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ORAL INTERVIEW
(PARTS 1&2)

ARTHUR OSMAN

HERBERT HILL, INTERVIEWER
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Detroit, Michigan

H: Herbert Hill, Interviewer
O: Arthur Osman, Interviewee
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Interview with Arthur Osman

H. This is an interview with Arthur Osman, in New York City, July 12, 1968. Mr. Osman, I would like to ask you, by way of beginning the interview, to tell us about the early organizing efforts that resulted in the founding of District 65. Tell us something about the groups involved, the personalities, and something of your own efforts to organize District 65.

O. Well, the best way is to describe it from the beginning. Our union was started on the lower east side of New York in the wholesale dry-goods industry. I personally worked in a place that was located on Orchard Street and Grain Street. You know that neighborhood, and so you can appreciate the character of the environment. The people working in this industry were primarily Jewish immigrants. Many of them could not speak, read, or write English; some of them, because of religious scruples couldn't work any place else because of their observance of Jewish holidays.

H. First of all, Mr. Osman, what year is this? What year are we talking about?

O. We're talking of 1933, the worst days of the depression. Now, you've got to understand something which was going on at the time. In many respects our union can be called an NRA baby. You remember what the NRA was? In 1932 people were rioting all over the country; farmers were dumping milk, food warehouses were being broken into; foreclosures of homes and farms were being fought physically, violently; there was a spirit of revolution in America. Roosevelt enacted the National Recovery Act and gave workers the right to organize under Section 7A. There was a general response to this, this opportunity to become organized and involved in an effort to assert oneself. This was a desire on the part of working people generally to have a voice in shaping their own destiny. You remember the conflict between the AFL and the CIO over that.

H. In 1933 there was no CIO.

O. No, but there were beginnings of organization in industrial union areas. You remember there were stirrings in New York industry - this was before the CIO. And I recall a specific incident, when Roosevelt did not come to the aid of the budding automobile workers union, and even helped break at strike there. Many people who had hopes that the Recovery Act was going to solve their problems became disillusioned.

H. Can you tell us a little about the various groups? In 1933, in the heart of the depression, what were you doing?

O. Well, as I was saying, I was working at a wholesale dry goods merchant..His function was to buy merchandise from a manufacturer and sell it to a retailer. Now, the people in our industry were primarily immigrants, Jewish immigrants. They were lacking in courage. They were afraid, they were uneducated, they were dependent entirely on management. You've got to bear in mind that there was a great deal of unemployment in those days. Any job was a precious possession.

H. Will you please tell us about the first organizing activities you were engaged in? I judge this was organizing in the textile district among the textile distributors. warehouseman -

O. Let me just complete the beginnings, because this is significant. In 1933 there were some attempts to organize in our industry.

H. How would you describe the industry? What name would you give it?

O. The dry goods industry. Now on one occasion - we came to believe they were furriers; we're not sure to this day who they were. They came, and they appealed to the workers to walk out. It was one of those vague appeals. No one paid any attention. Now, this place I worked in received leaflets; and I once attended a rally. I and a few others from my place went to a rally, and some people spoke to us. To this day we don't know who they were. And we did not respond to them. Our people did not seem to be im-

pressed with these people. But there was discussion amongst us as a result of that. It so happens that when this discussion took place I was employed, and I had one of the better jobs. I had been working there about a year and a half, and I had been advanced, peculiarly, in an unprecedented fashion. I kept making threats to quit, and others were surprised and shocked that I had the guts to do that. For one reason or another I seemed to enjoy the confidence of the people in that place; there was occasional talk in the basement where people hung up their clothes , about their need for a union. I once suggested they give me a party for my first son. So out of that suggestion came the plan for a meeting at my house, presumably to celebrate the birth of my first child.

H. Can you give us the date?

O. On September 16, 1933, on a Saturday, we met in my house in Brooklyn. It was a secret gathering of six or seven people. All were employees of the Wholesale Merchant. At that meeting we discussed our lot and our need to do something about it. We didn't know whether we wanted to call ourselves a club, then a brotherhood, and then we saw we were evading the issue - we were a union. At that gathering we agreed to have another meeting a week later, secretly and to invite six additional persons - the whole place had only about sixty or seventy workers employed. After several weeks, by doubling, we had the place 100% organized. That's how the union got started.

H. Did you give yourself a name at this point?

O. We called ourselves the wholesale drivers' union, with no affiliation. We did explore the possibility of affiliation; first of all we were afraid - we didn't trust the AFL. "Labor racketeers" was a meaningful phrase to us. We didn't trust the labor racketeers, we didn't trust the cops, we didn't trust anybody, but ourselves. When we went to the AFL to talk with them we spoke to William Collins, who was regional director for the AFL. We were

disappointed in talking with him - all our fears were multiplied. Then we went to the United Hebrew Trades on East Broadway. We spoke to Morris Feinstone, and he did offer us some encouragement but we also felt very suspicious that some kind of deal was to be made. We first became affiliated, a year later, with the AFL as a federal local. It was called Local 19932, directly affiliated with the AFL, with a federal charter. Incidentally, you will be interested to know that before the AFL accepted us, they made us change our name from wholesale drivers workers union to wholesale drivers employees union. The word "workers" rubbed them the wrong way. Now, incidentally, this was in 1935, and, for your information, in 1935 I attended my first convention, in Tampa, Florida, of the American Federation of Labor, and naturally, representing a federal local, I had one vote. We were called "one-lungers." We had about 100 or 120 members at this time. Incidentally, I spoke at that convention and was part of the progressive, rebellious element that came to the defense of the Committee for Industrial Organization which had already been formed, but which had not been formalized. They were expelling the clothing workers and other unions for forming this committee at that convention. You might be interested in reading the proceedings of that convention, and seeing my name.

H. You were associated with the group which was pressing for industrial unionism. Do you want, perhaps, to make a jump now into John L. Lewis' Committee for Industrial Organization? Tell us something about your role there.

O. In 1935 after we organized this one shop we organized the rest of the street. After we became 100% organized in our plant we suddenly confronted the boss with our need for a contract. We got our first contract in 1933 with H. Ecstein and Company about sixty to seventy workers being covered. We got that contract before we were affiliated with anybody. We drafted our own contract. If you read the text of that contract, you will see how

amateurish and naive we were. We didn't trust anybody. We had no arbitration clause. We wanted the right to approve or disapprove everything. Nothing could be done without our consent - an impossible contract. We were like extremists today - you couldn't reason with us.

H. At the time of the convention in 1935 how many union contracts did you have?

O. At the time of the convention we must have had about a dozen places, because these were small places, two workers, three workers, maybe 150 workers. After we organized the immediate vicinity we organized the next group on lower Broadway. These were all Jewish establishments, but these were the so-called aristocracy of the industry. Unlike us greenhorns, they were the more Americanized Jews. I am an immigrant - I was born in Poland, near Warsaw, but when I was about three years old, my mother and my brother and myself went to Siberia. My father had been a political exile in Siberia, so after he had been exiled a year, the family was permitted to join him. We ended up in Siberia. When the Revolution broke out, he was liberated, being a political prisoner. They tried to get back into Russia, but we lived in such a remote part of Siberia that finally when we got to Irkutsk which took months by caravan, and so forth, the Civil war had broken out, and they couldn't get back. So we went to Manchuria. That's where we lived until by accident my father became aware of the fact that his brothers lived in United States. They communicated with each other, and my family decided to come here. I was twelve years old when that happened.

H. Now to get back to the matter of union organization. We're now in 1935, pretty bleak days. After your AFL convention you came back to New York and you began to organize in earnest. You were still in the shop?

O. Yes. In 1936 we had several hundred workers and we wanted to hire a full-time organizer. We shopped around, and tried several people, but they

didn't work out. One of the organizers we had was recommended to us by a newspaper man working for the Jewish Daily, a liberal man, Mr. Morgan Stern. His father-in-law was the man that worked for us, Mr. Shalley. This Mr. Shalley after being with us for a couple of months suddenly without forewarning us gets up at our membership and says "You people are looking for leadership all over the block and you've got the best leader in the room." Right then they drafted me to come on to the staff of the union.

H. What year was that?

O. This was in 1936, and I did come on. For practical purposes I was president of the union. We did not go for the mechanical concepts of secretary -treasurer being the important guy. We did what seemed natural; I was the leader of the union so I was the president.

H. How long did you remain with the federal charter?

O. In 1936, we made a decision having organized the dry goods industry to expand into other section of the wholesale industry. As a federal local AFL this had nothing to do with the textiles. We immediately came into conflict with the AFL. There was a wholesale shoe local and a wholesale hardware local and when we suggested that we merge with them, Bill Collins objected to it. This is not the first time we encountered conflict with the AFL leadership. Prior to that when we had a big strike in the main dry good places on lower Broadway the United Hebrew Trades sent in friends to help us solve the problem and we recognized their behavior as being more concerned with interest of management than of us. We just physically chased them out of the union halls, these were union officials. Later on Bill Collins himself became involved and he called in by an association of dry goods merchants. He was trying to convince us that we should give the boss the right to hire and fire; as long as everybody belonged to the union what difference does it make, you'll still get the dues. That was his philosophy. When we tried to merge with the Shoe workers and the Hard-

ware workers they objected to it.

H. What was the next group of workers that you did organize?

O. Well, at that stage the CIO had already come into existence. The Committee for Industrial Organization, Allan Haywood was in New York and John Brophy was in New York and I did visit with them and discussed with them and they suggested that we should quit the AFL. We did quit and took a few workers with us and some of the Hardware workers with us and we formed a wholesale dry goods workers union. At that stage we became acquainted with a little group of about 50 or 60 people who worked in the textile market. Livingston was the leader of that group. They had a lot of cards, but no members. They were part of the textile workers organizing committee. So we met with them. They were called local 65 of TWOC. 65 was a good simple number, better than 9932 so we adopted that number.

H. So it was a merger?

O. It was a merger in 1937, you can get these specific facts from our union paper.

H. So it was at this stage that your group became affiliated with the textile workers organizing committee?

O. We were there just nominally. Within a few months Sidney Hillman suggested that we did not belong there. There were many complications involved there. First of all you've got to realize that within our own union there was a struggle for orientation. Some of our people wanted to be respectable, concentrate on the narrow group of dry goods people - associate primarily with the retail dry goods people who were also being organized at that ime. Establish good decent conditions for ourselves and just forget everybody else. Others of us talked about a more basic element, of warehousemen in particular looking towards laboring rather than the sales help as the source of our strength and power and hope.

H. What was your membership base at this stage? You had the textile dry goods workers -

O. We had the dry good workers, including sales help, office help, warehouse help, industrial help, shipping help. Everybody from top to bottom. Then we had the shoe workers (jobbers not manufacturing) and hardware. Two of the plants were warehouses of the Miles shoe company and A.S.Beck Shoe Co. You know that these are chain stores that maintain huge warehouses and offices in the shoe market. Then there were the textile workers. So we had three bases. We had definitely decided that we were going to organize the poor, the most oppressed, the least skilled people. Our orientation would be directed in that line rather than sales.

H. Very early there was significant differentiation of your approach towards the unskilled as from the AFL approach toward the skilled craft workers.

O. We had conflict in the AFL on many skills even with the teamsters. Some of our places were really warehouses which employed drivers. The teamsters union organized these drivers and they consciously at the time at that time prevented the organization of the warehousemen. Mike Cashell, if you'll recall, he was the director of the teamsters union in New York at the time, argued with me. He said, "Arthur if you organize all the warehousemen, where is the boss going to take the money? If you organize just the platform men and the drivers we can get 'em a good raise but if you got to divide the pie with everybody, you're just going to get crumbs." This was the basic distinction.

H. How close were you personally involved with the John L. Lewis group in the attempt to set up the Congress of Industrial organizations?

O. I was not; I was a small fry in that picture, but I did meet with Brophy, Gropi and Haywood. Because we were an active union our activity brought us in contact with many people. We had quite an importance which

was out of proportion to our size. We were not working in a manufacturing plant. When we walk out on strike we do not automatically cripple our employer. So we seem to be powerless. Because of this lack of capacity to cripple our employer we had to devise methods of involving not only our total membership, but all sorts of other people including the community. When we organize ourselves and became involved in the strike we had to find out where the employer was getting his goods and try to cause him trouble at the source of his merchandise. We had to find out where he was selling his goods and try to cause trouble in the retail place. We chased the boss to where he lives and caused him trouble in his synagogue or in his church. In those early stages we discovered for us to win with our limited power we had to involve the whole community and many communities: something we are learning today in the efforts to organize black workers in the south where we find that organizing on a narrow trade union basis is a guarantee of defeat. Only organizing the whole community can supply us with victory.

H. Can you tell us the next stage of growth of union? By the way at this stage was the membership still entirely or primarily Jewish?

O. At this stage it was primarily Jewish. First non-Jewish person we had was a Negro worker in the BIB Corporation; he was a porter, Alexander Miles. He was the first Negro member - in 1935. We were so eager to prove that we had ideals of brotherhood and equality that we went out of our way to honor him and fight for him to make progress. An interesting incident occured. One of our firms on Orchard Street, L & B Hosiery Co. tried to put on airs of being a very dignified and fancy place and they wanted to hire a porter so we sent them various workers, but they wouldn't hire them. They wanted a black man as a porter and we insisted on making an issue of it. We said if a job is open for all you don't have to discriminate against blacks by hiring them specifically for that purpose. From then on we said we had to

find ways in getting black people into the industry and the people eventually did. We fought against the hiring of a black to be a porter.

H. Where did this early sensitivity on the race question come from? It certainly did not come from the AFL, it did not come from general context of the American labor movement. Where did your early sensitivity on the race question have its origins?

O. My impression, in retrospect, is that coming as we did from a group of Jewish immigrants many of whom had revolutionary back grounds. I personally got through telling you my father was a political prisoner in Russia, and he was in jail for several years and was exiled for life to Siberia. I was brought up among political exiles and to me it was a natural thing to fight for freedom. The struggle during the depression had an element of revolution in it. The fact that some people wanted to make a reform movement out of it is another question.

H. We're not in 1937-38. What were your political involvements at this stage?

O. I was apolitical at the time. A lot of politics was in the air. When I say I was apolitical I do not mean that I was ignorant as to what was going on but I was not affiliated with anybody, and I was not active any place. Within the union we had all sorts of elements, and my main concern was to unite them all for a revolutionary objective - fighting for working people to shape their own destiny. My thinking was that some day workers will not shape only their own lives, but will alter society according to their own wishes. Specifically, we had communist and socialist and what not. In this clique that Livingston brought in to our union, I think among a group of 20 workers they had 18 political philosophies. You can go crazy trying to enumerate them all. The times were full of radicalism. I personally welcome cooperation from every source. As a matter

of fact I did receive cooperation from communists a great deal. In fact, they were the only ones that really cooperated. They were helpful. Some individuals among them might have been extremists and unrealistic in some of their approaches, but nevertheless we found them contributing to the spirit of the times. They were willing to cooperate.

H. Now please, as rapidly as you can, tell us about the next steps in the organization of the union.

O. We tried to get a charter from the AFL as a warehousemen's union in 1936. Allen Haywood was telling us that Harry Bridges was coming into the CIO.

H. Let's get the chronology straight here; in 1936 the CIO was not yet separate labor federation.

O. When I say applied, we were discussing it, I don't know if they did anything in a formal sense. Haywood was telling us that Harry Bridges and longshoremen on the West coast were coming into the CIO. He was posing a question as to whether we would not be suitable to associate with them. We were at that time reluctant because Joe Ryan on the East coast was conducting a life or death struggle for him and we would have been ground to dust between these two gentlemen.

H. Ryan was very powerful?

O. That's true, and when I mentioned this to Brophy and Haywood, they agreed 100%. In the meantime the retail union, Retail Clerks International Protective Association, as you recall, they had a split, between you and me it was a falling out of thieves. Samuel Wolchok led a clique of characters who rebelled against the international union for proper cause, but they weren't exactly angels themselves. They broke away, and applied for a charter from the CIO and they received it. It was called the United Retail Employees of America in 1937, I believe. Haywood suggested that we go into Wolchok's outfit. By this time we had laready had about 3,000 workers or more. We met with Wolchok and reached an agreement whereby the

name would be changed to Retail and Wholesale-Wholesale and Retail Workers of America, and he would establish a warehouse department within this international. We would name the director of the department, persumably it would have been me. I don't have to tell you, you're acquainted with the facts, well he double-crossed, he was a thief, he was a liar, he was a Red baiter, he was more interested in organizing from the top, sweetheart contracts, and we had a contest with him from the very first day. At about that time the department store workers were organizing in 1937. They came into this international. They were honest, decent youngsters who were fighting for clean trade unions. We naturally gravitated toward them. They immediately labeled us communist. We were-at that time didn't even know what the Communists were. I remember attending a strategy committee meeting which discussed the progress of organization in the Bloomingdale Department Store. Bloomingdale had about 3,000 employees. They had signed up about 1,000 and I recall at this meeting one of the leaders, Sam Lewis of Bloomingdale was describing the progress they're making and he thought that within another few weeks they'd have close to 2,000 people signed up. Sam Wolchok turned around and he thought that I was one of his stooges. He turned around and said to me, "we don't want to sign anymore," I asked why. "Because we won't be able to control these people; this way I can go through management and make a deal." This has been the touchstone of his methods of organization. That's the reason we always came to conflict with him. We stayed 'til 1946. During all this time we were in constant conflict with him, but we concentrated on organizing ourselves. During this time we were Local 65 of the Retail, Wholesale & Department Store union-

H. Which was the CIO affiliated?

O. Yes!

H. When did you go into that international union?

O. In October or November of 1937. We remained 'til 1948.

H. In that span of 10 years, tell us something about your membership

growth, the kind of industries that you had members in, how large you had become and something about the racial and ethnic composition of your membership by the end of your period in the wholesale- retail union.

O. From the day we became affiliated with the CIO we started, and were constantly involved in an organizing campaign. We were organizing actually, the people that no one else wanted. Our jurisdiction was poorly defined. We haven't got a homogeneous industry. The dry goods workers are a small group, the shoe workers are a small group -

H. Please elaborate on the groups, name some of the other groups and some of the actual occupations. What was the delivery department?

O. They were people who were stock boys, shipping clerks, receiving clerks, sweepers, messenger boys, unskilled people.

H. At this stage between '38 and '47, was your membership still predominately white?

O. It was predominately white, but by '37-'38 we'd begun to organize shops where some Negro workers were employed, particularly in the textile industry, in the lining industry, in the notions industry. This is where employees didn't have to know anything. They just had to carry packages, know how to run errands and how to find an address.

H. Very early, then, you were a union of unskilled workers in marginal occupations.

O. We were organizing the "Dead End" jobs, jobs which kids took when they got out of school. They would receive all sorts of promises and found out, after several years, they weren't getting anywhere.

H. I remember in the middle 40's, I was a kid and I was a member of local 65, I worked in a small print shop on Listinard Street, one block below Canal Street and that was a printing shop. I helped to organize that shop for Local 65. You did have some manufacturing shops of a great variety;

how did that happen?

O. Because we did not have an identity like the auto workers or the steel workers we found other devices for stimulating organization, for giving ourselves a sense of pride. Aside from popularizing the number 65, "Be alive in 65" and slogans of that kind. Our union did engage in activities which made the union hall the center of social activity. We had recreation, athletics, dances, parties and every kind of thing you could think of. But we adopted certain slogans like "organize the shop next door". We didn't state what kind of a shop. If you're organizing a shop that could belong or could be served in another union we'll send them there. But if nobody else wants them then 65 will welcome them. That's how we organized places which were marginal printing places, and box makers, people who nobody really wanted although they were on the edges of other industries. After we organized them and demonstrated that they were valuable people and organizable, others made all kinds of jurisdiction claims against us. That's one of the reasons why 65 was always in conflict with everybody else.

H. We're now in 1948; local 65 at this stage has approximately how many members?

O. About 13,000 - 3,000 shops with employees ranging from 1 in a shop to 1.000 in larger stores.

H. In a certain sense you were one big industrial union.

O. Yes, we were organizing people, we weren't organizing jobs. In our union when a person becomes unemployed he is still a member of the union. When a person is retired he's still a member of the union.

H. In 1948, tell me something about the racial and ethnic composition. Did you begin to have more Negro, Puerto Rico workers, is the composition of the labor force changed?

O. By 1948, we must have had 20% Negroes due to two things , first of all before the war we consciously tried to organize shops which employed Negro

workers.

H. Why?

O. We felt that they needed the union most. Secondly we felt that they are better union people because they never had illusions about ever becoming a boss or becoming part of the establishment. Many white workers particularly one that does some selling and some other executive work thinks he's going to become a boss one day. There were no illusions among the black workers, they were the best union people, basically, because of our revolutionary approach that most exploited people needed the organization most. During the war when there was a shortage of labor, we were most unsuccessful in getting black people organized, and employed in our industry. Many of them would have been employed anyhow, the fact is that we expedited the hiring of Negro and Puerto Rico workers.

H. At this stage in Local 65 had you already established a hiring hall, you have a dispatcher's hall.

O. From the beginning we had a hiring hall. I mean literally at the beginning when an employee needed help we insisted that we would supply help.

H. What year did you set up a formal hiring hall?

O. The formal hiring hall was set up probably in '38. You can look up back files of union hall ---

H. How did the hiring hall operate?

O. At that time we examined other hiring halls and we even had two people from Harry Bridges' union on the West coast. They had what you call a rotary hiring service and we more or less copied that.

H. How did that work?

O. When a person became unemployed, he went to the union hiring hall and registered. His name or his registration number was posted. When a job came in the job was announced and the first person who was qualified

for that job applied for that job.

H. The person who was the longest unemployed had first prerogative for the job.

O. Assuming he was capable of handling the job. Now later on this was slightly changed because of the Taft-Hartley limitations. Under the Taft-Hartley law you know you cannot conduct a hiring hall that way. So we adopted a new approach. The approach was the seniority in the industry shall be the guiding principle for hiring people. Today the hiring hall is opened to anybody, union or non-union people as well. Obviously, the people with the senority in the industry, are union people, and get the jobs first, not because they are union people, but because they have seniority. Today we are placing many people who are not in the union and they inevitably become members of the union.

H. In 1948, you had 20% black membership; was there some indication of the emergence of black leadership, that the union should take steps to develop a black leadership? Furthermore, was there any conflict with white workers regarding the leadership's insistance on a full equality and treatment of the black worker of the union?

O. We always had unity in a struggle for fair employment practices. From the very beginning when we would send a man on a job, a black man, and if he wasn't hired, we would automatically ask the people in the hiring hall who were white to skip their turn to make sure another black person is sent.

H. What year did you do this?

O. From the very beginning of the hiring hall.

H. What if the white workers objected to this?

O. We would argue this out and if it were necessary to argue for 2 or 3 days we'd argue it out. Eventually, they would all agree. Some white workers felt that they were losing an opportunity.

H. So what happens if the boss refuses to accept this Negro? The next person up for the job would be a white; would you convince them out not to apply for the job? You would wait, and resist on sending out a Negro?

O. Yes, the next Negro in line was sent. The boss was told to hire a Negro. If the very first Negro is rejected and if we can prove that it has no merit we'd fight odds right there and then. But assuming we weren't able to prove discrimination or the man really wasn't obviously qualified we would pursue this tactic, as a result of which after a while the employer stopped fighting us.

H. As a result of this strategy you were able to open up a significant number of job opportunities for Negro workers. What made District 65 so different from other unions in New York on this question? There were other unions in New York City that had a much publicized socialist class, that pledged themselves to equality in fair employment practices. But they did not do very specific things that led to equality in job opportunities of Negro workers. What were the factors that made District 65 different on the race question?

O. You cannot separate the race question from other questions. Our union was different.

H. Why?

O. Why, because it could not suryive unless it involved the total membership in struggle. Our industries were not vulnerable to a strike for the reasons I explained to you before. If a small minority walked out we were licked. We had to have 100% participation. Even when all the workers in the shop were on strike we had to mobilize our total membership on the nearest picket line. We were conducting physical struggles. We did not engage in speech making; we were acting. We were performing and the black people saw that we were performing and for that reason many workers came to us;

we didn't have to organize them. All the unwanted knew that 65 will welcome them. If you please, they were beating a path to our door.

H. You are saying then that the union's commitment to racial equality was a positive factor in organizing new workers. You didn't have the resistance that other unions had in organizing. Well, how about the white workers then, did you not experience resistance with white workers?

O. Obviously, there were many whites who didn't see it that way. Most of them came to recognize that they could not win unless the union was strong and big. We organized this industry when wages were less than 10¢ a hour. You have no idea of the misery under which we worked. You take when I worked in Eckstein's I used to come in at 9:00 in the morning and at midnight I used to have to sneak out to go home. My first week's salary was $11 or $12. I was married and had a child. The point I'm making is that this was typical. There were people working for seven or eight dollars a week working 80 or 90 hours or more. Now when we came into the picture, when we organized our industry and changed the hours to a 6'oclock closing time people never saw daylight before. Never went home when the sun was so shiny they were shocked. Many people were wondering what they were going to do with their leisure time. We were not the only ones. I remember Eleanor Roosevelt talking about we have to find ways and means of utilizing this leisure time. It was a problem.

H. So, very early -

O. When we made these demands we doubled and tripled the cost of employers. Our workers recognized that in order to continue to keep making progress that they'd have to have an awful lot of strength and a little union couldn't do this. We have to grow and get bigger in order to have the power to get more wage increases.

H. But there were many unions in New York City who took the opposite paths to get power. They became narrow restrictive organizations. They made

deals with employers to get power. They restricted their labor force to certain ethnic or religious groups. They sought another route towards getting power. You took a route that was significally different; was this in anyway related to some idealogical committment?

O. I think so' basically we were organizing people, others were organizing jobs. We said if a job isn't worthy of decent compensation it isn't worthy of a human being's time. We said to an employer,"If you cannot pay a decent wage, get out of business." Other unions were interested in preserving their industries. We said to hell with that industry. If it cannot support decent living conditions it should not exist. But we said to our people if this firm goes out of business we'll fight to get jobs elsewhere. We'll go to unorganized shops and fight to place our people. That's the reason from the very beginning that we had a hiring hall.

H. In other words you're saying you were not in business to solve the problems of the employer as other unions are, but to solve problems of the owrker?

O. We were organizing people - human beings, not jobs.

H. It seems to me that you had a fundamentally different attitude on two questions. Number 1, a different attitude toward black workers and a different attitude toward the unskilled, in contrast to most other unions operating in New York City. You welcomed blacks and you welcomed the unskilled and you took a position toward any job that an employer was ready to hire workers for, at decent wages, decent working standards, who didn't make insidious comparisons between the skilled workers, the craft worker, and the unskilled worker or the black worker and the white worker. But you were in many ways fundamentally different from most other unions.

O. Let me say this to you, the people we organized were mostly youngsters as is understandable. The people during that time had less of an opportunity for schooling than they have today. Many of our kids were under 18 and 19

years of age. Matter of fact we had a problem with a child labor act. Most of our people took these jobs under false promises, because of compulsion. They had no other job available for them. We felt that it was unfortunate that a man was compelled to take some kind of a job that is not rewarding. This is something we have to contend with.

H. Would you say that certain radical and political ideas, the concept of working class unity for the skilled and unskilled, black and white were, the contributing factors for success?

O. I presume my personal background and the background of other Jewish immigrants who had a socialist, communist, or marxist ideological background in their family was a factor, but basically we dedicated ourselves to the elevation of the people.

H. There are other unions that had a significant Jewish immigrant leadership who also had a background in radical and political ideas, like certain locals in the ILGWU, and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers; they didn't take this approach at all. They were craft unions, restricted, narrow, protective. They had an attitude of superiority towards black workers, they made not only no effort to bring black workers in, but they tried to keep it closed to their Jewish groups or their Italian groups and it became an organization of skilled workers. You obviously took another approach. I want to get to the point of why.

O. I don't know why, but I do remember from the very beginning we were confronted with two facts. One was that no union official was capable of accomplishing anything without involvement of the total rank and file membership. We had attendance at meetings between 90 and 95%. If we had a social event, or a boat ride 100% of our members went on that boat ride. If we had a ball game not only did each team play, but every member. The reason for that is that we couldn't win a strike if our membership was not

involved. Therefore, union officials did not regard themselves as geniuses who did things for the membership; the membership did things for themselves with guidance and direction of the officers. We had a basic dispute over meaning of the word "collective bargaining agent." When the NRA was enacted the workers weren't permitted to choose their collective bargaining agent, we had a discussion in our own rank that we are not a collective bargaining agent, we're not any agency whom the workers choose to represent them. We are an organization of people that are shaping their own destiny. This is the basic difference in approaches. Many union officials found that they could make more rapid personal advances by speaking for many people, and setting themselves up as the spokesmen for all sorts of masses. Perhaps if we'd had that kind of leadership, we would have been a better union or it would have done more good, I don't know. Our approach was to organize people as equals, not as tools for union officials.

H. In 1948, you left the retail wholesale warehouse union.

O. We left them because of the McCarthyite atmosphere that existed at that time.

H. I want to interrupt you.

O. In 1948, this was after the Taft-Hartley law had been enacted and the CIO was conducting a campaign to kick out of its ranks every militant union on the grounds that they were Communist dominated. Now our union, our local union 65 at that time was considered to be a Communist dominated union, because there were communists in our leadership. I worked close with communists myself and I agreed with many things that the communists did. I disagreed with some and agreed with other items. In our international, department store locals were also considered pro-communist or communist dominated. When the Taft-Hartley law was enacted with the requirement for the signing non-communist affidavit, Wolchok who was looking for split in the union rather, he was looking to take control of the unions which he

could not dominate, namely the department store locals and ourselves he grasped on this thing and proceeded to suspend various locals he regarded as communist dominated on the theory that they had not yet signed the non-communist affidavit. We were never actually suspended. That's why I say wait. When the Taft-Hartley law had been enacted and the problem of the right to be on the ballot and our election became a real question, many unions including ours were considering signing the non-communist affidavit, although men like John L. Lewis refused to sign. As a matter of fact our unions had meetings scheduled for the purpose of voting to sign a non-communist affidavit. One of these locals was the Macey local, which was not a communist dominated union even by Wolchok's definition. Because Sam Covinesky, he was a red-baiter from way back. He himself became victimized by this thing. Local 1S had a meeting scheduled to vote on the signing of the non-communist affidavit. Wolchok beat them to the gun and suspended them before they had a chance to sign a non-communist affidavit. When that happened the other departments in local 65 seceded and came to the defense of local 1S.

H. Which other departments were locals beside local 1S?

O. At that time it was local 1250. Others were Hearns and Manns and Mozier's, Local 3, Bloomingdale's, local 2, Gimble's, local 5, Stern's, and local 1199, the drug employees.

H. With the exception of 1S did the other departments or locals come into 65?

O. Yes, afterwards. After we disaffiliated.

H. What was the date?

O. In 1948.

H. Approximately what day?

O. It was in the summer of 1948.

H. You disaffiliated, local 65.

O. And the other locals, and we got together and formed what we called the Distributive Workers Council.

H. Consisting of what?

O. Consisting of all of these locals

H. What locals?

O. Local 1199, Local 1S, Local 2, Local 3, Local 5 and Local 1250 and plus Local 65.

H. Approximately how many workers were involved?

O. I would say there were close to 20,000 workers.

H. That includes the 13,000 workers of local 65; some of these joined with the newly formed district 65, Sam Covinesky

O; Sam Covinesky drifted away, he didn't feel like he was a little bit of a red-baiter himself and he felt more comfortable being away from us. We then decided to form a national union. At that time the office workers union had been expelled. That was not a professional organization.

H. May I interrupt you? For the record I want to establish that in the period of 1948 and 1949 the Congress of Industrial Organizations expelled the so called communist-controlled unions. Among those unions were the United Office and Professional Workers and the Food and Tobacco workers, FTA.

O. By the time we met them they were remnants of their old union. There were very few of them left. However, we suggested that they unite with us and we formed the DPO. The Distributing Processing and Office Workers of America.

H. You called yourselves District 65?

O. No, we called ourselves the Distributive Processing, and Office Workers of America. In New York City we combined all of our membership into one organization, District 65

H. Did you still have an international union?

O. Yes

H. In '48?

O. That's right. District 65 became one organization of all the locals in New York City. That's why 65 is called District 65 because it had several locals within it.

H. Who was president of DPO?

O. I became president of DPO

H. Who were some of the other officers? Would you mention some of the other officers?

O. I was president, Jack Paley was secretary-treasurer. Donald Henderson of the FTA was a vice-president and John Stanley of the UOPWA. And we had an executive board which was a broad body representing all of the locals.

H. Tell me something about the growth of Negro membership at this stage.

O. Well, let's discuss the total membership because our job at that moment was to salvage members rather than to organize new ones. Wolchok attacked the locals in New York City. The CIO didn't have confidence in his ability to attack them effectively so the clothing workers union, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union, set up an organizing Committee to organize the department stores. They became involved in a raid on our union. We beat them everywhere. Later on Jack Potofsky said he didn't realize that our union 65, and I personally, Arthur Osman, was involved. He said had he known that he would have stayed out. The fact is that they did withdraw after a few defeats. Of course we defeated Wolchok.

H. What year were those raids?

O. In 1948 and '49. Every attempt to raid our union failed. And after a while everybody in the CIO respected us as an organization.

H. How long did the DPO exist?

O. From 1948 to 1954. Now we went all over the country where there were elements of the FTA in existence. And we salvaged some of them. Some of them were dead. For instance, I went to Bay City, Florida, where the Pasco Packing Corporation, world's greatest citrus plant, was persumably under contract with the FTA. We had written letters and we had gotton no response. I went to Bay City, I couldn't find a single member. I looked up all the names and addresses and they weren't even in the City.. I finally found two persons who claimed that they were members of the union, but they were not active. And from that insignificant foundation we restored a union of 1,000 workers.

H. I recall during this period representatives of DPO went into the deep south and established local unions.

O. Well, this is one of them, Pasco Packing Co. in Bay City. In Charleston South Carolina we reorganized the American Tobacco Company.

H. Did you have a contract there?

O. Yes, in Suffolk, Virginia, the Planters Peanut Corporation in Memphis, Tenn.; in Houston, Texas.

H. Now here you had a significant concentration of black workers, didn't you?

O. In most of these places the bulk of the workers were black. We've got to bear in mind that when the red-baiting attacks on the FTA took place all of their white workers quit on them. The only loyal element were blacks. And the black people proved themselves to be the most trustworthy trade unionists.

H. The DPO had expanded into the deep south now. I would like for you to mention some of the Negro organizers. There was Henry Hamilton.

O. We sent some Negroes from New York to other areas and we found we had mixed success. They did not always prove to be effective, but this was the way we found out. We sent Henry Hamilton, we sent Clay Stout to

Louisiana, we sent other people elsewhere, but we found out that our best leadership came from the ranks of the local, indiginous groups. In Suffolk, Va. for instance where we had a shell of a local, there was a man, Leroy Harrisey - he's died since. We helped him, we brought him to New York. We gave him some training, we sent him back and gave him some assistance as we could and------.

H. Would you rapidly indicate the number of shops or the number of contracts you had organized out of New York City and roughly the number of workers and something of the industry wide diversity?

O. In Florida we had this Pasco Packing Company, about 1,000 people. This was one place which was pre-dominately white. In Charleston, South Carolina, the American Tobacco Company also about 1,000 people. It was about 50-50, but the blacks were solid in the union, the whites only a fraction of them were in the union. In Suffolk, Va. we had about 1,500 people. Mostly from Planters Peanue Company and there were two or three other similar plants. In Newport News, Virginia we have a Hide and Storage Company, all blacks. In Memphis, Tennessee we had (All of these numbers I give you are a result of reorganization from practically nothing) about 1,000, in Houston, Texas about 500. In Nashville a few hundred people. In Mississippi, Fort Gibson, Leland and Jackson, Mississippi, we had little plants. We had a few additional plants here and there.

H. Did you pick up a significant Negro membership during this period?

O. Most of these were Negro people. And when we were able to get full time Negro leadership they became viable-they survived and they grew. When we could not get full time Negro leadership it began to fall apart.

H. In what year did you disband DPO?

O. During this period from '48-'54, we were growing slowly, but we were growing. By 1954 we had a combined membership of about 35 or 40,000 members.

With that unusual diversity and very broad spread of industry and occupations involved necessary to have strikes which might have otherwise been avoidable.

H. Were there any problems with some officers signing the noncomunist?

O. No, because if presumably there were one or two who were actually members of the communist party, they would resign from the party. I signed the noncommunist affidavit and so did Paley, Livingston, Michaelson and all of the officers. There was no problem there. Let's get one thing straight. Even some our officers who were members of the communist party they were not agents of a foreign government, they were just belonging to something which they thought had some merit.

H. I want to make the point that between 1948 and 1954 the period in which the DPO was a separate international union with you, Arthur Osman, as its president; you successfully fought off the raids by both the AFL and CIO unions, you successfully fought off the attacks upon the government, you succeeded in maintaining your organizational integrity, you grew, you established a nation wide base; by 1954 you had almost 40,000 members.

O. Probably

H. Would you please explain the position of District 65 on the matter of a dues check off?

O. When I talk to you about the democratic character of our union, the involvement of our membership in everything we do, you may think this is just a phrase, but this was actually a fact. We could not exist as a union unless our members were made aware of it at the very beginning. They did not become a member until they learned that fact. An unorganized worker who refuses to join the union isn't a stupid person, isn't a prejudiced person, he does not want to join the union because whether he says it or not, he does not think the union is capable of protecting him. It's his way of saying to you, you are not capable of delivering. That's

why he doesn't want to join the union, Therefore, we have to educate this worker to get him to join the union. To prove to him how we operate and why the methods we use will lead to success and those methods mean the involvement of these people. We say to an unorganized worker, you can't buy a union, you just can't sign a card and pay dues period. If you're not prepared to give your time, energy, heart and soul stay the hell out of our union, you're worthless. That's the reason we do not have a check off in 65. A member of the union has to come to the union hall himself and pay his own dues. It's a matter of necessity because if we merely collect dues through the employer we will never know what's bothering our member. When he comes to the union to pay his dues, if he's got something on his chest he'll express it somehow and someway at the union hall.

H. You of course know that virtually every major union in America insists upon the dues checkoff. This gives them control of the membership, control of the apparatus.

O. This is a source of corruption. A decent union would not have a checkoff as a general thing. There are exceptional situations here and certainly those unions who do not recognize this as a fallacy and don't do something to compensate for it are guilty of terrible crime. This is the reason most unions have mostly no members attending their meetings. I know of many unions with thousands of members, but only three or four dozen people show up at a membership meeting. This is a union? This is a matter of principle and determines the character of the organization. Is it a business or is it an organization of human beings? Democracy is the most difficult method of operation, but I'd rather have democracy. It's easier to do things myself. It is much more difficult to work democratically. If you want to have a decent union there is no substitute for the membership involved in every detailed activity of that union.

H. Until the present time 65 has never had a dues check off. The worker

comes to the union hall to pay his dues.

O, That's right, but this principle of involvement is the reason, despite our way-out political attitudes, why we were never divorced from our membership. Some of us took pro-communist positions and might have gotten into trouble in different unions, but our members knew and approved what we did. And when we were wrong we corrected it. Our members assumed a share of the responsibility for our political errors as well as other kind of errors. You've mentioned before some of the conflicts with pro-communist groups. When we merged with the UOPWA and FTA we had trouble with Communists.

H. Was that a merger or absorption?

O. We called it a merger; what difference does it make? We were the dominant organization, but it was a natural thing, it was nothing that was imposed upon them. We took also into our ranks, all sorts of crack pot communists. Now we have communists in 65, but there are communists and there are crack pots and decent, intelligent, thinking theoreticians with whom you and I might disagree, but they are sincere people. We have people who tried to mechanically impose decisions which could not be swallowed by our members. Now the communists in 65 did not agree with the communists in other unions, because we were never agents of some foreign troublemakers, we were merely people with ideas. Some of us were more progressive than others.

H. Do you think there were some special, desirable implications for the Negro worker, the fact that you maintained this policy of no dues check off, of internal democracy, of involvement of the rank and file in leadership training programs? What were the special implications for the Negro worker in this program?

O. First of all, I think we ought to be honest with ourselves, we did not understand the racial question in those days as we understand it now.

As we grow with experience, things begin to have new meanings and new depth to us. We did not understand it too much then, but the fact that we were honest and sincere, we were modest and we admitted that we did not know the answers to all questions appealed to many people including the black people.

H. Did you develop a black leadership?

O. The fact that we were fighting with the black peopel to assure leadership. They didn't have to fight with us for a role in the union. On the contrary we were on the offensive, we demanded that the black people should hold up their end of responsibility for leadership. This was a constant struggle. Perhsps this is one of the reasons many of them felt more at home in our union than in other unions. Even the good things we did, we did not necessarily do them well all the time. We made many errors.

H. As my recollections from reading your union newspaper and many other publications, you began to have a base in the Negro community. You had all sorts of Harlem activities, community groups, all sorts of Negro affairs, action committees.

O. We were attracted to the struggles of the black people because we saw in them a reflection of our own struggles, especially in early days. I used to attend rallies in Harlem, and speak at rallies and I somehow in those days felt at home there and I didn't speak to them as a white person to a black person. I almost felt like I was one of them. And I was critical of many of them. Times have changed. Perhaps today, well we're not in our own small little world and we're affected by what's going on around us, and it inhibits us. But basically, we were young kids who rushed in where intelligent and mature people fear to trod.

H. During the period of the second world war, from examination of district

65's publications, press statements, there seemed to be a very great identification with the support for the no-strike pledge. In retrospect, do you think district 65 support for the no-strike pledge was a trade union tactical mistake, or do you think it was correct?

O. This no-strike pledge during the war, like many theoretical questions, cannot be generalized. Let me put it another way, appearances and substances are not always the same thing. We believe generally that this nation has a priority to subordinate everything to the struggle against Hitler, but this does not mean, and did not mean to us that we can advance the struggle against Hitler by denying the legitimate aspirations of the people by imposing conditions upon them which make them discontent and therefore disloyal or ineffective and unproductive. I'll give a concrete example of my approach to the "No Strike" pledge, I recall. You remember in the old building on the tenth floor, we had a bar in the middle of the tenth floor. People from work used to come up there, congregate and have a beer and snooze. I was going up for a snack one evening and I see a group of congregated workers having a hot debate with an organizer. And they say, they want to strike, and the organizers says, there's a no-strike pledge; you can't strike. They were teeing off on him. It was a very distrubing discussion. When I heard that, I walked over and asked them what was the problem? Red Lorenzo who was a steward in the corrugated place says, isn't it true that this union has adopted a no-strike pledge as a result of which we cannot fight against what's wrong?

O. I said, "what's the problem before I answer yes or no." He tells me the problem. So I specifically said, "Look you call a meeting and we'll discuss the best means of solving that problem. If a strike is the best means of solving it, we will have a strike. Don't worry about this policy business. Today, under the conditions existing today in most cases,

a strike was not the best method in solving problems. Therefore, the no-strike pledge had merit including the fact that it demonstrated our concern with victory over Hitler. But if the situation is as you describe it, the best way of serving Hitler is to create the kind of discontent that your boss is creating and for us to tolerate that is putting it into Hitler's hands. It so happens we did have a meeting and we found ways and means of correcting it without a strike. We did have things which were better than strikes. Let me give you an example: we would find that an employer violated the minimum wage provisions of the contract. We didn't strike over it, nor did we go to any arbitration to wait forever for a decision. What we did was mobilize a group of people who would physically remove from the job any non-union people who were hired in violation of our minimum wage law provisions. We enforced the right things, the right decisions.

H. Did any employers take advantage of the no-strike pledge?

O. We did'nt concede the no-strike pledge as a license to the employers to use legalistic means of giving us the run around. We instead took the law into our own hands, and enforced decisions. We said to the boss, "you go and arbitrate; we're not going to arbitrate."

H. Let me ask you something: did you ever have an unauthorized walk out?

O. We believed in the NSP, we believe that there must be a peaceful solution to every problem. But the employers took advantage of that and violated contracts or did things which they weren't suppose to do, and expected that in the light of the no-strike pledge, we will be given a run around for months and months, taken from one grievance step to another, from one court of law to another. By the time the answers are found the damage is irreparable. We did not permit that. We said if there's a no-strike pledge the employer is not going to have a chance to do the

wrong thing. If we do something wrong we will pay the employer back instead of the employer paying us back 6 months or 6 years later. We ran the industry, that's what we meant by a no-strike pledge.

H. What year did DPO come to an end?

O. In 1954 when we merged with the CIO Retail-Wholesalers Department Store union. The union which Wolchok headed, we kicked Wolchok out and another man became president, Irving Simons, he died, and Max Greenberg became president. That union was falling apart, but the CIO at that time, urged us to get together. Louie Hollander was involved, Walter Reuther was involved.

H. What year was this?

O. 1954, one year before the merger. We were invited to come into the new union. We jointly established the union that exist now. Still we were District 65.

H. But you did give up your New York locals?

O. District 65 became affiliated with this international, just as all the other locals. They were separate locals. They are affiliated rather than with DPO but with RWDSU.

H. What was your position?

O. I was the executive vice-president of the international union.

END

Continued 2nd part
July 13, 1968

Arthur Osman - speaker - founder of District 65
Herbert Hill - interviewer

H. In 1954 the DPO was disbanded and 65 became affiliates of the RWDSU, an international union that was part of the CIO. Can you tell us why the DPO was disbanded and why 65 gave up its independent status as an international, as a separate independent international union and instead went into the RWDSU of the CIO?

O. First of all, it was not the status, as I told you before; we merely merged as I told you before. We were already accepted back into the CIO, but on the condition that we merge with this other union, the Retailer, Wholesaler, Department Store union with which we were orginally members. Of course, when we quit we were unhappy: we did not believe in splitting the labor movement; we quit because we were under attack and when we were independent while we made progress, we made progress in spite of the numerous attacks made against us, not only by the CIO and AFL but by the government. There were various congressional investigations and senatorial investigations and all sorts of attacks were being leveled against us and at the same time the McCarthy Act period was at its height and we felt that our days may very well be numbered. We were not kidding ourselves with our victories, but in retrospect, we exaggerated the dangers. We overestimated the dangers of McCarthyism. Had we known then what we know now we would never have merged.

H. Would you say that, in retrospect - you made an error, that you should have maintained your status as a separate international union - that there was a vast potential for organization, especially among black workers?

O. Definitely, we honestly believed that most of the decent trade unions would not only be run out of the labor movement but would be jailed, imprisoned and incarcerated in concentration camps and things of that sort.

H. You over-reacted to McCarthy?

O. That's right. We thought a fascist-like regime was in the offering. So much so, that I was even concerned about finding ways and means of raising funds for making some money so that the victims of such fascist offensive could be subsidized by us so that we could go underground and conduct ourselves as rank and filers struggling for freedom and democracy and decency within our union. We assumed most of our union officials would probably have to go back to the shops and exercise leadership from those ranks. We honestly believed this. As I said we overestimated the degree to which McCarthyism was being accepted by the American people.

H. Now, you went to live in Dade City, Florida?

O. No. When we merged the agreement was that Greenberg was to be president and Haley was supposed to be the financial officer and I was supposed to be the executive vice-president, which I still am, but it was passively understood that I will not be too active; therefore, I suggested that I be assigned to the job of director of organization for the South (Southern Area Director). This was regarded as an exile to Siberia because no one expects any organization in the South. I, at the same time agreed and welcomed the idea that such work as I would do would be behind the scenes. I would not stick my neck out and flaunt my name in print.

H. You in effect retreated?

O. I retreated, but at the same time, I personally felt I'd like to take a crack at stimulating organization in the South without being too obviously the person who's doing it; that's why I welcomed calling Frank Parker, the Assistant Daily Director; and basically it is not contrary to my style of work because I always work through other people.

H. At this point David Livingston became president of Local 65?

O. Well... David Livingston became president of Local 65 which, in turn became District 65 at the time when the DPO was established.

H. I see.

O. Because I became international president....

H. You became international president of DPO, Livingston became head of District 65 of DPO?

O. Right.

H. When, however, ...

O. When DPO merged with the RWDSU, District 65 retained its identity...

H. As a New York organization?

O. ... as a New York organization. It was now District 65 of the RWDSU ... period.

H. I would like to discuss both this period and go back a little bit, the relations of 65 with the other unions in New York City. You have told me, privately, of some of your experiences with the Teamsters and with the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. Let me ask you first of all about the organization of the pushboys in the garment centers. It is my understanding that the pushboys remained unorganized, in the garment center, that the ILG never organized them. It was not until District 65 expressed an interest in organizing, in effect did begin to organize that the ILG, in order to keep its hegemony of control in the garment center, paid attention to the delivery clerks, the pushboys and organize them into what is essentially a segregated auxiliary which is known as 60 A, which is part of the Pressers Local 60. Tell me please about the efforts of District 65 organizing the garment center.

O. Well, District 65 organized in the garment center originally when it tried to organize the textile converting houses.

H. What year?

O. Well, we took in that little group of TWOC people where we got the number 65 from. This must have been 1936. They had an insignificant number of people; but we grew from that group and we had several thousand members after a while. And we grew because of the methods of our organizing. We were not a craft union identified with single commodity - we were know as a number, a catch-all union, actually we were a catch-all union in the sense that whoever was not wanted by anybody else was welcomed by us. We wanted to organized everybody and we were organizing them on a physical basis; our whole concept was that the capacity to win depends on the capacity to concentrate numbers in one spot. As a matter of fact I had a dispute even with the CIO leaders about the concepts of industrial unionism. People whom we organized frequently were clean as being in somebody else's jurisdiction.

H. All right, now, would you give an example of that. You told me about the Coro situation?

O. The Coro situation is a case of corruption. Now, there are two different things. I'd like to elaborate on that. You recall the difference between the AFL and the CIO - Industrial union verses craft unions. The AFL tried to divide people into single plants along craft lines and the CIO correctly said that together they are so much more powerful; but even in the industrial unions there were what I believe to be a ridiculous extremes of its applications; for instance, the Rubber Workers' Union has a concentration of workers in Akron, Ohio, but they might have a little warehouse in San Francisco and another tiny little warehouse in New York City. They are neither of any value to the Rubber Workers' union in Ohio, nor is the Rubber Worker's Union in Ohio able to help them; but as a unit of a distributive workers union in San Francisco or in New York they are a valuable asset, so I argued with Brophy and I even prepared a memorandum for him once to define what I believed to be appropriate concepts of industrial unionism. Mainly, that workers should be organized in and around a plant irrespective of the crafts or the nature of the work and in distributive areas, distributive centers, distributive workers, warehouse workers, delivery men, and people of that sort should be organized into distributive workers' union because they are concentrated into areas of distribution. So, we had this kind of dispute. For instance, the Shoe Workers Union wanted us to turn over the shoe warehousemen to them. If they were of no value to them, to us they were indispensable. The textile workers had similar notions along these lines. We were to use their extremes. The department store union would be split amongst textile workers, furniture workers, shoe workers, electrical workers and what not. So this was a continuing kind of ideological discussion, while they were frequently talking about who is going to get the dues, I was talking about how do you concentrate numbers where they can physically exert power and develop the strength in which to win a struggle. And this concept of physical struggle is what made 65 survive, because no single shop in our union is able to defeat its employers.

H. You told me earlier that in 1939 that all of District 65 expressed an interest in organizing the pushboys of the garment centers.

O. Now when we conducted these drives, naturally, we were attracting, we attracted to ourselves rather many people. The pushboys... came to us.

H. The Negro pushboys, Puerto Rican pushboys, they came to District 65 what year?

O. This must have been 1938 or 39. They had an organization

H. At this stage the ILG did not organize them, is that right?

O. They were not organized. As a matter of fact we were organizing the interlining industries. We were organizing boys working in the shops which were selling supplies to textile and garment places and while we were organizing them some of these pushboys came into our union and we tried to organize them.

H. You, of course, had already organized the pushboys in the textile industry?

O. Yes. Some of these people came in the Teamsters Local, not the Teamsters Union. The Teamsters Local of the ILGWU, Local 102. I think Berger....

H. Ross Berger

O. Berger was the manager of the local. They raided our union. Actually, they came up to our union headquarters and attacked some of our people...

H. Physically?

O. Physically. And when we...

H. What year was that?

O. This was, as I said, '38 or '39, you can look that up. As a matter of fact we used to have a different color union button every quarter. When a member paid dues he got a button and he pinned it on. At the end of three months he had to get a new button. If his color was wrong we would identify it. Today 65's color is green. There is a reason for that. Because in that particular period the button color was green. And the Teamsters Union had a bunch of goons walking all over the garment market. And when ever they caught a kid wearing a green button they slugged them and many of our people were beaten up something awful in a struggle with this local 102. The upshot of it was that we did step out of line.

H. You mean by the Teamsters Union, the ILG Teamsters Local... The ILG?

O. Yes, the ILG.

H. Local 102? Not the Teamsters Union?

O. Right.

H. You don't mean the Teamsters Union, you mean the...

O. Teamsters Local of the ILGWU.

H. Right. That was in about 1941, you say?

O. 1940, probably.

H. Around 1940, all right. At a later period, however, didn't you again express an interest in organizing the pushboys?

O. Well, no. We had... As a result of this fight, incidentally, while we got a lot of our members beaten up many goons got beaten up. Of course, it took a hundred members to beat up one gangster, because those men were experts and our boys were amateurs.

H. You are suggesting that the ILG had paid professional goons on their staff?

O. There is no question about it. They don't make any bones about it. As a matter of fact, we occasionally hired them for protection, ourselves, in some rare situations.

H. They were available to anybody?

O. Yeah. So there is no question about that. But these people were professional goons and they beat our people up and the only defense we had was mobilizing tremendous numbers and incidentally, the tie up between these people and the police is such that there was never a cop around to protect us.

H. Right.

O. But when we hit one goon there were plenty of cops to protect him.

H. Now, at any other time did District 65 try to organize the Negro and Puerto Rican pushboys who remained unorganized in the garment center?

O. No. After this your sequence or maybe my dating is wrong - there were several attempts made by us and we didn't always succeed. But on this occasion the pushboys became organized. Local 102 agreed to take them into the union. See, they could not defeat us except by claiming that we were organizing them and we reached an agreement whereby they were going to set them up as a local and they promised to give them good conditions and things of that sort.

H. Did they set them up?

O. Well, at that time they did. Whether it's since fallen apart,

I am not acquainted with it because I have not been in the picture. But we at that time received guarantees and they did succeed in raising their wages and setting it up as a local. How long that lasted I do not know. It was a result of a peace settlement.

H. Are you sure that it was as early as 1940?

O. I am not sure, as I told you.

H. I think you are...

O. Look at our publications and you will get the exact date.

H. I will check that but...

O. It might have been later.

H. You told me earlier about the experience with the Coro organized drive.

O. The Coro situation I think is a case of corruption. Now, a corruption in a labor movement is a common thing; as a matter of fact even their so-called honest trade unions' philosophy is in a sense a corruption. I think I told you the other day about Mike Kaschal (?). He would argue with me. How can you organize a whole warehouse. A whole warehouse employs one hundred people who might employ four drivers. You can get good conditions for these four men, but you can't get good conditions for 104 men.

H. In a certain sense they decided to have the low pay unskilled workers exploited at the expense of the...

O. For the sake of the skilled white workers. So in a certain sense the whole concept was a racket. They were collaborating with the employer to keep these wages down. It's not an accident that a couple of years ago when District 65 conducted a struggle for higher minimum wage bill in the State of New York, the Plumbers Union officials, whose members make five and six dollars an hour, they testified at the legislative hearing against the minimum wage that we proposed of a dollar fifty an hour on the grounds that their employers, the Hotel owners, whose plumbing they serviced couldn't afford to pay a dollar fifty an hour.

H. Now, would you also... you are also aware of course, that the ILG refused to support the demands of the dollar fifty minimum wage.

O. The ILG and the Amalgumated and many unions failed... some of them were not as crude and blunt as the Plumbers Union who do not regard themselves as workers; they regard themselves as businessmen.

H. All right, now would you give me a formulation on the ... I'd like you to elaborate on this point, Arthur. Now they tried to get better wages for the highly skilled white workers and for the disability of employment by collaborating with the employer to oppress the unskilled black worker. Would you like to elaborate on this point?

O. Well, in all of these see, you got to bear in mind we were organizing the people without crafts, without skill. So who were they? Shipping clerks, errand boys, stock clerks, receiving clerks, people who were used as mules, as horses, as beast of burden. They were not skilled craftsmen. Now a company that was manufacturing some product also employed this kind of person. Porters, sweepers, pushboys...

H. Who were mainly non-white?

O. Mainly, increasingly non-white. At one time there was whites, too.

H. Increasingly non-whites.

O. Increasingly non-whites. We were organizing not because they were non-whites because we were organizing the lowest paid workers. Now a manufacturer frequently would call in the ILGWU and say if I have to pay these people wages I won't be able to give you the things you want.

H. The high wages for the ILG skilled workers...?

O. Allegedly, they weren't so high to begin with but...

H. They were higher.

O. Higher.

H. So the higher paid white workers were getting their wages at the expense of union forced collaboration to keep the wages of unskilled black workers low.

O. That's right. The fact is that those unions never tried to organize these people because they were not interested in them. Their mentality didn't move in that direction.

H. Would you say that they had contemptuous attitude towards the black and unskilled?

O. The facts speak for themselves obviously they didn't deem to invite them into their ranks. They were not concerned with these peoples' problems. And many of these people, incidentally, many of these people have told stories of numerous occasions when they went to the ILGWU and asked to be organized and they were always

told it's impossible, it won't work. They were always given some reason why it can't be done.

H. And so these people then came to District 65 and asked for help in organizing. Would you say that the ILGWU responded by eventually organizing them as a response by District 65?

O. There is no doubt in my mind.

H. Would you elaborate on this point for us?

O. Well, let me give you an example: When we first joined the CIO we had the Lerner Warehouse organized. Now, there were other warehouses...

H. Lerner Department Store?

O. Lerner Department Stores, Ladies Apparel Stores, but they had the warehouse in New York City. Now, there are other such chains like Dahlings, and others I don't even remember their names that had little warehouses not quite as large as Lerner's but substantial employees in the distributive centers at New York City. The factories could be elsewhere and the stores all over the country and a warehouse in the garment area. Now when we organized Lerners, all of a sudden it was announced that Dahling and all the other shops' warehouses had received a contract with the ILGWU under the leadership of a man by the name of Dwarkin, I believe it was, of the ILGWU.

H. What local? Do you recall?

O. I don't remember the number... Hyman Dwarkin of the ILGWU. When I was negotiating with Brophy and Allan Haywood - Allan Haywood was sent in as Regional Director of the CIO. Our entrance into the CIO...

H. The RWDSU?

O. Well, we did not yet spell it out at that moment. I insisted that these people be merged with us. So Dwarkin was called to a conference. By the time we had a conference I knew that there was no union there. It was just phony sweetheart contracts on top.

H. Did the workers know that they belonged to the ILGUW?

O. No, sir!

H. There was no evidence of a contract? (phone rings tape stops) There was, in fact, no evidence of a contract? The workers did not know that they belonged to a union. But they were paying dues in to a union? Is that right?

O. I am sure there was no membership in the union at that moment. There might have been a contract...

H. But the workers didn't know?

O. A contract between the boss and the union.

H. But the workers knew nothing about it?

O. The reason for that is... Dwarkin kept insisting that they don't want to unite with us. I said if you say they belong in the ILGWU, that they would be better off there rather than the retail union to which we were considering affiliating, then perhaps all of District 65 should go in there. I have no disagreement with that. He said, "No, we don't want you. We just don't want them together". As a matter of fact, he wanted us to step out of the Lerner Stores.

H. Did you?

O. Of course not. We then suggested that we form a union, one union of all these people and they not be in 65 or the ILGWU and let them elect their own officers. They disagreed with that. He acted as if I was trying to impose myself on all these workers. I said I'll resign from all of 65. You can run for office... I offered not to run for office for two years. Let him run the union. I'll be working in a shop. They were not interested. They had a phony contract pure and simple. The fact remains later on that in the Coro incident...

H. That is C O R O (spelled it out) Coro... Coro

O. That's right, it's a costume jewelry.

H. Coro jewelry?

O. That's right.

H. What year was this?

O. A year or two later. This must have been '38, 1938.

H. 1938?

O. Yes.

H. What happened in Coro jewelry?

O. We were trying to organize this place, but we had not yet succeeded.

H. How large a shop was this?

O. Perhaps three-hundred workers and we organized... by the time we had fifty or sixty people, all of a sudden we got a call from the ILGWU, a man by the name of, well, I don't recall his name... Local 132, ILGWU. They called us to say we were poaching on their

jurisdiction. This is their field. When I started looking into it, I found they didn't have any members there. He said he did have, and he said he's got a contract with the company, which the company said they did have a contract and they raised the issue of the existence of a contract as a bar to an election. We weren't ready for an election yet anyhow, but it became obvious that we would have all sorts of technical difficulties caused by them and by fictitious jurisdictional dispute. We got around it by forming an independent union and the workers themselves organized. The company fell for the trick; they thought they were getting a company union, they were getting rid of both us, the legitimate union and the payoff artists. They won't have to pay anybody off, if they got a company union. Of course, once we organized them they found out that this company union was not the stooge of theirs that they were making decent demands and then after getting it they affiliated with us. That's the way we do things.

H. ... Have to take an important break.

O. But the practice of injecting themselves for jurisdiction, to confuse the issue, is a common practice. When we organize a shop the boss through his lawyer... There are many lawyers who are making a profession out of defeating unions; if they can't defeat in a simple strike breaking effort...

H. ...they bring in another union...

O. ... they defeat it by bringing in a respectable union, a private union.

H. I recall recently that the Teamsters in some situations, the Teamsters in the New York-New Jersey area have begun to organize completely unorganized shops - open shops, and once they start organizing they get a call from a labor lawyer who says they can't organize because they have a contract with the ILG. There is no contract with the ILG, but suddenly the boss's organizer calls in the ILG, makes up a phony contract and the workers have never paid dues, never received any protection of the benefits, but the ILG really function by provided sweetheart contracts a few cents above the federal minimum wage as a way of keeping out a legitimate union.

O. This is a common practice.

H. This is a common practice?

O. It's a common practice in the ILGWU. It's even a common practice in

portions of the Amalgamated but not as badly.

H. You say this even goes on today?

O. It goes on today, particularily when Negro and Puerto Rican workers are involved

H. Why do you think that's the case?

O. First of all some of these workers are fooled easily; they have language problems. They are just generally uninformed. The unions are able to get away with it and the combination of the union and the employer are very difficult combinations to break.

H. What you are saying then is that the ILG and in some cases the Amalgamated are collaborating with the employer to exploit black workers in this city and that they are in a combine and that they use the unskilled Negro worker as a grist for vast labor exploitation?

O. You know both the ILG and Amalgamated for years have been bragging about the fact that they are statesmen, that they work with management, and so even before this simple corruption seeped in, the tendency was to organize from on top.

H. What do you mean to organize from on top?

O. Well let me give you an example: First when the CIO came into being you may not remember this, but the CIO set up a Department Store Workers Organizing Committee with Sidney Hillmen as chairman, and this committee never made any attempt to organize department store workers. What they did try to do was to speak to management amongst whom, Sidney Hillmen, enjoyed many friendships and they were trying to sell management the idea that their people should be organized. Of course, they did not succeed. One of the reasons they did not succeed is because the management, there were two reasons, first of all the management thought that Sidney Hillmen and his clique would not be able to keep the workers in line once they were organized, and secondly, some of them thought that they don't even need payoff, they don't even need a respectable union that they can avoid both unions all together. Why should they deal with these harmless unions when they are better off with no union at all? Now, but this must have been the philosophy even Sidney Hillmen as much as he did many wonderful things and there were many tremendous contributions he made to the course of progress in those days. Nevertheless, this basic philosophy of collaborating with management trying to convince them as a matter of right and of

statesmanship that in the long run business will be better off- it just must lead to all sorts of corrupt practices and the natural consequence of this is that when another union comes into an industry they are called in for help. The employer calls them and says, "can you save me from this impossible union that is going to double my wages?"

H. You gave me an example earlier of how a Teamster official asked you to put out a leaflet that would frighten the boss. Will you tell me that story?

O. Well, I'll tell you that story in time... The point I want to make is that an employer will call in a union to save him from what he calls an unreasonable union. A union that's trying too hard. You know what an employer calls unreasonable?

H. A union with a high wage.

O. Yes. A union that is not indulging in collective begging, it's really indulging in collective bargaining, it says no sometimes.

H. Usually it's the other union that is called to sign the sweetheart agreements?

O. Yes. The boss writes his own ticket. Now, this was so prevalent that incidentally, you say that Teamsters are complaining about the ILGWU. The Teamsters were the worst culprits in this field. Today the Teamsters union has a lot of fine workers. I think it's one of the finest unions in the country today. It's very militant. It's showing up the phony AFL leadership and both the bankruptcy of the AFL policy and practices and the Teamsters union are doing wonderful work and they deserve support. Yet there are still pockets of corruption in the Teamsters union today. But years ago the whole Teamsters union was corrupted from the top to the bottom. And when we were organizing in the 30's and the early 40's in New York, I soon found out that wherever we were organizing, the Teamsters were right in back of us selling protection against us. It was like they were getting paid off to keep us out allegedly. The truth is wherever we failed in organizing, they took credit for it and they got paid off on employers. It's like the lawyer who says he'll fix it with the judge when you have a case in court. But if you are convicted, well, he failed and he doesn't ask you to pay him. If you got away with it he says it's because he fixed the judge. This is

the kind of practice they indulge in. In this incident you are referring to, there was a character by the name of Benny Cross, a leader, well he had about a dozen charters in his drawer. Every time he orgainzed a shop, it is a new union. It was his personal business. His whole family, his nephew, his brother, his uncles, everybody was in the business. Well, he helped us occasionally, for a price, to cause a stoppage of deliveries while we were on strike, and we would allegedly pay him money to compensate the Teamsters for losing wages and for being in sympathy with us. But I personally believe he pocketed it; I have no doubt about it. So we had a relationship with them. One day he gives me a ring and says, "Arthur, do me a favor. I know you got a strike there in a place, and you need a lot of money for your strike fund. If you do me this little favor, which won't hurt you a bit, I'll cut you in a thousand dollars for your strike fund." Well, we did have a strike then, we did need money and I want to know what is this favor. I can't believe he is going to give us a thousand dollars out of the goodness of his heart. So he mentions the name of a place on 23rd Street in Manhattan, and he says this man we had organized, New York Merchandise Corporation, around that time and conducted a strike, a very militant strike - we won it - and apparently this man thought we were going to organize him too, and he says, "This man is scared like hell that you are going to tackle him, and if you will issue just a leaflet I can get ten-thousand dollars, just like that."

H. The boss will buy?

O. The boss will pay me ten-thousand dollars to prevent 65 from organizing. Just issue a leaflet and he will think you are after him and I'll collect ten thousand dollars and I'll give your strike fund a thousand bucks, but I won't offer it to you (because he knows I wouldn't take it) but you do it for the union of course, we didn't do that but...

H. You refused?

O. Naturally, but this opened my eyes and I began noticing all sorts of things, and it was obvious that a lot of people were making a wonderful living by merely trailing us and selling insurance against 65.

H. Now why...?

O. It's still being done today.

H. Now why has District 65 in organizing the pushboys, the delivery clerks, the porters in the Textile Industry been able to get appreciably higher wages and better working conditions for workers who do essentially the same kind of work as the garment sector? The ILG has organized the garment sector pushboys. The wages are a third less under the most recent contract. The pushboys in the textile industry in the District 65 contract they're given about $95 a week, they go up to about a $115. The new ILG contract is $72. These are contiguous industries. How do you explain the fact that the District 65 contract is substantially better for the exact same kind of work in the same setting. Why has District 65 been able to get so much higher wages? better working conditions? and also these are open ended jobs. You have provisions for the upgrading of these workers in the skilled positions whereas in the ILG they are stuck, they are trapped, they are doomed; there is no job mobility and the wages are so much lower?

O. Well, why the ILG has a philosophy attached (oh how can I tell you?) This is basically their philosophy of concerning themselves with the quality, with their industrial image, with their statesmanship; the're not really concerned with people. They're concerned with industry.

H. Now would you say that it goes back, also, a different attitude towards the black worker and the unskilled worker? These are black workers involved about 99% of it is black workers. Would you agree that it reveals there was a fundamental distinction in the attitude of 65 in the ILGW for the black worker and the unskilled worker? You suggested earlier that the ILG makes deals at the expense of the black unskilled workers so that the white skilled worker can get higher wages?

O. I think that the racism you are implying exists in the ILGWU is worse than you think it is, because it's completely unconscious.

H. It's social race?

O. It's so part of their make up that they are not even aware of it and they would deny it...

H. They do deny it?

O. From the rooftops. They would resent it. They honestly believe

they are wonderful people but they are not fighting people, they are not organizing people to fight for freedom for dignity, for self-respect, they are statesman who are helping businessmen organize for bigger profits.

H. But they are solving the problems of the employer?

O. Yes. That's the essence of it and from that flows everything else. Now we are organizing people. We believe in the dignity of the human being. We think every human being is capable of being a wonderful person and that that capability is not been realized because a crime has been committed against that person.

H. Now you gave me an example of the Coro Shops. Can you give me other examples where District 65 went in and tried to organize and suddenly you were told there was an ILG contract when there is in fact no ILG contract? Where the ILG collaborates with the employer is a way of keeping 65 out?

O. Well you know you asked me from memory to give you names of places, but you don't have to go twenty years back. Go to District 65 today, speak to Gene Eisenhower, attorney and he will give you examples where recently, in the past year or two the ILG where the ILG has injected itself in a jurisdictional manner of this sort where we 65 organized workers primarily black workers or Puerto Rican workers, and suddenly we discovered there is a ILGWU contract.

H. When in fact there is no I

O. There might be a contract.

H. But the workers don't know?

O. The workers don't know about it. You know even contracts... You know there are such skills in the labor movement and racketeering and corruption that you can't begin to tell the whole story. I know of a union incident I can't recall its specific place where we were defeated - where we ourselves were taken in by some of this clever things. For instance, we were trying to get - this was in the early 30's. We were trying to get a $21 dollar minimum wage. We were considered terribly revolutionaries, an impossible demand. And incidentally, we were revolutionary when you take a worker that was making $10 to $11 to $12 a week and you change his wage to $21. We changed the quality of living for that person. Today when they get a 10¢ an hour increase,

It's nonsense, it has no effect. Unions today are not having the revolutionary impact on effect. Unions today are not having the revolutionary impact on the quality of human existense. We use to regard a union that makes settlements such as we today make as sell out artists. We doubled wages. Today we just make some ridiculously insignificant advance and we brag about tremendous victories. We ought to apologize for these things. However, I don't want to get into that, that's a separate subject of discussion. But, ...

H. You started to tell me of a situation wher District 65 was taken?

O. Yeah, in one place we were trying to get a $21 minimum, and anothe union appeared in the picture and said that they got a contract, and they showed me a contract, and it showed that they were supposed to get $30 a week. And this was an ILA union, a longshoreman's union. Joe Ryan resolved it. And he says this caracter, you know, the longshoremen in New York City are notoriously racketeer-ridden and this man made no bones about it. He says I make the money out of it but I'm sharing it with my people. This is what I am going to get for them. Well, some of us fell for that including myself. The workers felt that they were really going to get a thirty dollar wage and they did have a contract on paper it sounded very good that contract was never enforced.

H. So, it is not only the question of signing sweetheart agreements, it is also the question of enforcing...

O. Of enforcing the contracts. We found for instance unions that had a good contract but all new people came to work and were getting half the salaries.

H. There is no question that the ILG is known as a soft enforcer rather then a hard enforcer.

O. That's right.

H. Some shops get a hard enforcement, some a soft enforcement.

O. And incidentally this is the one thing they hate 65 for because we live up to our contracts.

H. In New York City one takes a walk down lower Broadway and Canal Street and Green Street, Thompson Street. Those horrible loft buildings standing there, rat infested, fire traps. There are

these little shops but in total combination, accumatively they employ tons of thousands of workers.

O. They remain urorganized. The New York labor movement remains unorganized. Most of them are in jurisdiction of the ILGWU. Once upon a time the ILGWU would not permit an unorganized shop to operate in its jurisdiction. Today they don't care.

In some of the fringes of their industry like suspenders, buttons. We've organized some of them like _____, _____ _____. Various companies I can't remember. There are thousands of them in 65.

H. This is the miscellaneous crafts?

O. Now we organized them and sure enough we got into jurisdictional fights for them. But we kept most of them.

H. Alright, the interesting thing is, that you say until District 65 arrives the ILG makes no effort to organize.

O. That's right.

H. Once you appear then the ILG claims it.

O. That's right.

H. Maybe they go in and then organize?

O. Maybe.

H. Maybe?

O. And if they do the contract, how the contracts enforced I don't know, and if it's worth enforcing I don't know.

H. Now wouldn't you say that this is an example of a kind of contemptuous attitude towards the black worker who needs the _____? Once upon a time when Jewish, Italian and immigrant workers went in they wouldn't permit this to happen. Now the whole attitude has changed. They've carved out there area of success, of power, and everybody else can...

O. Nobody can escape the poison of racism that exist in America. Even in 65 we have a lot of racism. We fight it but that doesn't mean that we always win the struggle and it doesn't mean even amongst our leadership there aren't example of racist attitudes even in District 65. So don't be so shocked and surprised that in the ILGWU it should be whites practically. It is whites all over the lots. But the contempt stems from, in my opinion, a lack of a revolutionary concern for the dignity of the human being. Our approach has been that if a job isn't capable of

of paying a decent wage, it isn't fit to exist. And there are cases where such things happen. For instance I'll give you example of a handkerchief place we organized. This was a company that used to get both handkerchiefs boxed and then sell them, but there are two ways of boxing: one is what we call a square box, a simple fold, the square fold, the simple fold. Another one's what they call a French fold. It means folding it in the middle in the length and in the width and it has a certain fancy appearance when you fold it that way. Well, this did not add any value to the handkerchief. It made the handkerchief a little bit more saleable, but to invest time and energy in folding that way and pressing it down required time and when they could hire a girl for eight and ten dollars a week it payed them. When we demanded $21, $22 and today $80 a week, it just doesn't make sense. So we used to say to them find another way of beautifying your package and labeling and something of that sort. But you are not going to employ a human being for such a ridiculous wasteful operation.

H. I see 65 has had a fundamentally different attitude then the ILG towards the unskilled worker. Now if an employer needs a worker he has an obligation to pay in full.

O. Do you remember when there used to be the human criers who were going to chase bosses out of New York? You say fine, this will be success for us. We were never scared that that slogan would chase people out of New York. If they can't live like human beings in New York, let them get the hell out of here. They don't deserve to be ...

H. Now the ILG's justification for its low wage policy...

O. That would put them out of business

H. Right that that would force them out of New York. They said this again and again. They've said this as a bill. Suppose we do get higher wages for the black worker?

O. They will go to the South. They'll go to the South then these people will be out of a job. Are we doing them a favor?

H. What is your answer to that?

O. My answer for that is organize them in the South period. That's the only answer.

H. Certainly, a union with the ILG's resources - its the wealthiest

union in America with its resources, with its power it could follow the employer.

O. The only reason it can't is because it hasn't got the right attitude. Money can't organize. This is one of the mistakes the labor union is making even Walter Reuther, who I believe wants to do the right thing, thinks a few million dollars can do the job. You don't need a god-damn cent to organize, you've got to have the proper attitude and the proper will power. Now let's understand something, I was just speaking today to the people in St. Petersburg. They want help. And they think that this phony state county municipal workers union is for..

H. Black workers?

O. They use black workers and they're being betrayed.

H. In St. Petersburg, Florida?

O. Florida. These are garbage collectors. It so happens you can not organize garbage workers by themselves. You have to organize the whole community, otherwise they're going to get licked. In essence the philosophy in 65, concentrating great numbers in the defense of each individual group of workers is essential. If they can't organize the whole black people in St. Petersburg, the garbage people are licked, so they talk about money, and I tell them they don't need nomey, and if any body gives you a contribution this is your Archilles Heel and this destroys you. It's one thing if you have the right policy you may need some money to get started but if you had the right policy, and if you organize properly you are a good credit risk. I'll get you a loan, and I am sure you will be able to pay it back. And if you are not organizing in a manner where you are capable of paying back, them all the charity in the world is not going to solve your problems.

H. So you think the future of organizing workers, especially Negro workers whether it be in the public sector or private sector of the economy is a community approach. No longer can you organize just in terms of a shop. You have to organize through the community.

O. All the workers in that community in reference to black people the whole black people, I believe, ought to be organized but certainly all the workers should organize themselves into a mutual defense organization. This concept of what is a union ought to be

made clear. The labor movement has been very happy to regard itself as a collective bargaining agency. We don't need agencies, the black people don't need representatives. They need to speak for themselves because they have to organize themselves as an army of human beings, who hold hands togehter, march together and defend one another and come to each others rescue, if you please, this stupid innocent naive ideas that we have when we started our union when we had our meeting at my house when 65 got started. We didn't call ourselves a union. We just took an oath to defend one another. We did another thing. We took an oath that if any bastard double-crossed us, we were going to kill that son of a bitch. We really talked in that way but that's the essence of a union.

H. You are right, I certainly agree. Let me ask you this. Given the fact that the racial composition of the New York lavor force has so radically changed in the past 20 years and that increasingly the New York labor force is basically becoming a black labor force and that the big respectable unions like the ILG and the Amalgamated are not organized? Why doesn't District 65, especially in the Garment Industry, make a turn toward - an attempt to organize these workers and also challenge the ILG?

O. Well, 65 like all institutions is an imperfect institution. I think we are the finest union in America, but we are far from perfect, and as I said before we have some racism-unconscious, and that's the worst kind of racism that exists in our own ranks, but for several years I have been pushing. After all I am not an officer of 65 today for a discussion. Remember I talked to you about it some time ago for a grappling with this comples problem of race, of black identity, of black position in society, Who is Who. Who can continue this revolutionary struggle that we initiated. Of course, when I say we initiated, we were just a pebble on the beach. The CIO movement in the 30's were in ferment, people were rebelling and that spirit existed in 65 then. It does not quite exist today, and one of the reasons is that our members, the whit members have made it, relatively speaking, and their objectives are not revolutionary any more Another 10 or 15¢ an hour is not that important. They do not see

the need to scrap the system and change it and replace it. The only revolutionary force today are the black people because they need a revolution. The white people are part of the racket. We're getting paid off so until the black people formulate a clear-cut revolutionary program for themselves, though it will be hard for white people to. Until they do that, it will be hard for white people to find themselves back into the revolutionary current again. In 65 we have problems that were caused by our very progress. I told you haw we fought to bring blacks into 65. We went to Harlem and we recruited from... we sought all the unemployed.

H. You went into the Harlem community?

O. We went into the Harlem community; we asked Harlem leaders to send us people who need jobs. We brought them into our hiring hall and sent them out on jobs. We did everything to bring black people into our ranks. Of course, the war created a need for it and that picture swayed when it was resolved by events, but we nevertheless consciously did that. As we made progress, it had both positive and negative effects in our union. For instance, one of the basic characteristics of our union was: it was a way of life. We used the slogan "Be alive in 65". "Join 65 and live! Join our union for a fuller richer life."

H. You had it beyond the shop?

O. That's right we had recreational programs and social programs. Our union hall was a second home for our people. Before we had a union, a full time official, we had a hall, a union meeting hall, a recreation hall, we had dances every weekend. We had parties, we had songs; we had all kinds of activities... Our people lived.

H. Would you tell me a little bit about the 40's and 50's? In going through the union paper I find that there were all sorts of community=based activities. I think you even set up an office, a hall in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Tell me a little bit about that?

O. Yes, I understand what you are saying. District 65, because it tried to totally involve the membership in its existence, was concerned with the lives of our members, whether it was athletic activities, social activities, educational activities. We organized all of these things. Incidentally most of the things were organized

by rank and file committees, not paid union officials. Nobody got paid for doing these things. All of our leadership was rank and file leadership. If, on occasion a phase of our activity became so voluminous and reached such great dimensions that it required the attention of a full time person one of the rank and filers was taken out of the shop to perform a function that he was paid for the wages he got lost. We did not have job holders for the sake of creating means of paying people for this kind of work. We believed that the work of our union must be free work done by members of our union. This is as much part of their obligation as paying dues or attending meetings and so forth. Incidentally, on attendance of meetings, we had a rule that any meeting which was not attended by a majority of the people was not a legal meeting and any decision made at a meeting where less than the majority were present was not binding upon our organization.

H. Was it enforced?

O. I don't know if it's enforced, but I am afraid it's not enforced strictly but the principle is accepted and they will try to enforce it.

H. Is that a shop meeting?

O. Every meeting. If we have, for instance, an election of officers a majority of persons eligible to vote must vote before that election is considered official and the person running for office must receive a majority of those voting. If there is no competition, there is a box provided for a yes and no vote and a person who does not receive a majority of yes votes is not elected. Now if you think this is an abstraction there have been in a few cases situations when a person did not get a majority of the votes and a new election had to be held. It didn't mean that the majority voted no, but you might have a ballot where there is ten different officers and one individual does not receive enough votes. People were just not interested in voting for him. Well, this man was not elected. Even though nobody else got the vote. A new election was called. But to come back to this question you asked, even this involvement of our members in the total activity of the union and vice versa, the union becoming concerned with all the problems of our members. Now there used to be a slogan in our union that our union officials, of course, they were talking to

me about me particularily. They use to say if one of our members has a cold, I sneeze. Arthur Osman would sneeze. We knew everything about our members. Their lives, their origin, their condition of their existence, their dreams, their hopes, their frustrations, everything. We were concerned with everything about our members. There was nothing troubling that member we were not aware of.

H. How many members are there in District 65?

O. Well, today there are about 35,000 members and it's impossible for the president to know everybody. But the organizers should know. One of my criticisms of our organizers of 65 is that they do not know. They are not living with them, all our social activities, all our friends, our whole social life was unthinkable for me to have friends that were not members of 65. 99% of my time was with my friends who were members of 65.

H. What proportion of those 35,000 members were black people?

O. Today, I would say between Black and Puerto Rican there must be 40%. But I did not answer the question you asked about the community organizations, being involved in this question of the total problems. We always had more business than could be handled at any one meeting and we came to the conclusion on that we have to organize our members along certain specific lines. For collective bargaining purposes we organized along industrial lines where the problems of a given industry are discussed and we had people, committees and officers whose jobs was to do research and provide general leadership and guidance along those lines. For the purpose of organizing drives we have what we called territorial arrangements. we adopted this so we could organize the shop next door. We gather together the people working closest to one another so that they can quickly come to one another's aid physically in the event of a strife or a struggle. For health and welfare and social problems we came to the conclusion that the best way to roganize them is on a community basis. We tried it but it... we did not do to successfully. But today I think they are about ready to revive that; as a result of that we would have meetings in Harlem. All our members living in Harlem in Bedford Stuvesant, in East New York, in Brownsville where ever the case is. If they have their problems with their doctors, with schools, with the police. This is the way, the place where we discuss it. And all sorts of insights

were developed because of this.

H. I would like to ask you to make an evaluation of... the 14 years, now, since you've been back in the CIO... since you've been...since you have personally been an officer of RWDSU and District 65 has been a constituent unit of the RWDSU. Would you like to make an estimate of those 14 years? Has it been good or has it been bad, would it have fared better as an independent union?

O. Well, we made a mistake in my opinion, not only because of our errors in over-estimating the McCarthyite danger, but also in underestimating the corruption of the labor movement. Just as the CIO made a mistake when it merged with AFL. Mike Quill was right when he said this would be the end of militancy. When there was competition between the AFL and CIO there was atleast a pretense at doing something decent. Today in the security of their empires no body's fighting anybody and the workers who need leadership and inspiration are the forgotten victims of this so-called unity policy. Today the unity in this case... the kind of unity you have in a cemetery. But we made a terrible error when we merged with this union. It didn't take long to find out that this union was just not capable of doing anything decent. The purpose of the president of our international is to advance himself personally, his image and his relationship with him it is purely a public relations job. Their attitude towards organizing is they would like to organize form the top if they can. They're not a threat to anybody so no force invites them to give them a sweetheart contract. They're not even organizing in this phony way. In a proper way it's ... just beyond their concept. That does not mean that they would not welcome some members here and there because it is a source of incoume and incidentally when they do get some membership, they are constantly raising the per capita tax and their philosophy is so tremendous; Get as much money out of them as you can because the members haven't got brains to use that money properly and...

H. It is my information that 65 has obtained a high degree of economy even though you only been here a few years.

O. Well, I said we made a mistake but we weren't completely crazy. When we merged, we drafted a constitution which provides that any

local that is not happy has a right to secede and this right to secede makes it possible for 65 to avoid being victimized or abused. If Greenberg or any of the AFL-CIO officials, could get away with it they would like this man to destroy 65, change its character, but they can not touch it. If for a minute they behave in a manner that becomes intolerable to us we would quit.

H. You would pull out?

O. We would pull out and as a matter of fact I think the situation has become intolerable not because of any overt act of theirs, but because of the nature of their policies and their methods. They just... We are just paying tribute to be left alone, that's all we're doing. 65 is paying a couple of hundred thousand dollars a year for the right to be called AFL-CIO, which, in my opinion has no value any more and for the right to be left alone, but I say we have that right anyhow because the only reason they leave us alone is because they can't lick us and the question is becoming timely. How long are we going to remain in there? I can't see us remaining there much longer unless we have so completely abandoned our principle and integrity that we are a different kind of people.

H. Was one of the values...

O. I don't think that's so. We have weaknesses but most of our people in 65 are fine people.

H. One of the advantages of being independent would be that you would then be in a position to start the kind of vigorous organizing efforts that challenge the unions who are not organizing black workers.

O. Well, let me give you an example: We organized in Fort Meyers, Florida.

H. When you say (we) you mean the RWDSU?

OL RWDSU.

H. You a Southern Director.

O. I, a Southern Director was informed that there was a contact in Fort Meyers for certain workers. I sent Harry Bush, who was in charge in Florida, who was orginally one of the 6 members of 65 who is there under my leadership and guidance. We organized this plant. The workers organized themselves after all that's what I mean when I say (we). All these union officials are talking

about what they did. That's a lot of crap. They didn't do nothing. If the workers organize themselves they take credit for it. Usually they take advantage of the workers but we succeeded in stimulating the desires of these workers to organize themselves and they did a good job and we finally, got a contract. Now, this plant is a nursery where they produce certain flowers and bulbs and that kind of stuff. The majority of these people, oh! Maybe 80% of these people are either Negroes, Puerto Ricans or other Spanish speaking elements and about 20% are white. Well, you'd think the natural thing is when we set this union up as a local union, we should elect from the ranks a leader to be the full time organizer, a president, and it probably would be a Negro or Puerto Rican. As luck would have it I had a heart attack at the time and I was in the hospital and Greenberg sent out _____ and he imposed upon them a white man from Alabama somebody who became superfulous on their staff and needed a job and they brought into Fort Meyers and installed him as President of this local. Now, this man is not only incapable. If he were capable he couldn't do a job with this kind of an approach. Now, this is what happens in this international This is what happens to all the AFL-CIO. So when I fight against it, I am over-ruled.

H. Now, you have been in the South now for some ten years. Could you give me some general observations of the situation in the South concerning the AFL-CIO, the union efforts? Periodically there are brave announcements about them organizing drives in the South especially in the textile industry? Why haven't they really organized, especially in textiles which remains the basic manufacturing industry of the South?

O. Well, look there are so many reasons you don't know where to begin. First of all, the labor movement has a phrase: "It takes care of its own." They've got a staff of representatives and characters who not only are worthless, who not only are capable of doing anything good, but invariably they do damage. They are a hindrance. If all of them were pensioned off and sent to the North Pole and taken out of the picture, workers might succeed in organizing themselves. Their presence prevents these people from organizing. This is one point. Now, why is that so? The old AFL's philosophy can not possibly work today amongst the people in these organizations.

They're part of the war machine, they're part of the racket whose profits depend on the prevention of the organization of these people. Just as big business wants a reservoir of unemployed, they need a reservoir of unorganized, of low paid people. The blacks are the most convenient element for that.

H. Could you explain why (this is a very important point) excuse me for interrupting you, but I'd like to elaborate on this last point. I understand why the employers want the reservoir of unemployed labor. But you just used a very important phrase that organized labor also wants a reservoir of unorganized workers that somehow it finds it to be in its interest as an institution to have that situation. Can you explain what you mean by that?

O. Well, the minute there is this collaboration philosophy they can not fight too hard. They would like... the labor movement would accept the organization of these people if the employers hand it to them. The textile workers would like J.B. Stevens to give them a contract and DuPont and everybody else. I do not deny that, but these people aren't going to give it to them unless they are forced to. The labor movement is part of the capitalist system. It brags about the fact it is the most loyal defender of the profit motive. When A.G. Gleason of the longshoresmen brags about his contribution in Saigon in organizing the docks. Well, what else do I have to say to you? It is ridiculous to expect your enemy to help you.

H. Why does unorganized labor want a mass unorganized workers? How does it help them?

O. First of all, examine when you say organized labor. You mean why does the officialdom feel that way? Look at a Joe Curran(?) how much is the salary $80,000 a year and similar such situations. Now, are they... they are not interested in a mass movement that will challenge their leadership. They have a business. They can't afford to have stupid backwards discontented workers join their ranks and determine policies and pick leadership which will reflect those policies because if that will be done these guys won't be the leaders. Isn't that true?

H. In other words what you are saying is that unions as an institution have begun to have interests separate and a part from the interests of the workers.

O. No, when you say unions, I disagree with that phrase. I say they are union officials. I call them racketeers, even though they may not take a so-called dishonest penny. There are people who have merely a profession, a business of unionism. This is not a union.

H. Glorified business organizations who call themselves labor unions?

O. That's right. They're in the business of handling up controlling working people. They're not unions of workers fighting for themselves. They are institutions which control the workers and keep them cool and these union officials, if they could, they would sign contracts for less wages.

H. If they could get away with it...

O. If they could get away with it. But, unfortunately, they sign contracts and even their brain-washed workers are uncontrollable. They walk out, they repudiate contracts.

H. increasingly, there is a repudiation of contracts...

O. It's a common thing today. Incidentally, this happens in 65 and any other local which I handle.

H. Now, would you like to make some comment about the racial attitude, practices and policies of the major AFL unions that are supposed to be organizing in the South? Is this a fact _____failure program?

O. First of all the AFL and CIO unions have historically welcomed the Ku Klux Klan. Many Klansmen were officers of these unions and still are.

H. Of which union - would you mention some?

O. I'm not going to mention. But, in our own union there were Klansmen; in the Textile Union and in the Teamsters Union there are Klansmen; in the steel workers there are Klansmen, even in the oil workers.

H. Even where there are not Klansmen there are certainly racist elements.

O. Some of them are know to be Klansmen.

H. Right. Would it be your observation that one of the reasons they haven't organized is because of the... They have been so solicitious, they have compromised, they have capitulated to the racist elements or backwards elements of the white working class?

O. Well, I honestly believe to organize in the South you've got to

organize black people first. And if there are mixed groups of workers it must be organized under the leadership of the black people. Those white people who are not willing to accept leadership under blacks are not going to abandon their racist attitudes in any event, no matter what you do and they will be used as strike breakers no matter how you handle it. We've had experience. No matter how much you cater to a white minority, if you don't put the law down to them about their attitude towards the black question and towards trade unionism as we see it, sooner or later they'll turn against you. We organized... we had a group of people signing up with us in one of the southern plants. When I went there and I examined and looked at the element I saw the way they were talking, I told our organizer, "We don't want these people in the Union." These were 99% whites and I said the best way to get rid of them is to tell them the truth. If they will survive this truth we will take them. If they don't we won't take them and...

H. You mean, tell them the truth about the race question?

O. And this is what I told them. I met with them and I said, "Listen gentlemen. You people want to have a union? You want to organize? You want to fight for conditions, wages, security, all the wonderful things that unions are capable of bringing. Fine, but let me tell you something before you get started. If you fail, nothing will happen, but if you begin to make progress, certain things are going to happen. If you are not going to be prepared to stand up to these things, you might as well quit right now. Now what are these things? You'll be told that we are a nigger-loving union and there is an element of truth to it. If this scares you, quit right now, because we as a union are going to fight as much for the black man as for the white man. We're going to see to it that he gets a fair shake at the dice. If you don't want that, let's not start. You're going to be told I gave them the whole speil. You're going to be told that we are a bunch of reds and there's an element of truth in that; it depends upon what you call reds. If we are fighting for the dignity of people - and I described to them the philosophy of 65 - we'll be called Communist; and there were some Communists in our ranks at one time or another. So what, if this scares you, quit now! We are going

to be told that we are a bunch of Jew bastards and if this is going to frighten you, if you're so go-damn prejudiced that you can't arise above your prejudices, I have no objections to you having your likes and dislikes. You may not like a Jew, that's your privilege, but if you're going to hate us so much that it blinds you to logic and to reason, you're cutting your own damn throat. Cut your throat by yourself, don't cut it in my presence. You will be called a few other things", and I told them these things too. They quit together.

H. They Did?

O. Yes.

H. Would you care to identify this situation?

O. Well, it's a group of workers in the J.C. Penny Warehouse in Statesboro, North Carolina.

H. How long ago?

O. Four or five years ago.

H. How many workers were there.

O. There were a few hundred workers. We, of course, didn't have that many around. But we told them so. Some of the people I spoke to, they said to me, "I am not a nigger hater and I am not a Jew-hater and some of my best friends are Jews. But in my shop they won't like this." I said, "I am glad you are telling me this because we don't want to waste a lot of time and energy on this and a few other things. You know the people at the meeting claim that they don't feel that way, but that's the way they operate. Now, I mentioned a name, we might want to reorganize that shop. Let me tell you a tactic which I find most essential now days.

H. By the way, are there any Negro workers in that shop?

O. Very few. A handful. But you know what I want to do that's the reason I ask you to be very cautious about the use of this information.

H. We will be.

O. In a shop which is predominately white I try - I don't frequently succeed - unfortunately the lack of leadership among the black people is very serious. I go to the black community and I say here is a shop that is practically all white. Start a campaign for jobs in that shop. We don't want to organize them till there

are blacks working there because as a union after we organize them we have to fight for their seniority rights. The union becomes the agency which excludes the blacks from working there. Therefore, before we start organizing them, we want you to conduct a campaign and we will help you to mount a campaign -

H. Have you done some of this in New York City? Has this approach been used?

O. I don't know but I have suggested it, but I don't know.

H. This is a very important point.

O. All over the country, I say to people, we don't want to organize - the union isn't going to organize this place. Let the blacks first fight for job opportunities there, then we will try to organize. Otherwise, we in fighting for our seniority rights are an agency of exclusion policies.

H. Many unions in fighting for what they regard as a sacrasant seniority structure they established many long years ago, are in reality agencies to exclude Negro workers either from initial employment or from promotions.

O. When they provide their boss with a good excuse so the boss gets the workers to fight each other - blacks are fighting white.

H. In fact, there are many cases now before the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission involving industrial unions on this point - cases I have filed.

O. Now, in the South in my opinion even some well-meaning people like Walter Reuther are not capable of organizing. I don't want to sound like I know all the ins because I frankly don't know, but I've been thinking about it. I do think the first thing we have to do is admit we don't know our legs from our elbows. If Walter Reuther and a few others would sit down and some of us would sit down and say we obviously have failed. What's wrong with our method? Let's go into it, let's examine it and find what is needed to solve the problem. Instead they are indulging in crying about how stupid the workers are, how backwards they are, how lousy the politicians are and how bad the laws are and how everything is. It's the old cry, a worker used to cry that to the boss isn't good to me. Well, if he were good to you, he wouldn't be a boss.

H. Has the Taft-Hartley Act seriously been a barrier to organizers?

O. I don't think so. It might have been a barrier to the desire for a creation of a great source of income to many unions. I think that in many respects the organization of workers into the Unions as they now exist is not a desirable thing because what happens is they become demobilized. You take Conscripto, you know the case of Conscripto?

H. Tell us of the case in which Reverend King was involved.

O. Now here is a union that for years...

H. What union is that?

O. I think it is the Chemical Workers Union. Now here is a union that for years was trying to get a contract.

H. Conscripto in Atlanta?

O. Right. And the biggest U.S. checkoff and the theory was that once they get the checkoff and have a good union then they'll be able to get good wages. Well, Rev. King became involved net result was that because of fear of his influence, the company gave them a contract.

H. Was there a significant concentration of Negro workers in that plant?

O. Yes, it was almost all Negro. Now, so they got a contract - well what happened in this contract? So they got an increase, and each year after that they got another few pennies. That group of people has become demobilized. At that time they were on strike. They were fighting. If a Local 65 policy had been pursued this would have been the launching pad for great movement of organization, instead they got their contract, they got their checkoff, they got their income and that's the end of it.

H. That's the end of it. Alright. In this regard may I have your evaluation of the events that led to dissolving the organization of the garbage workers?

O. Well, in Memphis, you know how the strike started...

H. Would you explain?

O. There was a local union of the State County Municipal Workers in Memphis. It was a dormant local - it was not active.

H. Did it have a contract with the City?

O. It did not have a contract with the City. The union apparently made some efforts to get a contract. But here again I'm not

going to describe terrible motives to them. They in their normal way asked for an agreement. The government says no you have not got the right to strike and that's the end of it. So, if they go around...

H. When you say the government you mean the Municipality?

O. The municipality. So, they go around saying how terrible it is... the employers, the government in this case, is bad; they have laws against striking. We're helpless blah... blah... blah. Well, long before there was an NLRB, before we had allegedly the right to strike and to bargain collectively, the workers fought, physically, for their rights. This union doesn't believe in fighting for its rights. It would like to have a union of tremendous size because it makes them very important, it makes them very wealthy and the president becomes a political factor in the society, but that's the essence of that union. So what happened? For years they had a union - to them it was a losing proposition because there was no income occasionally they'd be shaken out of a little charity or over a contribution of some sort. Sometimes on one occasion it was raining and the black workers were sent home, the garbage collectors. And the white workers were told to hang around. They got paid for the day. And the black workers lost. It so happens the rain stopped later on and the white workers did some work later on, but the point is they got paid and the black workers didn't and the black people got sore and made a stink about it. So...

H. Is this the event that galvanized the actions?

O. That's right. So, when this happened, the government offered them call-in pay. I think it's an hour or two hours pay and they properly rejected. (They ought to get the same thing the whites were getting.) But they didn't get,it, they walked out on strike.

H. The Negroes walked out without the whites.

O. That's right. Now...

H. What portion of that labor force was Negro?

O. I think it was 90%, maybe 80% Negro. However, they walked out on strike and incidentally, the union knew nothing about it (the national union.) I don't know if there was a functioning local union, who knows? The fact remains... this is not my story. I was at a meeting in Memphis where fifteen hundred workers from

another portion of the municipal employees got a part of the education employees - people we organized and handed over to them, incidentally. That's a story in itself. At this meeting the vice president from the govern employees union (State County Municipal Workers) tells the following story: He says, " I was in Washington when I get a call from a newspaperman in Memphis and this newspaperman says: "Isn't it the policy of your union not to strike in Memphis?" He says, "Yeah? I didn't know, where?" And they told him. That's how he knew there was a strike.

H. The Negro workers spontaneously walked out?

O. That's right. Now, so they came back to try to solve it and they couldn't solve it of course. How did they try to solve it? They approached the government and the leader and begged blah... blah... beg... blah... They didn't get any wheres. It so happens the black people in the light of what's going on appealed for help to the black community and the clergy and the other leaders of the community got together and formed an organization called COME. It stands for Committee On the Move For Equality. And they called in Dr. King to dramatize it and they exploited Dr. King. And they created a crisis situation. Now, whatever their motives, their tactics were very good ones. Now, I don't know their motives. Apparently they made a deal with the State, County, Municipal Workers that if they win this thing and there is a checkoff... and they made a big stink...

H. Well, wasn't the basic issue of the strike the checkoff?

O. That's right.

H. Basically, the issue was the checkoff?

O. Because before Dr. Martin Luther King was killed apparently they were in agreement on wages already.

H. They were in agreement on wages?

O. There were on agreement on many things but they were not in agreement on checkoff and they said this was the issue because without the checkoff there can't be a union. And you know what I told you about 65's attitude towards checkoff.

H. Now they weren't striking for union recognition, but for the checkoff?

O. I will grant the community that they believed that the checkoff was essential to the existence of an organization. They knew

not better. They were just naive, and this is what they were told by this union. And of course from the point of view of this union which is a business a checkoff is more important than anything else because they could never get their members to pay dues voluntarily because they're not that type of a union. So the checkoff was critical to them. Well, over the checkoff Dr. King was killed.

H. Now that Dr. King was killed and the strike was supposed to be won what have the black garbage men gotten out of it?

O. Well, the garbage people did get a fairly good settlement. You know it's easy to find fault with a settlement. If in their judgment the wage increase was as much as possible to get, I'll accept their judgment. But this is not the question.