Oral History Interview with John Peralta

March 25, 2013
Michigan Conference of Teamsters Local Fund
Detroit Newspaper Strike Oral History Project

John Peralta, Interviewee

John Peralta was born in Detroit, Michigan on April 15, 1955. His family moved to Sterling Height in 1959. Mr. Peralta began working in the mailer department for the *Detroit News* in 1973. He was elected to the executive board of International Brotherhood of Teamsters Local 2040 in 1978. He was elected vice president of the local in 1991. This position led to his direct involvement in contract negotiations and the newspaper strike that followed. He helped to coordinate and was active in boycotts, protest activity and picketing. Mr. Peralta currently works as an international representative for IBT.

Daniel Patton, Interviewer

Daniel Patton is a graduate student of Library and Information Science and History at Wayne State University.

Interview Location and Notes

The interview was recorded in a conference room at the Michigan Conference of Teamsters Local Fund building, 2700 Trumbull, Detroit, MI, USA.

The interview was recorded on a Marantz PMD 660. The recording is pcm 44.1kHz in .wav format.

Patton: Today is March 25, 2013. I am at the Teamster Headquarters in Detroit, Michigan. My name is Dan Patton. I'm with John Peralta. We are doing this interview in conjunction with the Detroit Newspaper Strike Project for the Reuther Library. If I could have you start with you saying your name and current title or position.

Peralta: Sure. My name is John Peralta. I am now a business representative for IBT Local 372. We merged from Local 2040 in 2007. I went from being the President of the Local to a business representative, but I also wear two hats there. I am an international representative with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, who represents newspaper workers across the country.

Patton: Where are you from originally? Where were you born? Where are you from?

Peralta: I've always, well, originally? Well, I was born in Detroit and we moved to Sterling Heights in 1959. And I lived in Sterling Heights up until 2006. Which I was like a, I worked at the *Detroit News* plant on 16 mile and Mound. I worked one mile from the plant because I was an officer also and I also worked for the union downtown. So I was a part time officer at the time.

Patton: Did you have a union background in your family?

Peralta: No, not at all.

Patton: So, how did you become involved with the Detroit newspapers and the Teamsters?

Peralta: Well, my brother-in-law, back in 1973, got me my first couple shifts in the mailroom. I started in November of 1974 as a part time mailroom employee. What we do is we package and bundle the paper and send it out to the drivers and they put it together. The pressmen print the paper and it comes to our room and we assemble and distribute to the drivers. We also do the Sunday comics and all the preprints that are put together in packages and sent out to the consumer. Those are all your insert ads like Target, Meijer's, Kmart, things like that. So there's not just print. There are two different types of print: there is what they call ROP which is Right Off the Press and then there's inserts that are preprints. Someone else prints them and brings them to our mailroom and we put them together. For instance, when you get your Sunday paper, all the Sunday ads you see and that little comic, those are done by us.

Patton: So you started off with that. How did you move up through the ranks?

Peralta: Well, in about 1978 a good friend of mine was the Vice President of the local and he said he would like me to get involved and become an executive board member because there is going to be an opening. He knew I was very interested because I used to go to every union meeting every Sunday. So he said I had the qualifications just because I went to the union meetings. So when the opening occurred, we had an election and I won the election and became an executive board member in 1978. That was my first position.

In today's reality, because we were in a different union at the time, it would be considered what a trustee would be today in the Teamsters Union. My second position–two months later–I moved to recording secretary, which the recording secretary takes down all the notes and minutes and keeps track of all that stuff for the union monthly. I was there until, I believe, in1991, when I became the Vice President of my local where, until 1995, I stayed the vice president until the newspaper strike started.

Patton: So in 1995 you were the vice president [of Local 2040]?

Peralta: Correct.

Patton: So, going through that process, what was the Teamster position and the feeling within your local of the JOA [Joint Operating Agreement]?

Peralta: Well, when the JOA was enforced, what came about, we tried to intervene as much as possible. It became apparent that it looked like the JOA was going to go through. We were pretty smart because we negotiated a fourteen point piece where it protected our people in fourteen different ways. I don't remember every piece of it, but basically it was employment. We had secured some kind of overtime positions and secured seniority. Now, because the *News* and the *Free Press* were two separate companies, they were forming one, we agreed to a dovetail of seniority where we would mix our seniorities, one from each shop. At that time we represented both shops. So it would not have been fair for us to take the *News* people who, at the time, were the ones that became the

dominant paper. They said that–they didn't actually terminate it. Anyway, we wound up dovetailing our seniority. We had a bunch of different things and I wish I would have thought, I would have tried to remember that fourteen point plan. But actually, that was done in 1987 I believe. That was one of the reasons we stopped being interveners. Once we got that plan, it protected us for a period of time. And from 1987 to like 1992, things were really good. I mean, as far as the union part, we had a really good relationship with the company and they were making money, we were making money. But it wasn't until 1992 that we started to notice a difference. There was a reason there was a difference: late in 1991, just before Christmas, they hired a new CEO and his name was Frank Vega. He sent out a letter, or he put it in the front page of the newspaper for Christmas and it was kind of like, the news was a real shock to the employees. Like, he was coming in and he was going to change everything. He hasn't even met any of us and he wound up making it sound like he was threatening us, basically, in a newspaper article that he put out on Christmas Day. That was 1992. So we went through the [19]92 negotiations with the new CEO, Frank Vega. The mailroom wound up keeping its old contract pretty much intact because, at the time, they wanted to change a lot of things in our contract and they couldn't do it because they weren't prepared. They did, however, my sister local was Local 372 which we belong to now, they had quite a bit of changes in their contract. And they agreed to them and it was a mutual agreement and everything was fine. We kind of felt like they were looking to go after us in '92 but they weren't prepared. So, what we wound up doing was we accepted our old contract and we moved on, until 1995.

Patton: You said that [Local] 372 was your sister organization. How much did the two locals interact?

Peralta: We were very close. The principle officer of that local [372], Alex [Al] Derey and the principle officer of my local [2040], Alex Young, they both interacted every day. We had meetings with them all the time. All of us did. We also had what a lot of newspaper unions don't have across the country which is called the Metro Council of Newspaper Unions [MCNU]. The Metropolitan Council of Newspaper Unions consisted of, at that time, six locals. One was our local, the mailers. The second one was the pressroom. The third one was the drivers department, which is IBT Local 372. The pressmen was Local 13N. The guild was called the Detroit Guild. And then we had the typographical union, which represented the people in typos. I think that's six, right? So, anytime we negotiated wages and things like that we went in with the company and negotiated jointly. But our non-economics were always bargained separately. So that's what we did and we actually still do that today. But there are less locals involved since we've had mergers and things like that.

Patton: What was the dynamic within the MCNU in terms of cooperation?

Peralta: We were very tight. Very strong and we still are today. We've gone through a lot and we've always stayed together. Now, previous to that strike, there were problems. But that wasn't with the new administration. Somewhere around 1992, a lot of different officers became the new officers of the locals and that was including me and Al Young

and another guy named Jim St. Louis who was the secretary treasurer of my local at the time. We were all young, very young, and we thought the important thing to do was stick together and make sure we were all on the same page. We always had council meetings. Anything we did, we did it as a council, as we do today, believe it or not. We still do it all these 18 years later.

Patton: When contract negotiations came up again in March [19]95, what was the, could you describe the situation with those negotiations and the talk of outsourcing and the WARN notification?

Peralta: Basically they were threatening to outsource all of the mailroom work. At the time we knew it was kind of unrealistic for them. But they wanted to take our work and bring it to Allentown, Pennsylvania. What we were doing, it would have been very costly to truck from Allentown, PA, all the way to Detroit. But that was the threat at the time. They also were, at the time, trying to make some changes at IBT 372, which was drivers and circulation. They had 125 different issues with that particular local. The mailroom– we were working through our issues. We were pretty close, believe it or not, out of all the unions. We had some issues but I think we could have possibly got an agreement with the company. It wouldn't have included outsourcing. But the major problem that happened was, they tried to impose something on the Newspaper Guild which was called merit pay, which people would get paid for merit and the Newspaper Guild was very much opposed to the merit system for their workers. Well, the *Detroit News* which was owned by Gannett at the time, told the Guild that they were at impasse and they were going to

invoke the merit pay system on the workers there. That is pretty much what actually triggered the strike. A lot of people don't know that. A lot of people think other things took place, like money and stuff like that, that we weren't happy with what we were going to get. But it was not an economic strike. It was the fact that they were trying to invoke a new system on the Guild. And actually the Teamsters were there to support the Guild. Now Local 372 had a lot of issues that they had on the table but I think those could have been resolved. Unfortunately, what took place was, somewhere down the road the company decided to try to push our buttons and they pressed them with the Guild. We were willing to support the Guild workers because no matter what, if they were going to do something to them then the next step would have been to us. That's why we did it. We thought it was important for all the unions to stick together because there were five other small craft unions that actually broke off the council probably five years before that strike. They were the electrical workers, the machinists and operating engineers and they only represented 140 people. We represented at the time 2,400. And they broke off from us because they were pretty much taking care of themselves.

Patton: What was the initial response just in your local to that contract negotiation and that sort of threat?

Peralta: Well, we just took the position that we were going to stick with our union brother and sisters from the other locals. At the time, like I said, I think we could have possibly gotten an agreement. It would not have been a great agreement, but we could have gotten one that we could have lived with that would have been okay. Unfortunately,

that didn't take place because of what they tried to do to the Guild and what they were trying to do to 372, our sister local which was the other Teamster local at the time. Now, the pressmen were not in the Teamsters then. They were called the GCIU. They were the Graphic Communication International Union. It was in 2005 when those people merged with us, the Teamsters. So now they're merged with the Teamsters and our Teamsters but at the time they were not. So the two Teamster locals were the IBT 372 and IBT 2040. But we stood behind all the unions as one and so did the other unions. They did the same thing because the pressmen were close to an agreement. If they wanted to, they could have gotten one and broke with the council unions. But they wouldn't do it just as we didn't do it.

Patton: How were you involved in the process of the contract negotiations?

Peralta: I was one of the key people on the negotiating committee.

Patton: Were there any other strategies outside of striking developed after the negotiations of 1995?

Peralta: We didn't want to go and strike and we were always hoping that we wouldn't have to go on strike. The problem was that at the time we knew that we could do a consumer and advertiser boycott where people wouldn't buy the newspaper. Also, we could go to advertisers and ask them to stop advertising. That was quite successful in a few strikes previous to our strike. So we were looking at that strategy. But the problem is

it would have been very hard to invoke that if we didn't strike. It wouldn't have been as effective. In other words, if we would have stayed in and worked and tried to do that. So we took the position that, if we needed to we would actually strike. But we always kept in mind that—behind the back of all our minds—was the fact that we wanted to get a contract that we could live with because no one wanted to strike. Unfortunately, the company decided that they thought that they could break the unions at the time. They wound up hiring 1,500 strikebreakers that they had waiting in hotel rooms. They hired two security firms that they used during the strike that actually guarded their trucks and their plants. These people were like hired mercenaries. They were very nasty.

Patton: How did you come to find out about these strikebreaking groups?

Peralta: It was just known. I don't remember exactly how we found out. We had our intel. But obviously the company wanted us to know. We also know that they met with the Sterling Heights Police. Now this is interesting because, here we are, its March. Our contracts didn't expire—I don't remember when our contracts were due to expire. But it was way before we even started negotiations. They met in January of 1995 with the Sterling Heights Police Department and they set up a strike program with them. They also told them that they would buy them equipment that they needed for the strike. They wound up purchasing riot gear and things like that for the police department of Sterling Heights. We also met with the Sterling Heights Police in March while the negotiations were going on and they took a very hard line with us, telling us what they were going to do. We were thinking, wow, how could they—who are they to do this, to tell us how we

are going to handle our strike. Besides that it was so early on that no one was even contemplating that there would be a strike. By that happening, it seemed like the company knew that they wanted us to strike them. That was what they were looking for. That was their ultimate goal, for the unions to strike them.

Patton: You said your Local office and your home and your workplace were all in the same area.

Peralta: No, our Local [2040] office was here in Detroit, in the same place [it is currently]. But I worked a mile from the plant.

Patton: I see. Then what was the feeling within the community with this police presence?

Peralta: You're talking about after the strike started?

Patton: I was talking before the strike. You're working in the area and working with the police or talking with the police and they are already preparing. On a community level, as being a member of the community and this being your police department, what was the feeling there?

Peralta: At the time, there were people on the Sterling Heights City Council who were sympathetic to the unions and we met with those people and talked with them. But they

had a person whose name was [Steve] Duchane and he was the City Manager. He was the one who was actually in charge of the whole thing. They had the Chief of Police at the time, a guy by the name of [Thomas] Derocha. This man was a very military styled person. He pulled no punches. Duchane also was very company oriented. So, it seemed like they were in bed with the newspaper back then. But we didn't really start seeing how the community was going to react until the strike started. Most of the community was definitely behind us. We were able to get approximately—pretty much from the start of the newspaper [strike]—at the time they had about 1.2 million circulation, and they lost about 350,000 pretty much simultaneously with the strike. That was a third of their circulation that was lost due to the strike. We were able to get a lot of the advertisers to pull their ads, mostly auto dealers. So they were losing advertising revenue. They lost 350,000 subscribers. But they still kept going. That really didn't seem to make them budge on anything.

Patton: How much preparation was there for the strike?

Peralta: How much? It's hard to remember because the strike happened in July. We prepared. We had weekly meetings and we had membership meetings. But, it was one of those things that took place rather quickly. So I can't tell you exactly how much preparation took place. We met with community leaders and things like that to talk to them about the strike, at least a month prior. We met with different places like unemployment, food banks—different ways to help our members in case there was a strike. But the actual preparation of the strike, a lot of it took place, happened after as far

as boycotts and things like that. We did not want to ask people to stop taking the newspaper and advertisers to stop advertising while we were working for the company. So, that took place pretty much after the strike started. But we did compile a list of advertisers and subscribers and things like that. We were doing that all along while we were in negotiations. I would also like to say, probably two months worth of prep work as far as finding out who was advertising, who was subscribing and things like that.

Patton: What was your organizations view of outside support of the strike as far as from the community, the state and on the national level?

Peralta: Believe it or not there was an incredible amount of support. One of the things that was incredible was—I don't know how to explain it. If this would have happened today—unfortunately the unions that helped us back in '95, a lot of them wouldn't have the resources to help. Back in '95, things were doing really well for the unions and the community on the whole. I can tell you that the UAW, the labor unions, like the labor and construction unions, the post office unions, almost every union that was around gave us tremendous support. It happened very quickly because we pretty much got them to lose 350,000 subscribers in a very short period of time. Most of that was union people. The finances that we received was an incredible amount of money. The UAW didn't have one person in the strike and they adopted our strikers. Every holiday during the strike they wound up giving our people holiday cash so that they had extra money over and above the strike payments they were receiving from the internationals. That was an incredible move on the UAW's part because it was unprecedented at the time. No one did things

like that. Then we had the AFL-CIO that had a fund that pledged a million dollars to our support, to fight the strike because they knew how important the strike was to the union movement.

Patton: We talked about preparation. Once the strike was under way, was there a strategy for the strike?

Peralta: The main strategy that I was part of, the biggest part to me and the most important part, was the advertiser and consumer boycott of the reading of the paper. That was our main way of getting to the company. Because the philosophy in the newspaper industry is that the newspapers make their money off how many people buy the paper, not because they are making a lot of revenue from selling it, but because that's how they set their ad rates. So, the more customers they have, the higher they can charge for ad rates. That was the reason we went after the people buying the newspaper and cut their newspaper approximately thirty three percent down. And then the advertisers, a lot of car dealers, pulled their ads. I don't remember which ones. I do remember two specifically: Jerome Duncan Ford, which is no longer in business because they were taken over by Suburban Ford; and Roy O'Brien Ford in St Clair Shores. There were others that also helped us. But we did get more support from the auto dealers than we did from the other advertisers. There were small mom and pop shops that stopped advertising. Immediately, Best Buy stopped advertising. So did Kmart, which is another unprecedented thing. It's very hard to get national advertisers not to advertise in a paper and we were successful in getting them to pull. Also, the Teamsters had contracts with Farmer Jacks and Krogers,

we were able to get Farmer Jacks and Krogers. Now this was crucial because they put ads in the actual newspaper, not inserts, and that's where they make their money. Those were very expensive ads. These were full page ads, one or two or three full page ads, three or four times a week from both of these stores and they pulled their ads. They pulled them all the way through the strike. Some of the advertisers stuck with us through the whole thing. Then there were advertisers like Art Van and ABC Warehouse that would not pull their ads and they never would. Actually, Art Van decided to help the newspapers and advertise more with them during our strike. The funny thing was, Art Van was one of the people I used to buy my furniture from for my house and things like that. So was ABC Warehouse, another place I used to go to buy my appliances. After they did that, to this day eighteen, years later, they have never gotten a dime from me. I've never purchased one thing from them, from either advertiser because they took a nasty stance. They would not even support us for a little period of time.

Patton: You mentioned Kmart and Kroger pulling their ads. Did they also stop selling the newspaper in their stores?

Peralta: That I can't remember. I don't remember that. I think they might have but it's hard to say. Now, that was another aspect. I'm glad you mentioned that. We would go to all the different stores and ask them not to sell the paper. That was not part of what I did but we were quite successful at getting a lot of stores to pull their ads. I can tell you that another thing that happened during the newspaper strike. Every newspaper box was pulled from every auto plant in the whole area. That happened very quickly. The other

thing we used to do, another important strategy of the strike, we formed what was called a speakers bureau. We had approximately thirty people on this speaker's bureau. What they would do was they would go around and talk to the community about the strike. We would go to weekly union meetings and monthly union meetings. We would speak at different places like VFW, anywhere where there was some kind of community organization, explaining to people what was happening with the newspaper strike and why we struck and that we were looking for support. We would get financial support that way also. We would ask for support and that was very effective.

Patton: With these sort of street level activities, was there a feeling that there was some progress being made?

Peralta: The problem is, all the things that we did were very beneficial to an ending but it took a very long time because this company had deep pockets. We're talking about Gannett and Knight-Ridder. They were so profitable that they could absorb the losses here in Detroit. Instead of them making, just using raw numbers, a million dollars in one year, they made six hundred thousand or whatever it was. Back then the money that they made was a much larger amount than things are today because you're talking so many years ago. But, I think we affected them to lose, in the first year, like a million dollars. In 1995, they were on their way to profiting over fifty four thousand dollars. Before that all took place, up into the nineties they were not really making a lot of money. It wasn't until the last couple years. When the JOA came into place in 1987, they still were at a deficit. After they figured out how to get rid of the double customers and the double TV guides

and all the things that were happening back then, they actually used to have two magazines that went in the paper, they cut it back to one. They finally figured out how to streamline the paper a little bit. What they had to do was they had to take two newspapers and put it into one for their Sunday circulation. What you have to understand is that the Sunday circulation was the backbone of the newspaper. That's what we did, we did the inserts. At the time, we had approximately three hundred and twenty people full time in the mailroom and another four hundred on a contingent list of workers that worked part time. So it was quite a big operation and that was just as far as the mailroom. The pressmen probably had two or three hundred people working the pressroom. I think we had thirteen hundred or fourteen hundred in drivers circulation which was IBT Local 372. So, it was quite a big operation. As time went by they [the newspaper] streamlined and they were starting to become more profitable. That profit was just starting in 1994. In 1995 they decided to go on strike which was very foolish for them because instead of becoming profitable that year, they were on their first year of making over a hundred thousand dollars–they ended up losing quite a bit. I don't know exactly how much they lost the first year but it was not worth it. The circulation loss and the advertising loss definitely hurt them because at that time there wasn't the internet. Then, in 1998, the internet started to arise and become a competitor, now they had a natural loss of subscribers, things they didn't count on. So had the strike not taken place, they would have had about 350,000 more customers to work off that base instead of losing, say you had 1.2 million, and you lost five percent a year of that would have been a lot less than losing 350,000 and then losing five percent a year or whatever they lost during the times

of the internet market, which drastically cut into their ROP, which is where they made their money, their classified ads.

Patton: Back to the beginning of the strike. We talked about the boycott. What about picketing? What role did your organization have in that? Your local?

Peralta: Well, we had people that their duty was to picket. We had people that were there twenty-four hours, around the clock, pretty much at every site. At the time there was a plant in Detroit and there was a plant in Sterling Heights. We had to cover two driveways in Sterling Heights, only one in Detroit. So we covered those driveways. But the problem with picketing—picketing was visual thing because you could not actually stop the papers from leaving the building because it was just impossible with the amount of people we had. And we had an injunction against us because we had a couple of mass demonstrations in August and September of '95. Actually one night was Labor Day 1995. We wound up stopping the papers from going out almost all night. They actually brought helicopters in to get their papers out. It was an incredible night that night. That was very successful. Now they claim that they still got the paper out and, yes, they got some papers out, but they did not get the paper out as they normally would have. But we had approximately four thousand people on the picket line that day and it was an incredible moment in labor history because unions from all over the country came in and helped us with that day. But previous to that, August 31st of '95, we had quite a few people, it was a Saturday night. We had quite a few people on the picket line in Sterling Heights and there was a couple melees with the Sterling Heights police that night. And actually this one

particular night they dragged this person across the street and they arrested him, saying he resisted arrest when all he was doing was picketing. It was horrible that night. The police department came over in a v-formation and plowed right through the people to open up the line. It was unbelievable. Have you ever seen any video on it?

Patton: Yes, a little bit. Were you ever present for any of those strikes?

[The interview continues on for another hour.]