deadline – we had typewriters in those days – where he would give us a set of facts or make an announcement that - portraying some type of official – and then we would have to compose an article and turn it in to him. So it was great practical experience, in terms of writing, photojournalism, feature writing, and so forth.

And as a result of that, I was able to pick up summer internships at the *Macomb Daily* for several years where I really started to learn the fundamentals of being a newspaper reporter. But it all started in the journalism program here. And also working for the student newspaper on campus – then it was called *The Daily Collegian* – and you could get a semester's credit – they were a quarter system – for spending an entire quarter working for the *Daily Collegian*, which I did. And from there, all of their advanced courses were heavily focused on the practical skills you would need to be a successful journalist after college and it was so well-respected – the

program – that I easily was able to get work at the *Macomb Daily*, and when I graduated from Wayne State – back in those days I had three newspapers that were bidding for my services, which was a wonderful experience to have.

So it really started here in earnest at Wayne State. I was able to also do some freelance work covering professional sports in Detroit while being a full-time student. Because of my work at the *Macomb Daily*, the sports editor encouraged me to do writing during the academic year and allowed me to cover Detroit Red Wings home games, Detroit Tigers baseball during the summer months. And I had a great experience. In 1968, the Tigers won the World Series, were in the World Series. I got to cover the Tigers fairly regularly that summer, and that fall I was given press credentials by the Tigers to be at Tiger Stadium to cover the three home games they played in Detroit. So not only was that a great personal thrill, it was wonderful professional experience for me to be interviewing professional athletes, being in the press box with accomplished pros that were covering those teams, and learning and watching and just rubbing elbows with them.

So from there it gave me the opportunity to start working full-time. The *Macomb Daily* first hired me when I graduated but within three months I had an offer to be a sports writer at the *Akron Beacon Journal* in Akron Ohio, which was a better newspaper than the *Macomb Daily* and was one of the more significant newspapers in the Knight newspaper chain. In fact it was their home base for Knight newspapers at the time. And was generally considered the best newspaper in Ohio, even better than the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* or the *Cleveland Press*. And I worked there for a year and a half and one of the highlights of being in Akron Ohio – I was at the Kent State University campus the day the Ohio National Guard gunned down and killed four anti-war protestors on the Kent State campus. And I got to cover that first day's events for The Beacon Journal. That led directly to getting an offer from the *Detroit News* to be a general assignment

reporter back here in Detroit. I had applied at the *News* when I graduated from college and they said "Kid go out and get some experience" – in those days the Detroit dailies, the *News* and *Free Press*, would never hire someone directly out of college. It was just unheard of. They wanted to see a résumé, they wanted to see professional work elsewhere before they would even consider you. But the work I did at the *Macomb Daily* and later at the *Akron Beacon Journal* convinced the *News* to take a chance with this young reporter – I was still only twenty-three, twenty-four years old when the *News* hired me.

Hnatow: So this would have been about 1971, 1972?

Mleczko: Yes, 1971 is when the *News* hired me. I worked in Akron from '69 – fall of '69 – until the winter of '71. And then I came to Detroit.

Hnatow: So at the Detroit News – and moving into it because you were instrumental in the organization of the Writer's Guild at the Detroit News – could you speak about the working conditions at the newspapers at that time and what were some of the reasons for the drive for organization that was to come a couple years down the road?

Mleczko: Yes. When I came to the *News* I discovered that the *Detroit News* was a non-union newsroom. There was no Newspaper Guild then. We were all at-will employees. And, uh, it didn't bother me too much at the time – you're young, you're excited about the job, and I was treated very well by the *Detroit News* in terms of pay and assignments I was getting – within a year I was transferred from suburban bureau to downtown, later became the consumer writer for

the newspaper. And although things were going well on that front, I could see where there were problems at the paper. First of all, the fringe benefits were mediocre, health insurance being one – it was an awful plan which you had to pay for, a good part of it. And although that wasn't a big concern of mine, other staff people were constantly complaining about it. Also about the chance for promotions and pay related to it. At that time the *News* would match the *Free Press* in terms of pay – the *Free Press* was a unionized paper, the Newspaper Guild represented the editorial *and* the business office employees of the *Free Press* and had since the late 19 – the mid-1940s. And when the *Free Press* would negotiate a new contract with the Guild, and the publishers bargained with the other unions, such as in 1971, they got significant wage increases and the *Detroit News* would match that to *News* employees. So we were getting the benefit even though we didn't belong to a union.

Things reach a crescendo in 1974, early 1974. There was a mild recession going on in the United States, the first Arab oil embargo was imposed the previous fall. So there was a – there were some economic cutbacks the *Detroit News* decided they had to make to rein in some of their operating costs. And what that triggered – the organizing drive – was at one point the management decided to terminate about 30 to 40 editorial employees. They were given no notice. I distinctly remember the reporters coming in to work on a Monday morning, being met by their supervisor and told to clear out their desks and be out of the building by twelve noon. Some of these people had been there ten, twenty years. Their science writer, Gene Pierson, had been recruited to work in the newsroom from the *Free Press* not too many years previously. Ken Barnard, who was the movie critic for the *Detroit News*, was let go – same circumstances. There was no rhyme or reason to it. It wasn't done by seniority, it wasn't done by positions. As it turned out, it was done by who the managing editor liked or didn't like. And that created a

firestorm in the newsroom. People were shocked, dismayed, because up until that point the *News* was considered a more paternalistic family-owned newspaper – at that time it was owned by the Evening News Association – the Scripps and Booth family descendants – whereas the *Free Press* was owned by the Knight Corporation – a big newspaper chain. And although the *News* was a larger paper than the *Free Press* in terms of circulation, advertising, and so on, it was basically just the family business here in Michigan.

Well, that paternalism was sorely tested during the 1968 newspaper strike – that was a nine months strike, by the way. And at that time that was the longest newspaper strike in Detroit history. It shut down both the *News* and the *Free Press*. It was a Teamster strike and all the other unions honored the picket line. The *Detroit News*, which was non-union, kept their staff on the payroll throughout the strike. And there was a lot of loyalty, then – those employees who were able to go through that as opposed to the *Free Press* where they were out on the street and they got strike benefits. There was a strike emergency newspaper – several of them – that were started up and they worked for those publications until the strike ended. Well, after that strike ended, people, things started to return to normal in the early 70s, that paternalism, so to speak, towards the staff began to erode. And it really manifested itself with that massive layoff in '74.

Hnatow: What was the beginning of the actual organization drive for the *Detroit News* then? Was it when that layoff occurred?

Mleczko: Yes. Cause there was no interest in the Guild up until that point. I was a young consumer reporter, worked on the city desk, but I had a great sense of unease where I saw some veteran top-notch people, through no fault of their own, being shown to the door

unceremoniously. And it dawned on me: if that could happen to them, what's it to prevent it from happening to me? The same thing could happen. But I didn't do anything overt or specific. The person who did, I'm told, was Jack Crellin, who was the labor writer for the *Detroit News* at the time – long-time labor writer. There aren't even labor beats anymore at the newspapers anymore, unfortunately. Back then there was.

Mr. Crellin took it upon himself to call the headquarters of the Newspaper Guild in Washington and spoke directly with President Charles Perlik and told him "Chuck, this place is ripe for organizing. You should get one of your organizers here and start a drive." Perlik did. And it wasn't long afterwards that they set up a organizing office across the street at the Fort Shelby Hotel and the word started to be passed around through the building that the Guild was trying to organize the newsroom and if you're interested go up there and check it out. Which I did, along with a colleague, another reporter by the name of Len Yearst (??), and I met the organizer, his name was Willard Hatch, and talked a little bit with him, and Len and I on the spot signed Guild cards. And from there the drive gained momentum – it wasn't an immediate big wave of members but it was slow and steady. And I remember my wife Lorraine was instrumental in prodding me, saying "Well, what are you going to do about this? You're not just going to sit there and do nothing, are you?" And I said, "Well, I guess not. You know, maybe I should get more involved." And from there I became more and more active in trying to recruit other colleagues to sign a Guild card and to talk about the positive benefits of being under a Guild contract as opposed to what we had just experienced. So that was the beginning of my involvement with the Guild as a in-house organizer, so to speak.

Hnatow: During the organization, was there – what was the feeling in the newsroom towards unionization? Was it generally positive? Was there resistance to it? Anything of that nature?

Mleczko: It was mixed. The younger staff members, like myself, were very positive about it. And they had hired a number of relatively young people when they were expanding their suburban operations in 1971 – 72. But the middle-aged and older staffers were far more skeptical. And for good reason. They still had vivid memories of the '68 strike and the fact that the *News* kept them on the payroll whereas the quote union work force was out on the street. So there was resistance on that level, and two there was some resistance that the Guild couldn't make a difference by itself, it was too weak, too small of a union. Those were some of the fears that many of the staff people had. And it was an up-hill climb, it was not an easy business of getting a majority, let alone a big majority, of people to sign cards saying "Yeah, I would like to have union representation." This went on for a period of three, five months. So, it, there was resistance to it. It wasn't, like I said, a big wave of "Yeah, we need a union."

Hnatow: Was there any resistance from the *News* itself? The newspaper?

Mleczko: No. Surprisingly not. At least I never saw any or heard of any. I'm sure they heard about it at some point, but in hindsight, I don't think they took it seriously. So they did nothing overt that I can recall or remember from that time-period about trying to discourage people from having any interest in the Guild. So there was no mailings, no meetings with staff people, no one-on-ones, none of the stuff you would see now, for instance, at least not at that time. There was nothing going on, and what the Guild was doing was fairly low-key. We were distributing

fliers, but basically talking to people one-on-one. We developed a core group of active folks and we organized by various departments: features, photos, sports, newsroom, and so on, to see what we could generate.

Hnatow: Do you think being in Detroit, which has a labor history, affected people's attitudes towards organizing?

Mleczko: Well, I'm sure it did. Labor had a huge presence in the Detroit area. In fact I remember some people saying, "Well, if I was going to join the union, I'd rather join the UAW or the Teamsters – some real union that could really do something for us, not the puny Newspaper Guild." You know, they didn't have as high a regard for the Guild. So, yeah, there was a strong recognition of it, and while people generally said "Yeah, being represented by a union was a good thing, but I don't really want to get involved. I want to see how this plays out." So those were some of the currents we were swimming against in trying to get enough people to sign cards.

Hnatow: And you kind of touched on your – the beginning of your increasing activity with the union, but could you speak some more about how you eventually became a leader in the union?

Mleczko: I was active in recruiting, as were others, I wasn't the only one, obviously, and finally in June of that year there were enough card signatures that Willard Hatch, the international representative that was assigned to this effort, filed for formal recognition with the National Labor Relations Board, and submitting the cards that we had already turned in. The NLRB

promptly approved that and it was at that point the company realized "Boy, this is serious. We're going to have to do something about this." And, in fact, the NLRB held then some administrative hearings about who should be allowed to vote, who might be in the bargaining unit, who shouldn't, that kind of thing, and that was concluded rather quickly, in about a month's time or so. I remember testifying as a witness on behalf of the Guild, but even then I was still keeping my identity as a Guild activist from the company. The Guild subpoenaed me, and I remember showing the subpoena to the managing editor Paul Poorman and he said, "Well, you've been subpoenaed. Just go and answer the questions as best you can and don't worry about it." Well, I – on the inside I was already speaking with not only Willard Hatch but the Guild attorney and was actively cooperating with them. Well, at that point, when the size and scope of the unit was determined and the campaign really geared up, that's when I became more active and upfront with my bias and favor of the union and what I was doing, so the company knew what I was doing as did all of my colleagues if they didn't figure it out already from our informal discussions, they saw and heard me openly talking about voting for the Newspaper Guild.

That election was held in August of '74. We were able to get a pretty prompt election date and we won. But the vote count – to go back to your earlier question – shows the degree of opposition. 150 yes, 90 no. So there were ninety folks in the bargaining unit that said no, and then there were others who just didn't vote at all, for one reason or another. So we did win a clear majority, we were certified, and then the real fight began to get an initial contract. That's when I was elected unit chairperson, to head the news unit, and we picked a bargaining committee and in October of that year we commenced negotiations to get that first contract. That went on until the following summer. It took, in fact it took almost a full year to get a contract. And during that year the newspaper laid off some photographers, started to make some changes

in working conditions, which we filed Board charges on, and also complained about at the bargaining table. And the bargaining was going along very slowly, very tediously – we weren't getting close to an agreement at all.

And what complicated it for us was we were bargaining in the middle of contracts for all the other unions at the *News* and the *Free Press*. They had bargained new three-year contracts in June of '74, right when we filed for election. That was the Teamsters, the Pressmen, the Typographical Union, the Guild at the *Free Press*, and so they had new three-year agreements and part of those agreements were no-strike no-lockout clauses. And while we would inform the various unions – there was a Metropolitan Council of Newspaper Unions even at that time – and we would meet with them periodically to give them updates of what was going on and ask them for their support. And while they were generally very supportive – they were delighted that the Guild had organized the *Detroit News* – they were very concerned about where's this going to lead to, and what's going to be expected of us, of what we're going to be able to do to help you get this first contract.

Well, as it turned out, it reached a crisis in summer of '75 where we could not get even the basics of jurisdiction and some of the other provisions of the contract agreed to. And they refused to take back the photographers they had terminated – about a half dozen folks. So we finally went back to the membership and got the strike authorization from them. Said, "The only way we're going to push this, folks, we've got to set a deadline, we got to let them know we're serious about going out on strike, otherwise we're never going to get a contract." And we were able to get that, and part of the fear of our people who had joined the union said "Well, will the other unions honor our picket lines or support us?" We had verbal assurances that they would, but it was very indirect, very vague. And we said, "I'm sure they will support us but we have to

show them we're a genuine union and that we're willing to go out on strike if need be." To make a long story short, we set several strike deadlines, bargained right up against them, still weren't successful. And at that point the Teamsters union, which was the dominant union along with the Pressmen in the Council of Unions, had agreed to sit in on our bargaining with the *News* to monitor what was going on and to try to assist us and the company by showing their interest to reach a settlement.

Bobby Holmes of the Teamsters District Council personally sat in on our bargaining, and we moved the bargaining to the Teamster Headquarters, on Trumbull Avenue. We were meeting there in their Health and Welfare Building on Trumbull. Even then, after about a week or a week and a half of that type of bargaining we were still far apart on some fundamental issues. And we had set a follow-up membership meeting to go out on strike the following day.

Hnatow: And this was still August?

Mleczko: July of '75. That afternoon, while we were still sitting there bargaining, word came from across the street that Jimmy Hoffa was missing. That was the day of the disappearance of their esteemed leader Jimmy Hoffa. Well, all hell broke loose. Bobby Holmes and Elton Shade, who was the chief officer for Teamster Local 372, who were sitting in the meeting room – someone came in and whispered in their ear and all of a sudden they bolted out of the room. Left the meeting and we just kind of caucused for a minute, and we're sitting there with the *News* committee saying "What's going on?" Shade came back in and said "Jimmy's missing. We're leaving." And within minutes, there were armed guards standing in front of the Health and Conference Building with shotguns, rifles, because one of the rumors going around was that he

was kidnapped by a dissident group within the Teamsters, among other things. Nobody knew where he had disappeared to, but he was indeed missing. Well, at that point, when we saw the armed guards, Willard Hatch, who was our chief negotiator, looked at Caleb Atwood of the *News* and said, "Well, I guess this bargaining session is over." And they agreed, and we said, "Let's leave. You know, we don't want to stick around here."

Well, that broke off, and we were set to go out on strike at noon the next day. We had set a membership meeting for 11:30 in the morning at the Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge right on Washington Boulevard and Michigan to actually go out on strike. And, uh, with this backdrop of the Hoffa disappearance and the breakdown of the bargaining. Well, early that morning, Willard Hatch received a call from one of the executives of the Evening News Association. They were willing to move on some of the key things that we were concerned about, about having the basics in place for the contract, and as a result, at that noon meeting, we were able to tell the membership that we have a tentative agreement, a final offer, and we're recommending that you take it to the membership vote it to do that. And that is how we got our first contract there in the end of July, 1975.

Hnatow: So pretty much an eleventh hour –

Mleczko: Very much so. Eleventh hour, eleventh minute. Because I didn't know anything about until I'm heading in the elevator to prepare to chair a meeting where we're going out on strike and that's when Willard caught up with me, pulled me aside, and said, "We've got a deal," and I said, "What? What do you mean we've got a deal? Who got a deal?" And he explained to me the phone conversation with – Tom Doris was the name of the executive vice president – and he

said, “This is what they’ve offered us and I’ve told them that we’re going to take it back with the recommendation to adopt it,” so I said, “OK let’s see where this goes.” And I think the members who did come to the meeting – they were already carrying boxes out of the building with their belongings and whatnot from their desk – they were relieved that they weren’t going out on a strike. And we had no formal assurance that the other unions were going to would honor our picket line. They told us, “Legally, we can’t recognize your picket lines or tell our people to stay off because we have no-strike language but individually we don’t think very many if any of our members will cross.”

I remember sitting in a Council Unions meeting about a month before perhaps and we asked them specifically, “Are you going to support us if we have to go out on strike?” And we went around the table, one by one, asking each president or head officer of each union, “Will you do that?” And that’s when we started hearing all the equivocation and “Maybe,” “Good luck, but I can’t commit anything formally,” *et cetera*, *et cetera*. One union did, though. The Pressmen, Local 13-N. Don Kummer was the president of the pressmen’s union. When his turn came, we said, “Ok, Don, what do you think?” Don said, “I don’t know about the rest of you guys, but my union doesn’t cross picket lines. If the Guild has to go out on strike, so be it, we will honor the lines and take our lumps with everybody else.” I was impressed. I thought, “Wow.” The Teamsters wouldn’t say that, the Paper and Plate Makers wouldn’t say it, Machinists, Mechanics wouldn’t say it, Typographical wouldn’t say it. The Pressmen did. Don said, “We’re with you. If you have to walk, we’re walking too. We’ll honor your lines.” But as it turned out we didn’t have to pull the ultimate plug and we got a contract and we signed it about a week later. In fact

we signed it the day Richard Nixon resigned from office as president. I think it was August 8th, if my memory serves me right.[1]

Hnatow: So right at the beginning your union faced some serious, uh, testing, I guess, with that whole negotiation going into possible strike situation.

Mleczko: Very much so. It was crisis bargaining, last minute agreement, and our first contract, which was only a two-year contract. But we had our foot in the door and we had an agreement and we celebrated. One of the bitter things about that is that we were never successful, even with that contract, of getting those six fired photographers back their jobs. And they were at the ratification meeting, by the way. Right in the front row. Glaring at me. Cause their first question was, "Lou, what about us? Do we have jobs at the *Detroit News*?" And I had to tell them, "No, you don't." And that was a bitter lesson for me because when they were first let go earlier that year, I promised them that, "We'll get you your jobs back." I was young and naïve and said, "No, we're never going to reach an agreement unless you guys are back." I broke that promise. And it haunted me, well, to this day. And I learned a harsh lesson that don't promise something you can't keep. You know, you can make assurances you're going to fight on behalf of someone and do your best, but don't tell them, "Oh yeah, 100% we're going to get you your job back."

Some of the photographers never forgave me. Herman Allen was a *Free Press* – well, at the time he was *Detroit News* report – photographer. Later became a *Free Press* photographer. He took my wedding pictures, when we were both employees at the *Macomb Daily*. He never forgave me for that. He was one of the people let go by the *News*, felt that I had betrayed him,

[1] August 9, 1974.

the Guild had betrayed him, never spoke to me again afterwards. Even though he later became a Guild member, he had to at the *Free Press* and I was president of the local at the time, he had no use for me. That was – that was one sad consequence of things that happened. Something I learned from, never to do that again in my exuberance for the Guild.

Hnatow: I think also, especially looking at the newspaper strike in the nineties and the role that the Metropolitan Council of Newspaper Unions played there, that that relationship existed well before the 1990s –

Mleczko: Oh yes. The Council of Unions actually goes back to the 1950s when there was a series of nasty newspaper strikes – two or three of them in the fifties, 1964, and finally the big nine month one in '68 which stood as the worst ever until our conflagration in July of 1995. And the reason the Council formed back then – the two newspapers, the *Free Press* owned by Knight and the *News* owned by the Evening News Association, they formed a publishers association to bargain jointly with the newspapers. So even though they were harsh and bitter enemies in competing for business, when it came to dealing with their employees and the labor unions, they were united. The wanted to – and part of the reason why they united and why the Council evolved was the whipsawing that was going on where – and this was before my time but I was told by my predecessors – that a publisher would first try to bargain a contract with one of the weaker unions to try to set a pattern for everyone else and to force that upon the other unions. Or it would trigger a strike by one union before the other unions could even negotiate, and the labor relations were god-awful. They had a lot of mean, nasty strikes with work stoppages, papers shut down, so they thought, "Well, there's got to be a better way here and let's see if we can do this in

a more coordinated – where at least on some of the issues we would talk about them jointly whereas each local with their individual problems or issues could deal with it separately." And that's how that evolved.

But up until the 1990s, to get back to that strike, the Council, up until '89-'90 was still very fragmented. It would bargain jointly on joint issues like wages, health insurance, duration, other economic issues related to it. But there was still the lack of trust where one union would undercut the others by saying, "Well, we've made a deal" or "We're breaking from the Council, we're going to agree to this." The Teamsters, unfortunately, were notorious for that. Elton Shade – their chief guy for many years, he was secretary/treasurer – repeatedly would do that. Even when he became president of the Council of Unions. So it reached a low point in 1980 where the unions were very close to fully paid health insurance with Blue Cross. In the previous round of bargaining in '77 we got fully paid health insurance but we still had to pay half of any increases. Well, 1980 the unions decided we were going to finally get what the UAW and what other organizations had. But the Teamsters blamed the Council for not getting a good enough deal in '77 even though Shade was the head of the Council. So he pulled his local out of the Council of Unions and announced that he was going to bargain alone, separate from the Council.

What that led to, in 1980, was a strike. The only strike from 1968 to '95 was a one-week walk-out by Teamsters, but only at the *Free Press*. They were attempting to break the pattern that the Council of Unions had negotiated with not only the *Free Press* but the *News* just before that. They were unsuccessful. They lost. Even though the company, the *Free Press*, was shut down for a week, the *News* kept publishing because it had tentative agreements with all its unions including the Teamsters, they couldn't strike. A week went by and it was a momentous week because it was the week before the Republican National Convention in Detroit at Joe Louis

Arena where Ronald Reagan was eventually nominated to be the standard-bearer. And the Teamsters at the *Free Press* thought, "Well, by striking them a week before the *Free Press* will cave cause they don't want to miss all this reporting and publication of the National Convention and we'll get a better deal." Well, they didn't. So, after that the Teamsters returned to the Council in '83, '84 and then the JOA was announced in '86. But it was still a Council that was wary of each other. You know, you really didn't have the trust – that didn't really occurred until 1992, when Gannett and Knight-Ridder now had formed a joint operating agreement and for self-preservation, if nothing else, the leadership of various unions realized "We have to stick together."

Hnatow: To backtrack just a moment, could you describe kind of the make-up of Local 22 briefly? Who was within the unit, which occupations, which jobs were covered?

Mleczko: Oh yes. Good question. The Newspaper Guild of Detroit got its charter in 1934, March of '34. It was one of the first unions to get a charter from then the American Newspaper Guild. Then we were called Local 22. And at that time and into the 1940s the only bargaining units the Guild had were the *Detroit Times*, which was a big afternoon third paper in Detroit – they were able to organize that, that was owned by the Hearst Company back then – and then in 1940s they got a contract with the *Free Press* but they couldn't get one at the *News*. The *News* was able to keep them, to keep the Guild out for a variety of reasons. So it was basically the *Detroit Times* and then the *Free Press* were the constituents of Local 22. That pretty much stayed the same until into the 1950s where the *Detroit Times* folded, went out of business, sold its assets to the *Detroit News*. And then it was the *Free Press* was the dominant and virtually the

only unit in the Guild local. During the fifties they also picked up a small contract with the UAW public relations staff at Solidarity House which we have to this day under our Guild contract. But that was pretty much it until the 1970s when in short order they were able to organize the *Macomb Daily*, the *Observer* and *Eccentric* chain out in Oakland and western Wayne County, and of course the *Detroit News* editorial unit, which greatly expanded. I forgot the *Michigan Catholic* also came under a Guild contract in 1946, so that unit was there, but fairly small. But it was basically the *Detroit Times* downtown and then the *Free Press* until the seventies when it expanded. They also got suburban contracts at the *Oakland Press*, then it was called the *Pontiac Press*, the *Royal Oak Tribune*, and the union, the local was growing in the '70s.

Hnatow: And at the newspapers – so reporters and journalist were covered, were members of the union. Were there other occupations also covered?

Mleczko: Yes. Oh yes. At both the *News* and – at both the *Free Press* and at the *Times*, the business office was covered by the Guild contract. All your advertising sales people, classified display advertising, circulation employees, clerical and other business staff were part of it. The Guild was successful at organizing the janitors at the *Detroit News* in 1941. There was an organizing attempt – there was a NLRB election – going through the archives here – in 1941, just prior to the outbreak of our involvement in World War II, and there were three votes cast. One was for *Detroit News* editorial employees, a separate ballot for *Detroit News* business office, and a third for *Detroit News* janitors. The Guild lost the first two: the editorial lost, the business office lost, but the janitors, in their infinite wisdom, voted yes, they wanted union representation. So from December of '41 on the janitors were also represented by the Newspaper Guild.

Hnatow: And was that maintained until the present?

Mleczko: Pretty much, yes. There was one short hiatus where as a result of the joint operating agreement, which finally got approved by the US Supreme Court in 1989, we lost the representation rights of janitorial staff, cause they merged the janitors with the *Free Press* janitors, and they were non-union at that time. Well, the *Free Press* was SEIU[2] – they lost jurisdiction, the Guild lost it at the *News*, so for a short time they were not covered by a union. The Guild immediately launched an organizing drive, and we were able to win them back the following year with a representational election. But we didn't get them back under contract again until 1992 when we were bargaining as a joint council. And then they were with us right up until the present time.

Hnatow: So I think we can move on to actually talking about the joint operating agreement and how that developed. And specifically how the Local 22 viewed these developments and how you viewed these developments, because before the '95 negotiations and strike, I mean, this goes back about a decade.

Mleczko: Yes. Well, in the mid 1980s the competition had become particularly fierce between the *News* and the *Free Press*. The *Free Press* was constantly gaining in paid circulation to the *News*, they were slightly behind the *News* in both daily and Sunday but they were putting a lot of resources, a lot of money, into surpassing the *News*, which was the afternoon paper and the *Free*

[2] Service Employees International Union

Press the morning paper, and the trend nationwide was to go more and more to morning home delivery as opposed to afternoon. It reached a peak in 1985 where the *News*, in trying to keep up with the *Free Press*, matched the *Free Press* dollar for dollar in expenditures and coverage, keeping their ad rates low. And that was directly a result of an illegal Knight-Ridder program called Operation Tiger. Read Bryan Gruley's book *Paper Losses*[3] – he goes into great detail about that and the JOA. Should be in the library here somewhere.

HNATOW: I'll check it out.

MLECZKO: Yeah, G-r-u-l-e-y, he was a *Detroit News* reporter, the book came out in the early '90s. Anyway, Paper Tiger was a corporate plan by Knight-Ridder to deliberately run the *Free Press* at a loss, both editorial and business-wise in hopes of two things. Either driving the *Detroit News* out of business or, two, failing that, causing the *News* to make equal amount of losses by artificially holding down its ad rates and circulation prices and expanding staff, that both papers would be quote losing money and could file for a joint operating agreement. That Operation Tiger first came into public view when the Guild was challenging the JOA and we were able to get administrative law judge hearings right here in downtown Detroit in federal court where that came to light and we were able to exploit that very successfully.

So, the papers had applied for a JOA in August – well, I should – Gannett bought the *Detroit News* in August of '85. The private stockholders of the Evening News Association put the paper into play because they were taking all of their profits and pouring it back into the newspaper. A lot of these were third, fourth, fifth generation family members who weren't

[3] Bryan Gruley, *Paper Losses: A Modern Epic of Greed and Betrayal at America's Two Largest Newspaper Companies* (New York: Grove Press, 1993).

getting any dividends or anything and they were fed up with it and they forced the paper to go up for sale. Gannett winds up buying the paper and a couple TV stations they own for like 700 million dollars, something like that. So Gannet now becomes a player in Detroit and they say, "We're going to go head-to-head with Knight-Ridder and outcompete with them" and saying all the right things.

What we didn't know at the time – Allen Neuharth, who was the CEO of Gannett, had secret talks with Alvah Chapman, the CEO of Knight-Ridder, and what Neuharth – he initiated the phone call to Chapman and said, "We have a chance to buy the Evening News Association but the only reason we would buy it is if we could get a JOA in Detroit. Are you interested?" Chapman said, "Hallelujah, we've been trying to do that for years but we could never convince the Evening News folks to terms on it. Yes, we'd be interested." So they did that quietly and secretly and it later came out in our hearings. So Gannett went ahead and purchased the *News*. In April of '86, both Chapman and Neuharth held a press conference in downtown Detroit, announced they were applying for a JOA, and they declared the *Free Press* as the failing newspaper. Surprise, surprise. That was something Gannett insisted on. The application also called for Gannett to be the majority controller of the JOA – it would be a five member board, three of the seats picked by Gannett, two by Knight-Ridder. And it put the *Free Press* in this awkward position. Even though they were in a virtual dead heat with the *News* and the morning paper declaring themselves the quote failing newspaper and "Save us from ourselves, we need a JOA."

Well, that spurred a lot of opposition in our local, but it also split our local. My *Free Press* editorial people were worried about what could happen to the paper, they were very loyal to the *Free Press* and Knight-Ridder, whereas the business office people clearly saw their jobs in

jeopardy with the JOA and they supported the Guild's position of opposing it. All the people at the *Detroit News* wanted nothing to do with the JOA. They hated the fact that they were working for Gannett and that Gannett had pulled this stunt and strongly supported my efforts that the Guild fight this application in any way we can. What also convinced us to continue the fight: Knight-Ridder and Gannett had signaled to the other craft unions that they were willing to negotiate new contracts with them if the JOA is approved, but not the Guild. They did not want to grant jurisdiction to the Guild with this JOA and that put us as the odd man out, and made it easier for us to rally our members to oppose the JOA. So that was the start of it.

Because of our opposition, we filed to become an intervener in the case, were granted intervener status by then-Attorney General Ed Meese. We were the lead intervener. Mayor Coleman Young was granted intervener status, and there were one or two others, minor players in it. And that was it. And, well, as it turned out, the other unions were also granted intervener status after we were. We were the first. And then the Teamsters, and the Pressmen, and the Typos also were granted intervener status by Meese. And the Council of Unions decided at that point – they didn't want the JOA either – because they still saw loss of jobs, would be dealing with a much harsher corporate entity that wasn't in competition with each other, so they supported the idea of opposing it initially. And we pooled our resources, there was Guild attorney – Duane Ice and the Teamster picked Eugene Driker who is now a trustee on the board of governors here – you might want to talk to Mr. Driker if you get the chance – to be the lead counsel in representing the unions and fighting the JOA.

They did a magnificent job. What they did, as they combed through all the records, through discovery – financial records, and the business operation records of the *News* and *Free Press* – they discovered Operation Tiger, they discovered that these papers could be making a lot

of money if they only priced their product reasonably – for advertising and so on and so forth – but they weren't. They were deliberately running at a loss. So they took all of that evidence, the companies' records, and threw it right back at them and it convinced the administrative law judge Morton Needleman, when the hearings concluded, to rule that they don't need a JOA and he recommended rejection of it to Attorney General Meese. So at that point the Council was united, but it was after that that, when that decision came down, then Knight-Ridder decided to begin a more public campaign saying "Without a JOA we will close – we will put the *Free Press* up for sale but we'll probably have to close it cause no one will want to buy it."

And they trumpeted that on the front of, on the front pages of their paper with front page editorials by their publisher Neal Shine, Alvah Chapman making statements, and the Knight-Ridder pressured Michigan politicians, saying "We're the progressive, liberal voice of Michigan as opposed to the right-wing *Detroit News*, you can't allow us to die. You've got to endorse our JOA." And one-by-one they were able to get people such as Mayor Young to drop his intervener-ship, Governor Blanchard of Michigan to support the JOA, Senator Carl Levin to support the JOA, and other business leaders, and even some labor leaders endorsing it. It was outrageous, even though the Guild was still saying "We're not going to have any contract with this. How can you be abandoning us over this?" But they did, because they were swept up in the rhetoric of losing the *Free Press*.

And that split the Guild, because the majority of the people in the editorial department were panic-stricken and believed what Knight-Ridder was telling them, and they had a great affection still for the local management here with Neil Shine. And they believed them. As irrational as it was, they believed it. The business employees at the *Free Press* said, "Bullshit! This is nonsense. We support the Guild in this." As did the news unit, but it split our local,

basically in half. We had our suburban units that were just not knowing what position to take, because the big downtown units were at crossed swords here. And I was right in the middle of it. I'm the president of the Guild, but I'm from the *Detroit News*. So my *Free Press* editorial people are viewing me suspiciously – at least some of them were. Whereas my *News* members and my suburban members supported me.

And despite my best efforts to convince the *Free Press* editorial folks, saying "This is in your best interests *not* to have the JOA. Don't believe this lightning bolt out of the blue" – as Judge Needleman called Chapman's statement that we'll have to close the *Free Press* - "that's all it is. It's a ruse." But they – there was a couple *Free Press* people even filed lawsuit in Wayne Circuit Court to get us to rescind an earlier vote. We had a big mass membership meeting, at Cobo Hall, and at that meeting we debated whether to maintain our opposition to the JOA. The majority of our members supported it and voted for it. That wasn't good enough for some of the dissidents at the *Free Press*. They filed their own lawsuit in Wayne Circuit Court asking for another vote, saying the vote was tainted, it wasn't conducted according to by-laws – they were that desperate. Never got anywhere. The court wouldn't even recog – threw the suits out after reviewing them. It didn't go anywhere, but it gives you an idea about the undercurrents that were going on here.

HNATOW: What year would that have been?

MLECZKO: That would have been 1987, early 1987.