

Communications Workers of America Oral History Project

Interviewee: Master, Bob

Interviewer: Debbie Goldman

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Debbie [00:00:00] It is February 27, 2024. We're in Brooklyn, New York. Debbie Goldman is interviewing Bob Master and Hannah Goldman is doing the recording. We'll talk a little bit about your own background and then we'll move into your CWA work. I want to hear you talk about the political program. I know you want to talk some about the strikes, 1989, and you were still around in 2000.

Bob [00:00:45] And 2011 and 2016.

Debbie [00:00:52] Are other themes or events?

Bob [00:00:59] Mobilization and the way that mobilization developed as a practice in CWA starting in [19]88.

Debbie [00:01:07] Perfect. Okay, so let's start. Tell us when you were born, where you were born, the neighborhood you grew up in. What shaped your values as you were growing up?

Bob [00:01:24] This could take two hours.

Debbie [00:01:25] Yes it could.

Bob [00:01:26] I was born in Queens, Forest Hills Hospital September 6th, 1955. My parents, who lived on Francis Lewis Boulevard at the time, very quickly moved to Levittown. They were the second occupants of one of the original Levitt houses. I grew up in basically a lower middle class [neighborhood]. At that time, I think it was a more upwardly mobile community than Levittown has been in recent years. I went to high school at MacArthur High School. My father always said that naming it after MacArthur was as close as the school board could come to naming it after Joe McCarthy. Interestingly, like I said this could take a long time, the school board politics went back and forth in those years. The junior high school was named after Jonas Salk and the high school was named after MacArthur. I graduated from high school in 1973. I was 15 in 1969. Led my first walkout over the Vietnam War with 30 of my friends who had demanded some kind of program to coincide with the October moratorium. We were denied and we walked out and knocked on doors in the neighborhood.

Bob [00:03:07] I got my values basically from my parents and in particular from my mother's side of the family. My mother's father was what we would call these days or then a “fellow traveler”. When he died, a speaker came from the *Freiheit*, which was the Communist Yiddish newspaper, as you know, and from the Brooklyn Cultural Club, which was the left-wing community group in Bensonhurst where he lived, because he had been very active. I once asked him directly if he belonged to the [Communist] Party. But, he denied it. He went back later in his life and visited the Soviet Union. He still had relatives in the Soviet Union in the early [19]70s and was very demoralized because he encountered a lot of antisemitism. But in terms of domestic politics he was a left-winger.

Debbie [00:04:20] What was his name?

Bob [00:04:21] Morris Leff. He was a tailor. He was a member of the ILGWU [International Ladies Garment Workers Union]. My father's father was a member of the Amalgamated

[Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union] and they lived in the Amalgamated Co-ops in the Bronx. So I grew up in a kind of Popular Front household. [The Popular Front refers to the broad Left that included Communist and non-Communist groups and individuals.] I remember, I think maybe it was in [19]72, we went to an anti-war demonstration with my mother's father and his wife and my parents and my sister and I, so three generations against the war. I grew up on stories of demonstrations and my grandfather being chased up the steps of the New York Public Library by the New York police, and whatever it was, unemployment demonstrations or --

Debbie [00:05:11] Were your grandparents immigrants?

Bob [00:05:14] Yeah. Yeah.

Debbie [00:05:14] They came as children, as teenagers?

Bob [00:05:17] My grandfather. The only story I really know is Morris's story, which is he fled the draft in Russia in 1914 or 1915, hid in a wagon under a bunch of hay, is the story, got to Hamburg and I think his sisters were already here, and he met up with them here. So, bluntly, basically, he was a Stalinist. In 1968, I can remember I was 12 or 13, about to turn 13. I remember having a conversation with him in which he said: it's not good but if the Russians had to invade Czechoslovakia to protect socialism, that's what they had to do. I understood, even as a kid, I was never really going to change his mind about stuff like that. He was loyal to the Soviet Union.

Debbie [00:06:16] What did your parents do?

Bob [00:06:19] My father bounced around from a number of different jobs and ended up working ultimately for Abraham and Straus, which was a department store chain in New York that ultimately merged with Macy's. He worked in the collection department and rose up to a kind of high- or mid-level management position by the time I was a kid. My mother became a schoolteacher. She taught in the city before we were born. Then when I turned ten, she went back to work in the North Bellmore school system on Long Island. She became a leader in her union only after the NEA [National Education Association] in New York merged with the UFT [United Federation of Teachers], the AFT [American Federation of Teachers] because she was unhappy that the NEA had segregated locals in the South and she wouldn't join until then. But then she ultimately became the vice president of the union. So I grew up, my grandfather was active in the union, my mother was active in the union. And when I got to college, I went to Princeton, my senior year coincided with the national boycott of J.P. Stevens. The chairman of the board of directors at Princeton, a guy named R. Manning Brown, was an outside director at J.P. Stevens. So we organized a chapter of the J.P. Stevens boycott and every time he came on campus, we picketed him, and then we picketed his house in Princeton. Also I would say, it was the [19]70s. I got to college in [19]73. The influence of the [19]60s and [19]70s was strong. Everybody was reading [Karl] Marx, everybody was reading [Herbert] Marcuse, and I was in that milieu. So both academically and in terms of my activities, I was part of this kind of broad left of the [19]60s.

Debbie [00:08:40] Were you in any left organizations?

Bob [00:08:43] I was, as you know. I joined the New American Movement [NAM] in 1977. I joined because I appreciated that it was not a Leninist organization, which I thought right from the very beginning, was kind of insane in the American context. I was pretty clear that all the Maoist

parties that formed at the time were going nowhere. But also obviously NAM had a radical set of politics. I actually succeeded Stanley Aronowitz [American sociologist, trade union official, and political activist, 1933-2021] as the chair of the NAM Labor Commission in 1978, a job for which I was supremely unqualified. I knew nothing about the labor movement, but I probably worked at it harder than Stanley did. So when I graduated from college, it was just natural to me to look for a job in the labor movement. I actually applied for the job of national student coordinator of the J.P. Stevens boycott. A friend of mine who had been a grad student at Princeton, a guy named Paul Horowitz had left and had the job. [When Paul left the campaign], it became pretty clear to me that they did not want another New York Jew in the job. They hired Gene Carroll who was from Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania, or wherever the hell he was from, who, I'm still friends with, and I ended up getting rerouted to the newspaper of the [Amalgamated Clothing and] Textile Workers, which was a good job because I went and covered NLRB [National Labor Relations Board] trials for the JP Stevens campaign. The guy who was editing the newspaper had a very expansive idea of the newspaper and let us write these incredibly long stories, which were great for me to write. No workers ever read them. But the staff read them. I did a story about occupational injuries at JP Stevens. I did a story with, do you remember the name James Orange? He was a big, civil rights organizer. He became an organizer for ACTWU, Amalgamated Clothing Textile Workers Union. We did a story about JP Stevens and the civil rights movement. Anyway, it was a good introduction to the labor movement.

Debbie [00:11:28] It sounds like the antiwar movement was very central to your political maturity. And you grew up in a family of labor movement and left politics. Civil rights movement, feminist movement?

Bob [00:11:44] All those things? I would say less the feminist movement. Although I had my mother as a role model, right? She did take ten years off from teaching, but she did go back in 1965 when a lot of women didn't. And she then went on to get her PhD in education and always talked about how my father was incredibly supportive and proud of her and never threatened. So, I think, sort of a living example. [I] was introduced to the gay rights movement through NAM. If you remember a guy named Jeff Weinstein, he was active in the New York NAM chapter. But I think my orientation was always primarily around class politics, and I think I had to learn a lot as the years went by to kind of broaden that perspective.

Debbie [00:12:46] And ideology, it sounds like was probably pretty important to you.

Bob [00:12:53] Yes. I always had a historical bent and my minor claim to fame as an academic dabbler and historian was that when I was a senior in college, at Princeton everybody had to write a senior thesis, my senior thesis was about *Monthly Review* magazine between 1956 and 1960, and the transition from the Old Left to the New Left. My advisor was Eric Foner [preeminent US historian, especially of the Reconstruction era]. It was the one year that he was neither at CUNY [City University of New York] or at Columbia. The story he told me years later was that Herbert Guttmann [another preeminent US labor historian] was chair of the CUNY history department at the time, he [Foner] had just gotten tenure at CUNY in 1976, spring of 76, and it was during the New York City fiscal crisis. Guttmann told him "you should look for another job, all the non-tenured faculty have been laid off and you're probably next". He got an appointment [at Princeton] for one year— actually he was filling in for James McPherson, who was working on *Battle Cry of Freedom*— and I went to [Eric] and said, please, please, please be my advisor. We're still in touch.

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Debbie [00:14:10] Oh my goodness. You studied under the best.

Bob [00:14:14] The best.

Debbie [00:14:15] And I've heard he's also a wonderful human being.

Bob [00:14:18] He is an unbelievably generous mentor, who particularly tries to cultivate students of color. I think he's most proud of people like Randy Kennedy, who was in my class, who's now on the faculty of Harvard Law School and this woman, Elizabeth Hinton, who has been going back and forth writing about criminal justice stuff. I think her first job was at Harvard and then she got a sweet offer at Yale. These are the people he's most proud of.

Debbie [00:14:55] Okay, so we've got you at the ACTWU newspaper. Keep going.

Bob [00:15:06] My first detour was into politics. I became the New York organizer, campaign director or whatever, for the Citizen's Party in 1980 and advocated for NAM to endorse Barry Commoner on the floor of the convention and had no idea what I was doing. But I was involved in that campaign.

Debbie [00:15:39] For president.

Bob [00:15:40] For president. Yeah. It was a sobering experience, to say the least. I was just reminiscing about election night in 1980. We thought it was going to be a close election. And if you remember, [Ronald] Reagan sort of blew him [Jimmy Carter] out over the last weekend. Polls had it much closer. And Al D'Amato [Republican] beat Elizabeth Holtzman [Democrat] for U.S. Senate in New York because Jacob Javits refused to get off the Liberal Party line. You know we have this cross endorsement system, which will be a big part of my life later on. And Commoner got a lower percentage of the vote in New York state than Earl Browder did in 1932. [Earl Browder was the leader of the US Communist Party.] So the limits of my political perspective were glaringly apparent on election night of 1980. (laughs) I have often told the story, I campaigned in 1980 saying that there was no difference between Carter and Reagan, an illusion which lasted until August of 1981 when Reagan fired 11,000 [striking] air traffic controllers. And I was like, man, I was pretty wrong about that. That was another sort of clarifying experience. But in any event, I did work for the Citizen's Party for a year. Then, at the end of 1980 I moved to Detroit and went to work for Teamsters for a Democratic Union [TDU].

Debbie [00:17:25] I have a question before we get into that. We skipped over NAM. NAM was a democratic socialist organization.

Bob [00:17:33] Right.

Debbie [00:17:34] You considered yourself a democratic socialist?

Bob [00:17:37] Yes.

Debbie [00:17:37] Do you still?

Bob [00:17:41] That is a great question. (sighs and pauses) I've done a lot of thinking about that, especially over the last few years, and I think I'm not 100% sure what I would say at this point. I believe in those ideals, but I feel like I'm more of a social democrat at this point, in the sense that I'm more skeptical about the potential for a wholesale transformation of the economy. And this kind of relates to the work that I did on [my] Master's [Degree] project about strikes and CWA. You know, I've talked to a lot of workers. In fact, I just wrote something which I don't know what I'm going to do with, about the fact that there is no automatic connection between militancy and progressive politics. I interviewed John Dempsey, Ed Dempsey's son, who's now the Area Director in downstate New York. [Ed Dempsey was the long-time president of CWA local 1101 in Manhattan and the Bronx beginning in 1972.] At the time, [John] was a staff rep, former president of the Brooklyn local. And, you know, he was very compelling that strikes didn't make people radical or social movement people. And so the question of agency, as we understood it in a traditional Marxist point of view, for me is very much undecided. I was much more confident of the potential leadership role of the working class 20 or 30 or 40 years ago than I am now. And I don't know, can you really be a socialist if you don't believe the working class is going to play a leading role in the transformation of society? This is obviously a conversation for a different day, not on tape, not that I'm afraid of having the conversation, but it's just a longer, much longer conversation.

Debbie [00:19:55] Okay. Yeah it is. We got to Detroit and the Teamsters for a Democratic Union.

Bob [00:20:07] That was part of my political perspective at the time, rank and file movements from below are going to transform the labor movement. I applied for a job at TDU and went there. I lived in Detroit from December of 1980 until Thanksgiving of 1983. That is where I really got my first actual training and orientation. To this day I consider Ken Paff to have been my mentor. The story I always tell is, we organized an annual convention every year. At that time, like 250 rank and file Teamsters would pay their own way to come to Detroit or Chicago or wherever to participate in the convention. I didn't realize how unusual it was for labor people to pay their own way to attend a meeting until years later. We would spend the period of time before the convention on the phone, nights, weekends, recruiting people to come. Ken would say, what are their travel plans? If they don't have travel plans, if they don't have flight reservations, they're not coming. It was like the basics of organizing that I learned there. I spent a year doing administrative work and writing foundation proposals, which was horrible. The foundation part— trying to dress up our work in the language of the foundation world—didn't enjoy that very much. Then I edited the newspaper and was an organizer for two years. It was incredibly challenging because basically I was going out to meetings in Wisconsin or Indiana, meeting with Teamsters and telling them how they should organize under their contract, which I knew almost nothing about and had to learn a lot and learn a lot about organizing. But I always felt like if I can do this, I can do pretty much anything.

Debbie [00:22:15] Ken Paff. P-A-F-F .

Bob [00:22:17] Yeah. He was head organizer or whatever they called them. It had been started by the IS, International Socialists, as I'm sure you well know, they sent all their cadre. --. They took a turn to industry in 1969 or 1970 and they encouraged strongly all of their members to take jobs in auto, steel, telecommunications..

Debbie [00:23:04] Was it dangerous?

Bob [00:23:09] There were moments when it was pretty frightening. We had meetings broken up. I remember situations like in Chicago where we just thought, oh man, this meeting is going to get broken up. And it wasn't. I think we had a meeting in Toledo, thugs came in and interrupted it. The biggest thing was my last TDU convention, which must have been October of [19]83. Jackie Presser was the president of the Teamsters at the time. And he was, I think, an FBI informant and connected to the Mob at the same time. Or maybe those things were connected. He had organized a group that he called BLAST, the Brotherhood of Loyal Americans and Strong Teamsters. They sent like four busloads of beefy thugs to the convention and just kind of swarmed into the convention, waving American flags and disrupted the convention for 4 or 5 hours. Ken always said afterwards, any time I want to commit a crime, I'm definitely going to commit it in Romulus, Michigan, which is where the airport was and the hotel was, because there were no cops there to help us fend off these guys. The IS formed Teamsters for a Decent Contract in [19]75, which was the predecessor of TDU, it was shortly after [Jimmy] Hoffa disappeared. So there was this kind of undercurrent of -- I remember, maybe it was [19]82. There was an election for the Detroit beverage local, local 338, and there was this IS guy named Steve Kindred who had been one of the organizers of TDU, he was a car haul driver, which was the elite of the elite, the guys who drive the trucks that have the cars on the back. That was the highest skilled and the best paid [job]. At the beginning of the campaign, Steve takes me to the top of the stairs of the TDU office, we were on Michigan Avenue, we were on the second floor, and he gives me a .45 [caliber pistol], and he says, if the thugs start coming up the stairs, just point it in their general direction because these are so big that if you nick them on the ear, you'll knock them over. And I'm like, I'm a Jewish kid from Levittown. I am not shooting any 45 caliber pistols at anybody. That thing weighed like 10 pounds. There was no way I was going to aim it at anything. So there was a little of that going on.

Bob [00:26:10] We went to the Teamsters convention in Las Vegas in [19]81, and when I got there, there were like 2000 delegates. TDU had like 50 or 70, and of the 50 or 70, half of them, when they saw the situation, were like, I'm not going to be public about this. There was a guy whose name you probably remember, Pete Camarata, who became very active in TDU, was one of the few rank and file workers who got recruited to the IS out of that work, and he was our candidate for president. My job was to do press for us. It was one of these things where he would do an impromptu press conference in the lobby of the convention center in Las Vegas, and he'd be surrounded by people jostling him and stuff like that. When we first arrived in Las Vegas, the same Steve Kindred showed me around the hotel where I could escape if we got attacked, like jump off the second floor and like, yeah. So there was a little bit of an element of that.

Bob [00:27:15] Camarata is with a C or a K?

Bob [00:27:18] C. Yeah. But it was a good education. I met a lot of incredible people and it kind of solidified my orientation towards the development of rank and file activism. That is an orientation that I carried with me throughout my whole career. It was also my first experience trying to do political education. I did an economics training that Les Leopold helped me develop in 1982. He was at the Labor Institute then. He had just come back from England where he had learned this approach called the "small group activity method" from the Trades Union Congress in Britain. And we literally did a workbook with hand-drawn graphs and stuff like that. I think it was because I always had this idea that we should make an effort to give rank and file workers some elements of the perspective that guided us. I always felt like without that perspective, how do people continue? How do people deal with the defeats, the inevitable defeats? That was my first experience with political education for workers.

Debbie [00:29:01] When you say that guided "us"

Bob [00:29:05] People on the left.

Bob [00:29:05] No, but I want to understand what you mean.

Bob [00:29:09] I always thought of myself as part of, a not gigantic, but significant group, of people from the Left who were involved in the labor movement in one way or another. I didn't dwell a lot, and I thought much more about this as the years went by, on the distinction between people who took jobs as rank and filers and people who went to work as staff. I had a very short effort at taking a rank and file job. I was working with Alan Charney, if you may remember, who was active in New York NAM, who encouraged me to take a job as a bank teller. This is before I went to work for the Citizen's Party. I was a bank teller for Chase Manhattan Bank for about three months. I actually got a raise when I went to work for the Citizen's Party. That's how bad the wages were. And we had no plan. It wasn't like it was a project of anybody to organize banks, which is a humongous thing, as I realized later. But I think I always felt like, okay, there is a labor left. There's always been a labor left, legendarily in the [19]30s. I was kind of oriented towards that experience. I grew up going to Pete Seeger concerts, and so the idea of the Left helping to lead and to organize the labor movement and to do the hard jobs that other people might not be willing to do, was something that always kind of appealed to me and I felt part of.

Debbie [00:31:08] I think where I was going with my question is: you said you were interested in political education for rank and file workers.

Bob [00:31:17] Yeah.

Debbie [00:31:19] So that they would understand and be rooted in what drove us.

Bob [00:31:26] Yeah.

Bob [00:31:26] So is this an anti-capitalist ideology?

Bob [00:31:32] Yeah.

Debbie [00:31:35] You were saying if you're rooted in that, then you can be in there for the long haul.

Bob [00:31:40] Yes.

Debbie [00:31:40] So what is the rooting? And I'm sure it developed as you did this over time.

Bob [00:31:44] Yeah. I think it was always this sense of there is a long-term struggle for working class empowerment which I think for most of my career I would have described as socialism. It wasn't like we ever did socialism training, but we were trying to get people we -- I mean sort of loosely defined people who share this perspective and who had the opportunity to do it -- Ken Peres [CWA economist in District 1 and later chief economist for the national union] later on and all the work I did with Les [Leopold], Kris Raab [CWA research economist] -- we shared this

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perspective that you needed some kind of big picture to understand the day to day trade union struggles in a broader context.

Bob [00:32:30] Are part of some larger systemic --.

Bob [00:32:35] Yes.

Debbie [00:32:35] And to understand power.

Bob [00:32:36] And I feel like, just jumping ahead 25 years, the work that Ken [Peres] and I did in the mid [19]90s. I had this sense [that] we cannot duck the questions that were being raised by [Newt] Gingrich's attack on the state, that we should be talking about welfare reform, we should talk about balanced budgets, talk about deregulation. Actually, not try to shy away from those things but explain to our members what a fraud those things are. And then, of course the best version of this was *Runaway Inequality*, which was the training program that Margarita Hernandez and Les [Leopold] developed after the financial crisis of 2007, 2008. And that grew out of our members, our leading political activists, saying to Margarita, we need to understand this. We need to be able to explain this to our fellow workers. The great thing about that is that both Margarita and Hae-Lin [Choi] have taken it so far beyond the kind of stuff that Ken and I were doing, especially because they've really, really perfected this train the trainer model and all of the trainings now are led by our rank and file activists. Our rank and file activists are even now involved in curriculum development, people like [00:34:10] Joe Tarulli and Steve Lawton [1.1s] and others.

Bob [00:34:15] What are some of the major themes of *Runaway Inequality*?

Bob [00:34:27] They would answer this much better than I would. It was basically about the growth of inequality and the way in which we have a financialized economy and tax cuts for the rich -- But the other thing that Marguerita insisted on from the very beginning was understanding institutional racism as a fundamental aspect of inequality in the United States, the way it's been used to divide the working class and so on and so forth. But anyway, that's skipping ahead.

Debbie [00:34:59] But it is a common theme throughout the work that you did in the union.

Bob [00:35:07] Yeah.

Debbie [00:35:07] So let's move from TDU then.

Bob [00:35:09] So I came back to New York.

Debbie [00:35:13] New Yorkers have a hard time leaving New York.

Bob [00:35:15] Yes. I had nine weeks of vacation in those three years. Eight of them I spent in New York City. I landed a job at a United Food and Commercial Workers local in Queens. It was a butchers local, where they had a program where the contract guaranteed every worker two hours of health and safety training a year. So I was hired to do that training. Make a long story short, I'd much rather talk about CWA. It was just completely empty. By the end, the last round of training I did was on stress because it was very clear to me that they had no interest in actually addressing workplace injuries. For example, there was a limit on the size of the boxes of meat that workers

were permitted to lift. It was 100 pounds. Somehow I must have gotten involved with the guy from NIOSH [National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health] and I hired David Michaels, who was a friend at the time and was at Montefiore doing occupational safety and health. This is the guy who became the secretary of OSHA for eight years under Obama. We did an epidemiological study to see if we could identify when these injuries were happening or why, whatever, it was inconclusive. But the guy from NIOSH said, you might as well have a 400 pound weight limit, because an average person can't lift more than 40 pounds without hurting themselves, and the union had no interest in actually making that fight.

Bob [00:38:08] So I had this job doing the so-called health and safety training and ended up just kind of taking it easy and not working very hard. I quit that job, did a little bit of contract education for the Public Employees Federation, which is a New York state workers organization. The one good thing that came out of the two years I spent at UFCW local 342 was that Moe Foner, who helped me get the job, by the way, with Eric's [Foner] intervention, was a refugee from [local] 1199 at that point. If you remember the history of 1199, Leon Davis, the founding president, had designated a woman named Doris Turner to take over. And she took over. And as often happens in these situations, she turned against the people who basically put her into power. And Moe, who had already started the so-called Bread and Roses program at 1199, which was this arts program that he introduced. They made a musical out of the oral histories of workers and their poster series, which became famous in the labor movement because of all the posters that they did. He was out of a job and he knew some guy in the UFCW and so he relocated to this butcher's local in Queens to do a cultural program, which he labeled "Slice of Life."

Bob [00:40:03] I was going to a lot of meetings in the city at that point. He was going to meetings in the city. We would drive in and he started telling me these stories about how they organized the hospital workers at Montefiore in the late [19]50s and so on. And I said to myself, someone needs to record these stories and [I] ended up doing an oral history of Moe Foner that was 20 episodes, and that is at the Columbia Oral History Project. I went and met with the guy who ran it at the time. I forget who it was. It became the basis for the autobiography that Dan North later wrote of Moe, although with all of the CP [Communist Party] stuff stripped out because Moe's career was very much intertwined with the CP. Incredible stories. In the [19]30s and [19]40s he was at District 65, [then the Distributive Workers of America] and they had the District 65 cafe and they had Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee and all these people that, oh, I forget, Zero Mostel. All these people were kind of part of the broad New York City Popular Front and connected to the labor movement anyway.

Debbie [00:41:28] Wow. So which Foner was the labor historian?

Debbie [00:41:35] Philip. They were four brothers of the generation older than Eric. Philip was the famous labor historian who has written volumes and volumes and volumes. Eric's father, Jack, was also an historian, who I think ended up in Maine or somewhere like that. Moe ended up at 1199, and Henry became the head of the Fur, Leather and I think Machine workers. [International Fur and Leather Workers Union]

Debbie [00:42:03] Okay.

Debbie [00:42:03] Yeah. The fabulous Foner brothers.

Debbie [00:42:05] Wow. Can we get to CWA now?

Bob [00:42:08] We can, yes. (laughs)

Bob [00:42:10] When did you start at CWA?

Bob [00:42:11] I started in July of 1986. As I mentioned, I had left this Meatcutters' local, sort of bored and disgusted. Interestingly, the strike at Hormel was going on, and these guys, the local leadership [of the Queens Meatcutters local] which, by the way, some of them had gone to jail for taking bribes from Pathmark to let boxed beef into the industry, which is a whole other story. [They were strongly opposed to the Hormel strike. The Hormel strike was led by UFCW Local P-9]. They [Local P-9] were these crazy radicals fighting against the International Union. And, of course, Ray Rogers was organizing this magnificent public campaign in support of the striking Hormel workers. So I was there at UFCW while this was going on, but I was kind of despairing of finding somewhere to work in the labor movement. And Jan [Pierce] was vice president [of District 1].

Debbie [00:43:13] Jan Pierce.

Bob [00:43:14] Yeah. Jan Pierce had become vice president in [19]85 when Morty [Bahr] got elected president [of the national union]. Jan was going around with the Hormel workers which was kind of astonishing for a guy who was a vice president of another national union to be going around, supporting. I was noticing this. Somehow I heard that there was a job open, and it was to take Mark Chernoff's place. He was the research economist in District 1. I waged a very intense campaign. (laughs) David Mintz, at one point, who was Jan's attorney, said to me, "could you call off the dogs," because I had everybody calling. And I got hired as a research economist. I remember at some point I had to testify in some arbitration and it was pathetic because I had no training as an economist. (laughs) But they had really hired me to do politics. Steve Weissman was still at 80 Pine Street [in New York City, District 1 main office]. This is before Weissman and Mintz became an independent firm whose main client was CWA. They were still in-house counsel. They were looking to create some additional staff so that Jan could start implementing a program because they had some left-wing lawyers, but they didn't really have anybody to do anything else. So I got hired primarily with the idea that I would do political action, I think. And then a month after I went to work for District 1 was the first NYNEX strike. It was the nine-day strike in [19]86 where Morty came in and made the deal with. I can't remember if it was Seidenberg or

Debbie [00:45:19] No. This would have been before Seidenberg.

Bob [00:45:22] It was Bud Staley. Right. But this was my first exposure to a CWA strike and it was pretty exciting. I think the main rally we did was, man, I actually don't remember in 86, I thought it was at 1095 Avenue of the Americas, but that seems like it would be too soon. I don't know, whatever.

Bob [00:45:53] What was the strike about?

Bob [00:45:57] It seemed like in those days all strikes were about health care. In [19]86, the company was insisting that we start paying [a portion of the premium] for health care. The compromise that Morty [Bahr] agreed on was co-pays [premium contributions] wouldn't kick in until the day after the contract expired [in 1989]. The company interpreted that to mean we had committed to the co-pays [premium contributions]. And Morty and Jan and the leadership

interpreted it to mean we're going to bargain about this again in [19]89. But this set up the inevitable confrontation of [19]89.

Debbie [00:46:44] Talk about the [19]89 strike.

Debbie [00:46:45] Well, let me say one other thing first because in [19]87, there was a strike at DeGraff Hospital in North Tonawanda, New York. It was Local 1168, the big nurses local in western New York. I was sent up by Jan. I basically spent 2 or 3 days a week there in I guess it must have been the spring of [19]87 helping to run that strike, which I basically knew nothing about, but it was sort of organizing solidarity. We had a big Jobs with Justice thing going on. We had a, I guess it was kind of like a precursor of what Seth Rosen [organizing coordinator and later vice president District 4] had come up with, this idea of the Workers' Rights Board. We had an Assembly hearing, chaired by the chair of the New York State Assembly Labor Committee, a guy named Frank Barbaro who was also a fellow traveler, a former longshoreman. For some reason, the hospital executives agreed to testify in this public hearing in Buffalo. And Frank humiliated them. I felt sorry for them. (laughs loudly) It was a completely -- He would interrupt them and [pursue a] completely unfair line of questioning. But the workers loved it. And ultimately, Jesse Jackson came to Buffalo. Now, Jan, building on his radical experiences in the Hormel strike, started campaigning with Jesse Jackson. If you remember, Jesse Jackson had kind of positioned himself to appeal to the white working class, and was very interested in labor. Jan was probably one of the highest ranking people in the labor movement to support Jackson in [19]87 and [19]88. The threat of Jackson coming kind of convinced management that they should settle. I can vividly remember standing somewhere in a circle holding hands with Jesse Jackson praying for the conclusion of the strike. We went to a black church where he preached and gave the multicolored.

Debbie [00:49:29] Rainbow.

Bob [00:49:30] Yeah, but it was the tapestry, whatever, and it was pretty incredible. It was pretty incredible.

Debbie [00:49:37] Who was the CWA leader up at there?

Debbie [00:49:41] Mickey Ash. Debbie Hayes was the president of the local and she was not on staff.

Debbie [00:49:48] Okay.

Debbie [00:49:49] And I learned a really enduring lesson from her during that negotiation. Mickey Ash was the area director, later became [00:49:57] assistant to the vice president.

Bob [00:50:04] I remember, we're finally in the last stages of bargaining. And I said to Debbie, what's your bottom line? She said I don't know what my bottom line is until I sign the contract because there is going to be a lot of back and forth. I'm going to get something here. I'm going to lose something there. So my bottom line can't be defined in advance. It has to be defined by what's on the table. What are the set of exchanges that you're making that get you to a deal? And I never forgot that, that that's how it really works in bargaining. But anyway.

Debbie [00:50:45] We have about an hour. So I want to jump to 1989.

Bob [00:50:52] In [19] 88 we knew that we were almost certainly going on strike in August of [19]89. Larry Cohen was now the organizing director [of the national union], and he had begun to introduce the idea of mobilization. And we took it and ran with it. This idea of building the “1 to 10” structure in the workplace, supplementing the stewards with mobilization coordinators. And we pioneered mobilization training. This was the first time that we did mobilization training, thousands of workers went through it. I actually don't remember what the mechanism was for implementing it. We didn't have the SIF [Strategic Industry Fund] or the Growth Funds where people were paid [lost time wages to be off the job for the mobilization training]. So they must have come on the weekends, after work, at the locals' expense, whatever. I don't remember who helped me with that training manual because I think Kris Rabb didn't come in until later.

Debbie [00:52:18] No no, no. [Too early for Kris Raab]

Bob [00:52:19] Yeah.

Debbie [00:52:21] I'm guessing Ken Peres was already on staff and Steve Early was pretty central.

Bob [00:52:28] That's correct. Yep. So we developed a program that started in [19]88 of training to the point where when we went on strike in [19]89 and workers got interviewed on the picket line, they were remarkably consistent in their messaging. All the other staff that were involved were like, wow, this is amazing, because everybody was talking about how much money the company had made, the CEO salaries, which were all like a pittance compared to now. I think Staley was making \$1 million a year, some tiny amount.

Debbie [00:53:17] And what was the slogan for the strike?

Bob [00:53:21] "Health care for all, Not health cuts at NYNEX." We adopted a public stance that tried to link the strike to other people's concerns about health care, not make it just be about ourselves. But then also, very importantly, we developed a whole series of programs and escalations, that were, as I've come to learn later, a pretty sharp departure from how strikes had been conducted in the past.

Debbie [00:53:56] For example --

Bob [00:54:00] If you read the history of the [19]71 strike, people just walked around on picket lines, and then they stopped walking around on picket lines because there was nothing going on the picket lines.

Bob [00:54:27] We developed this idea of the flying squadrons where we developed an approach to mobile picketing where we said to people, let's not walk around outside of empty central offices where nothing's happening. Let's follow the work. And, we made a poster, “Follow the work, Scare the scabs.” Gay Semel [CWA District 1 attorney] did legal memos and letters to the local police department saying, yes, it's our legal right to picket a telephone pole while some manager is up on the pole. We can't attack the guy when he comes down. We have to let him come down. But we can picket the pole, which, as you can imagine, would be pretty intimidating to some management guy. We had a PR strategy. Jan was connected to this kind of loose liberal establishment in New York. My favorite was that about 11 weeks into the strike, Jack Newfield, who was a prominent columnist

for *The Daily News*, wrote a column attacking NYNEX management. The headline was “The Ding-A-Lings who Run NYNEX.”

Debbie [00:55:44] Did you do regulatory interventions?

Bob [00:55:47] We did. NYNEX was so tone deaf [and arrogant] that they went to the PSC [Public Service Commission] for a huge rate increase in the middle of the strike. We got 130 members of the New York Legislature, basically all the Democrats, to sign a full-page ad in *The [New York] Times* and in the *Times Union* in Albany opposing the rate increase, basically saying you can't have a rate increase until the strike is settled. We had these huge rallies, The first rally, we gathered, I think it was 375 Pearl Street, if you remember that building. It was a giant central office, huge, which has now been turned into, I think, luxury condominiums. And marched down Water Street right next to the office and [it was] just kind of unforgettable. Everybody was chanting "Ma Bell, Go to hell," which was the old pre-divestiture slogan. It's only five years after divestiture so people all remembered this. They made a right turn onto Wall Street and we rallied on the steps of Federal Hall, as people have often pointed out, you couldn't get away with that anymore. I mean, we had permits and everything. There are pictures of Jesse Jackson standing on the steps of Federal Hall and 5000 workers on Broad Street, right in front of the Stock Exchange. And then there was all kinds of other stuff going on, a whole other level of mobilization that I didn't really know about until we settled. If you remember, the company brought in contractors. There were several what we called “garden parties” where our strikers would go to the hotels where the scabs were staying and by the time they were through it'd be impossible to move any cars out of the parking lot. Dennis tells a story about.

Debbie [00:58:06] Dennis Trainor.

Bob [00:58:07] Dennis Trainor tells a story about how, I don't think he did it, but his tires got slashed in the parking lot. He wasn't able to move his car. So it was a super militant strike.

Debbie [00:58:22] And is this only New York state?

Bob [00:58:24] This was New York and New England.

Debbie [00:58:26] So you were allied with IBEW? [IBEW represented technicians in New England.]

Bob [00:58:28] We were allied with IBEW. And one of the things that was done was, I believe it was Ed Cregan from local 1106, went to the IBEW bargaining table and somebody from the IBEW table came to our table. And famously to me, at some point in September, mid-September, late September of [19]89, so about 6 or 7 weeks into the strike, the IBEW regional VP wanted to settle. And Steve Earley and Miles Calvey -- (Miles Calvey must have been in his 20s at that point) -- from IBEW, the president of the big Boston local. Steve developed a very close relationship with him. They had a sit-in in the IBEW VP's office and blocked the IBEW from settling, which would have really screwed us. I have always given Steve credit for actually saving that strike because he was crystal clear about the importance of maintaining CWA-IBEW unity. All the things that we did in New York, which was completely foreign to the IBEW. I mean, they had no support from their national union. Telecom workers in the IBEW were always second-class citizens. They had big rallies in Boston. They had roving pickets. We organized a joint Members Relief Fund to

supplement -- if you remember what was then known as the Members Relief Fund went bankrupt. Right. And so we were raising money and --

Debbie [01:00:21] Is this when the Japanese --

Bob [01:00:23] Yeah, Morty got a loan of \$25 million from Zendantsu, which was the Japanese labor federation. Remember, this is [19]89. So it's eight years after PATCO [Professional Air Traffic Controllers] strike. Strikes are disappearing. Although I don't think we fully realized that, given how militant we were. It coincided with Pittston [United Mine Workers sit-down strike against the Pittston coal company] and there was kind of a back and forth between NYNEX and Pittston [strikers], delegations went down. There was also a brief, like a one day hospital workers strike. And it was a joint rally with us and 1199. Yeah, it was just an incredible strike. So in the 11th week you had the "Ding-A-Lings who Run NYNEX" column and then, Staley or whoever it was, I could look it up. I actually have the retrospective issue that local 1101 did that has all the examples of the material and stuff. There was a rally, the guy got the Herbert Hoover Humanitarian Award in some hotel in midtown Manhattan, and we had like 3000 people picketing this, rallying outside this event in a driving rainstorm. I mean, it was really incredible. And then also that was the week that the ads against the rate increase ran. I think it was very clear to NYNEX at that point, we were not going away, we were going to keep fighting. This is like early October. That's when the federal mediation service started to get some more traction and ultimately we won. I mean, we didn't have to pay [health care premiums]. We took a smaller wage increase, but we didn't have to pay for health care, which we correctly foresaw that once you open that door, it would just get bigger and bigger and bigger.

Bob [01:02:50] Many of the workers that I interviewed for my project about strikes recounted to me, and this is mostly from workers who got hired after the 89 strike. They described coming to the job and there were two generations of workers, the older workers who had outlasted the company for seven and a half months in [19]71 and then the workers in [19]89 who said we struck and that's why we're the only people not paying for our health care. Because if you remember, in that time period, of course you remember because you were in the middle of it, everybody was being forced to pay for health care. And for 25 years we weren't paying. I mean, we ultimately agreed to pay. I don't remember if it was 2003 or 2011 or whatever it was. But we held out for the longest time and people had this sense of, we can beat these guys, and we have this tremendous amount of confidence.

Debbie [01:03:49] What's the legacy for the unit of having that kind of confidence and for the relationship with the company?

Bob [01:03:58] Yeah, it always kind of ebbed and flowed in terms of the relationship with the company. I think that our experience was that a strike usually produced two or more likely three contracts. Right. So we got the [19]89 contract. Then there was early bargaining in [19]92. The company came to us and said we want to resolve this without a strike. I think there was even another round in [19]95, where we had a smooth contract negotiation. But there was a strike, very short strike, in [19]98 when Bell Atlantic took over. [Bell Atlantic merged with NYNEX in 1997.] A longer strike that was more complicated, internally divisive in 2000.

Debbie [01:04:57] One more question about the 1989 strike. You have these very powerful New York City technician locals. Were the operators and the service reps also engaged in the strike?

Bob [01:05:12] Yes. Absolutely. And my experience of it was, these were people who had joined CWA in the last less than ten years. They came in to CWA from the old independent unions.

Debbie [01:05:30] The operators.

Bob [01:05:32] And the commercial [service representatives].

Bob [01:05:33] I mean, Joe McAleer, who was a leader of local 1101 in the Bronx, was the key figure in helping to organize the commercial workers and the operators. They had basically been in company unions. TTU, I guess, Telephone Traffic Union. I forget what the commercial one was called. But we brought them in. They were part of the mobilization training and they became active participants. And in [19]89, there were still, I don't know, 5 or 7000 operators in New York state. It was still a big piece of the bargaining unit. Or it was its own big bargaining unit. So the militancy and the self-confidence of the craft workers spilled over to the commercial and traffic [operator] units. Even though they had nowhere near the kind of workplace power that these, especially the outside plant technicians had. Yeah. So there was just this tremendous self-confidence that people developed and I think a tremendous loyalty to the union because it was so obvious what a difference the union had made in people's lives. It was also the confidence of feeling like you always won. I mean, the story about [19]71 and the transformation of defeat into victory is an incredibly interesting story. Tom Smucker, who later on became the editor of the 1101 Generator, college educated guy who didn't particularly go to work because he had a political project, for the company in like [19]69 or [19]70. He recounted to me that the Dempsey leadership, Ed Dempsey, John's father, was elected at the end of [19]72. He said their leadership consciously transformed the [19]71 experience from what many people perceived as a defeat into a story of outlasting the company. And I think famously, this was expressed in a button that local 1101 put out that said, "Seven more in 74".

Debbie [01:08:23] Local 1101 is what geography?

Bob [01:08:26] At the time of the 71 strike, it was Manhattan, Bronx and Brooklyn. Under Morty's [Bahr] leadership, they split off Brooklyn after the strike because 1101 had like 20,000 members and basically controlled the bargaining unit. And the national union, Morty and [Joe]Beirne [CWA first president] were like, this is too much power for one local. And there were people in Brooklyn who felt like they were not treated that great and so they separated off.

Debbie [01:08:59] What number is the Brooklyn local?

Bob [01:09:01] 1109.

Debbie [01:09:02] Okay. Do you want to jump to the 1998 and 2000 strike or --

Bob [01:09:15] Look, I think that the [19]98 strike, I don't even remember what it was about, it was probably about health care. And it was very short, it was two and a half days. It wasn't like a big campaign or anything. And I don't really remember much about the 2000 strike. I remember 2011, 2016 much more vividly.

Debbie [01:09:39] That's interesting. Why don't you?

Bob [01:09:41] I don't know.

Debbie [01:09:43] Of course I have it in my book, so I know a lot. But that was the strike about Verizon Wireless and neutrality.

Bob [01:09:50] Of course. That's right. You reminded me now. Yeah. So we did a lot of -- My favorite flyer I ever did was a flyer that we did in advance, I don't remember if it was [19]98 or 2000, that Howard Saunders, who was the cartoonist for the Labor Institute, helped us do. The front of it was a crystal ball with a wireless phone in the middle of the crystal ball. And it says, "You don't need a crystal ball" and then you opened it up "To see the future of telecom." And it basically was trying to explain to our members, we need to get ahead of this, we need to organize at Verizon Wireless. We need to fight for neutrality.

Debbie [01:10:33] Do you have that?

Bob [01:10:37] If I don't, I probably do, actually. Let me take a look. We did a lot of education at that point. At that point, Kris Raab [CWA research economist] was there, and we tried to do a tremendous amount of education about the importance of fighting for card check. Of course, in the end, we had to connect the card check demand to the movement of work demand because that was what members really could understand.

Debbie [01:11:10] Okay, so now we're getting into some of the mergers. NYNEX and Bell Atlantic merge.

Bob [01:11:17] I think in 98, because I think by 98 the strike was against Bell Atlantic.

Debbie [01:11:22] The merger was before 98. [The Bell Atlantic/NYNEX merger took place in 1997.] But you're right, the strike was against Bell Atlantic. Bell Atlantic was the outlier at that point. And then in 2000 Bell Atlantic was merging with GTE to form Verizon.

Debbie [01:11:36] Right.

Bob [01:11:37] And so the concern [about movement of work], as I recall, not so much technician work because you can't move that to the south, but certainly call center work could have been moved to [former] GTE [call centers]. And as I recall, that's when you got the no more than whatever, 2%, 0.2% or something of work can be moved. That was a big thing. And in the South, the big thing was overtime.

Bob [01:12:08] Right.

Debbie [01:12:13] Talk about developing the political program. I don't know when Working Families Party comes in.

Bob [01:12:20] Not until 1998.

Debbie [01:12:21] You're not the biggest union in New York. How do you develop a political program? How did you transform the political program?

Bob [01:12:33] Yeah. I guess I would think about that in two pieces: the work that we did to try to get members more engaged pre Working Families [Party] and then after Working Families [Party], we became players at a different level. As you just said, we were never the biggest. We had, I don't know, 70,000 members in New York State at our peak. You're operating in an environment where the Teachers [Union] statewide have 600,000, the CSEA [Civil Service Employees Association] is a quarter of a million civil service employees, 1199 is 250,000. I mean, just gigantic players. And it's hard for us to get a foothold and be heard. But I want to say that, again, going back to the orientation that I gained starting with TDU, we always wanted members to be at the center of our activity. I think it's worth saying that. I have always felt incredibly lucky that I landed at CWA because even though it probably wasn't formulated as a political theory of some kind, it's obviously a union in which the rank and file is very central to the activities of the organization. And Larry [Cohen] came and reinforced that, combining the [19]60s workplace militancy perspective with the pre-existing culture.

Bob [01:14:30] There was a culture of shop control. I heard many, many wonderful stories in my interviews [for my Masters degree project]. My favorite being these very parallel stories that Dennis Trainor and Pat Welsh who was a steward in [local] 1101 and later became a head of their retirees group and was a chair of the Working Families Party chapter in Westchester -Putnam. Both of them were cable splicers in the late 60s and early 70s, and they both told the same story about how a fast cable splicer, in Pat's case, it was, could do 750 whatever it is, twists a day or whatever. And in Dennis Trainor's case it was 800. But they all agreed that they weren't going to do more than 250 or 300 because if you did what the fastest worker did, everybody else would be sped up. And there was this agreement, we are going to protect people, the average person. So this tradition which always struck me as being so deeply embedded in the culture of CWA and sort of parallel to the history, frankly, that [labor historian] David Montgomery describes of the “stint” in the early 20th century. Right. So I always felt like, especially in retrospect, that I landed in a place that was very culturally welcoming to the orientation that I had.

Bob [01:16:06] The first [legislative] campaign that I did in CWA was on anti-bugging legislation. The operators hated this practice of managers secretly listening into their conversations as a way of evaluating them. I don't know how I came up with it but we launched this campaign in [19]87. I had read some articles somewhere by Sam Gindin, who at the time was the education director for the Canadian Auto Workers, about what they called the “one-on-one program.” It was all about members talking one-on-one to other members about whatever the political program was. I developed this mobilization training in [19]87, which was kind of a precursor to the [19]88 contract mobilization. We had an activity focused on the obstacles to getting people involved. The so-called “Yeah, But's.” [CWA training method to help activists respond to members' reluctance to get involved.] “I don't have time.” “But I'm afraid of retaliation.” People were taught how to respond to these excuses for not wanting to get involved and learned a little bit about the political process and signed up to wear buttons and hand out leaflets and all those kinds of things. And we ran a campaign for like four years around that legislation. I didn't really understand what the hell was going on in the New York legislature. I started going to Albany. Some very good high ranking staff people took me under their wing. A guy who was an aide to Arthur Eve, the Deputy Speaker of the Assembly. Frank Barbaro's staff guy began to explain to me what was really going on when legislators said, “I'll vote for the bill when it gets to the floor,” which meant that it was never getting to the floor. (laughs) And you came out of the meeting thinking, I'm going to win, not understanding that somebody else was controlling it. But we began to get members involved. Marge Krueger was

at Local 1122. She had been an operator and she had gone over and [she was] one of the women who became a craftsperson in Buffalo. She was one of the few people in a craft local who really cared about the operators' issues. That's where I first met her when we were doing mobilization around that. I can remember going to Elmira to meet with operators and them telling me stories about how much pressure they were subject to and how quickly they had to get people off the phone. These were the days when operators were still based in neighborhoods and told stories about talking people through suicidal episodes and management coming and saying, (in a harsh voice) "Get off the phone,. I don't care about the person on the other end." They're like, "No, we're going to save these people's lives." So it was a great experience and that was how we began to build political activism in the union with rank and file involvement. So, we did a lot of work on that. And then whenever Ken arrived --

Debbie [01:19:50] Ken Peres.

Bob [01:19:51] Yeah. Ken Peres. We began to try to do stuff to protect jobs and service quality in the regulatory process. Ultimately, Richard Brodsky became the chair of the Corporations Committee. We had a really, really strong and creative ally in trying to develop this legislation. We did a whole bunch of bills that were essentially efforts to reregulate telecom and to protect local service and to maintain copper, which we didn't exactly see what was coming at that point. I don't know how clearly you saw it but --

Debbie [01:21:17] Okay. So you're doing regulatory [interventions]. Does that help in the bargaining and in your power vis a vis the company? So is it leverage to try and block what they want or was it more you actually were able to succeed?

Bob [01:21:46] No, we definitely didn't succeed and I don't know how much leverage it was. For me it was most importantly about building a program. I mean, I do think that probably the most valuable element of it was that we were seen in Albany as consistent advocates for the public interest because a lot of what we were talking about in the [19]90s, in the early 2000s as the company gradually but inexorably abandoned the copper network, was [that] we were fighting this idea that deregulation was going to produce the cheapest, best possible outcome for the consumer. We were 100% clear that that was not what was going to happen. What was going to happen was the cities were going to be well-served and the rich suburbs were going to be well-served. And in particular, the rural areas were going to be left behind. And as the technology changed, for example, we forged a real relationship with the AARP because older people wanted to keep their landlines. They wanted to be able to call 911 every 15 years when there was a blackout, and they didn't want to switch to cell phones. So we developed a set of relationships and a reputation for being consistent advocates not just for our own self-interest, even though we were clear, we just told the stories over and over again about how copper wire was deteriorating, water was getting in, etc. and we weren't allowed to replace those copper loops because the company was moving to a new [fiber and wireless] technology .At the same time, this was a way of bringing in a cadre of really good people in the locals who wanted to be more active, who wanted to take this out to other members and so on.

Debbie [01:24:16] And just to wrap it up, because we're going far ahead in the time period, also becoming the voice [saying that] we have to have the new technology everywhere.

Bob [01:24:29] Right.

Debbie [01:24:29] So the campaigns to get FiOS not just in the donut hole of the suburbs,.

Bob [01:24:37] Yes.

Debbie [01:24:37] But in Albany and Syracuse and Buffalo.

Bob [01:24:41] Yes.

Debbie [01:24:42] Okay. Let's talk about Working Families Party.

Debbie [01:24:45] Yeah. So, I had been at CWA for 10 or 11 years. We didn't talk at all about the transition from Jan [Pierce] to Larry Mancino.

Debbie [01:25:01] Do you want to?

Debbie [01:25:02] No. just because of time. It was a significant thing for me personally and politically inside the union because I ended up endorsing Mancino. I think people in the locals, to the extent that they were paying attention, I wouldn't overemphasize it. But they were "hmm," he was a Pierce guy and now he's with Mancino. That's interesting and a little bit maybe unexpected from a guy who was seen as kind of a leftist outsider ending up supporting Larry (Mancino). But then as a consequence, Larry gave me a lot of leeway to do politics and was very supportive. Larry was a wonderful guy. He was really a great guy. He didn't care that much about politics so he was kind of happy to delegate it. Anyway, so I'd been there like 10 or 11 years. We had a small group of people, me, Eddie [01:26:14]Ott, [0.0s] who, at the time I think worked for [CWA] Local 1180, later ended up going to work for the Central Labor Council and at one point becoming the executive director of the Central Labor Council; Jon Kest, who was at that point the executive director of Acorn in New York, a guy named Rich Schrader who later ran Mark Green's campaign for mayor, but was, I think, at Citizen Action and did environmental stuff, whatever. And Larry Hanley, who was the president of the bus drivers local on Staten Island. We put this group together [to] just kind of talk about politics. What are the things that we could do? And sometime in [19]97, Jon said --Jon and I were friends with Dan Cantor . Dan had been doing the New Party trying to promote fusion nationally. They had lost a court case, the Timmons case, in [19]97, in the Supreme Court.

Debbie [01:27:11] Did you grow up with --

Bob [01:27:13] I grew up with Dan. Yeah, yeah. We met in Hebrew school in 1967. And Jon said, we're going to lose the governor's race in 1998 but we should try to form a new party. Meaning that we would have to petition the Democratic candidate, whoever it was, on to a new line, and then get 50,000 votes, which under the New York state election law is how you qualify for ballot status for the next four years. 50,000 votes in the governor's race. So we agreed to see if we could do it. For me, the basic threshold was could we get another major union to back this so that we weren't totally isolated. Talked to the UFCW. Mark Perrone, at the time was the regional director, later became national president. They weren't really interested. Talked to a whole bunch of people and finally ended up having a meeting in Buffalo with Jimmy Duncan, who was the Region 9 CAP director and Phil [01:28:44]Rumore [0.0s] who was the head of then, this is [19]97, I think maybe still is, the head of the Buffalo Teachers Federation, which is the NEA affiliate of the teachers.

Bob Master Interview – February 27, 2024 and March 25, 2024

Debbie [01:28:58] What is CAP director?

Bob [01:29:00] Community Action Program, their political director.

Debbie [01:29:04] Of the Teachers?

Bob [01:29:05] Of the UAW. So it was Jimmy Duncan from the UAW. He was like the number two regional guy. And then, Phil Rumore, and they had been kind of allies in fights against the Erie County Democratic machine. I forget the details, but they had been kind of on the outs and anti-establishment in terms of the Democratic Party in western New York. When they got in, we felt we had the sufficient basis for going ahead with the Working Families Party. To make a long story short, Acorn really was the backbone. They led the petitioning. We definitely did some, we probably did more than any other union, but Jon really knew how to organize and they had a paid canvass, I think,. We got the signatures we needed to get on the ballot and then we ran an absolutely shoestring campaign.

Debbie [01:30:06] For whom?

Bob [01:30:08] For Peter [01:30:08] [0.0Vallone] It was a challenging set of choices because Vallone was not progressive at all. We just figured he's the guy who's going to win the nomination, which he did. He ran against Betsy McCaughey Ross in the primary. She was Wilbur Ross' wife, the guy who ended up becoming Secretary of Commerce, I think under Trump. I think they split up. She was a nut. I think I've got this right. We endorsed Vallone on a completely pragmatic basis and we did get him to make some commitment around improving the campaign finance system at the New York City Council. He had been the speaker of the New York City Council. But people were pretty skeptical. We ended up getting 51,325 votes. We did not think we had won on election night. But it turns out when they canvassed the machines in the weeks after the election day, especially in New York, the old mechanical machine system, they find a lot more votes than they counted [on Election Night], which we learned from the Greens, who told us that that was going to happen. The theory of the Working Families Party was, if you have this ballot line, you can cross endorse people. You can extract things from candidates, extract commitments on issues that candidates are willing to make in exchange for having that piece of real estate on the ballot.

Debbie [01:32:04] And you can get those that way as opposed to being within the Democratic Party?

Bob [01:32:11] Correct.

Debbie [01:32:12] So articulate that a little more.

Bob [01:32:14] Yeah. So fusion voting, which was completely common in the United States until the early part of the 20th century, was practiced basically everywhere, allows a candidate to run on two or more different ballot lines. The votes are counted separately, but then added together. And so it's a way of casting a third party vote without having to vote for a spoiler. The interesting history is, after William Jennings Bryan runs as candidate of Democrats and the Populists [01:32:55][in 1896] the Republicans go state by state and by 1920 fusion is illegal basically everywhere. Danny has a famous story. I think it's in some history article about how some Republican gets up in the Michigan legislature and says, separately we have no problem beating you, but together we can't beat you.

But in New York there was a court ruling in 1913 or whatever it was, that preserved fusion. So you had the American Labor Party which was formed in [19]36 to capture the votes of socialist-oriented immigrants for Roosevelt. That exists until like [19]52 or [19]54 until it gets red-bailed out of existence. So you have a history of cross endorsement.

Debbie [01:33:51] Talk about some of the successes or failures or the challenges of Working Families Party in New York.

Bob [01:33:59] All of a sudden, we're now one of the leading forces in the state that determines the outcome of the Working Families Party endorsement process.

Debbie [01:34:09] We meaning --

Bob [01:34:10] CWA. What happened was, after we get on the ballot, barely, in 1998, Jimmy Duncan from the UAW and Bertha Lewis from Acorn and I became the co-chairs of the Party. The Party very quickly became a pretty significant political player because in 1999, our first year, I think we had 600 candidates on the ballot statewide. People would run for coroner in St. Lawrence county. "Can I get the Working Families Party line?" It turned out to be so much more powerful of a tactic than we even imagined because any candidate looks at that line and thinks, "if I don't get it my opponent's going to get it, and who knows, it could be worth 15 votes and cost me the election." So our first campaign was for the minimum wage. We started in [19]99, took us until 2004. There was a Republican controlled Senate, which had been the problem for decades in New York. Even though this was a state that voted 60/40 for Democrats or more statewide, gerrymandering meant that the only time the Democrats had controlled the state Senate in the last 100 years or something was in 1965 after the [Barry] Goldwater [for president] landslide. [The landslide was for Lyndon Johnson.] And then there was a death and a redistricting or whatever, and whatever happened. The labor movement as a whole, and this is actually sort of an important point, in terms of CWA, the labor movement, the big public employee unions, including by that time 1199 but especially AFSCME, had decided that the Republicans were always going to be in control of the state Senate. And so their deal was every few years they would get a pension bump or they would get some other thing that the public employees wanted, so that the Republicans would take taxpayer money, give it to the public employees, but they would never do anything that would inflict any harm on private sector companies. So at this point New York State ranked 49th in the country for the level of workers comp[ensation] benefits as a percentage of the state average weekly wage. We had the federal minimum wage. We were not above the federal minimum wage. We had pathetic unemployment benefits, pathetic disability benefits, because essentially the labor movement, the AFL-CIO, was controlled by these gigantic public sector unions plus the Building Trades. The Building Trades got their PLAs [project labor agreements] on public construction projects. And the UAW and the CWA, steelworkers, whatever, we all got screwed, not to mention unorganized workers. So immediately WFP started to fight back and to fight for a Democratic Senate. But our first victory and this is where we began to learn the names of staff people we had never heard of. Like what I described in 87 and 88, I literally, in retrospect, realized I had no idea what was going on [in the Capitol in Albany]. [We] learned the names of staff people who controlled what got to the floor. Ultimately we made a deal with Joe Bruno, who was the Senate majority leader, who was a Republican from Troy or somewhere. We endorsed the Republican chair of the labor committee, a guy named Nick Spano in Westchester, in exchange for getting the minimum wage passed.

Debbie [01:38:27] And you would get enough votes that you would show that you were enough of a margin of victory?

Bob [01:38:35] Yes, absolutely. There were multiple times where we were the margin of victory for a candidate in a close race.

Bob [01:39:10] Even in congressional races. I forget there was a swing district in Utica or something like that or on Long Island where we would get a few thousand votes, and pretty quickly we were getting 100,000 votes for governor. I think [Kirsten] Gillibrand one year got 200,000 votes for [U.S.] Senate. And then [Chuck] Schumer did. In 2020, I think Biden had 350,000 votes on our line. Then there's a whole long story about [Andrew] Cuomo, who just spent ten years trying to destroy us, trying to destroy the Party and change the rules. Now, [because of the changes instigated by Cuomo], you have to get a certain percentage for governor, and then you have to get it again for the president. I mean, he just did everything he could. The most interesting thing that he did and the most telling. We were under investigation by the Southern District of the DOJ [Department of Justice]. Preet Bharara's first investigation was of WFP, we think inspired by [Michael] Bloomberg and the New York City Campaign Finance Board giving them a tip that we were somehow violating the law. We end up getting literally millions of dollars of pro-bono legal representation from a woman at Paul, Weiss, Rifkind. [We] got an exoneration letter, which is really unusual, but it coincided with when Cuomo was making his first run for governor. We were very nervous about existing and weakened. And he extracted from us, this was his demand, in exchange for endorsing him, we would not get involved in the 2011 budget fight because we had gotten a reputation of being a powerful player for taxes on the rich and for protecting social services in state budget fights. He understood that and demanded that we make a commitment to stay out. We felt if he didn't take our line, we wouldn't get enough votes and we would go out of business. We were probably wrong. We probably could have run an independent candidate. And this came up again in 2014 when Zephyr Teachout ran and then in 2018 when Cynthia Nixon ran. That led CWA and [SEIU] 32BJ to leave the Party [in 2018] on the expectation that we would go back. I'm telling a very disjointed story now.

Bob [01:42:06] My favorite story about the reputation that the WFP developed in this period. Dan Cantor was walking through the New York State Senate lobby, absolutely beautiful building, beautiful tiled floors and everything is gold and wooden benches with red pillows and really beautiful, big chandeliers. I mean, this was a building that was built when New York really considered itself the Empire State and this building reflects this kind of self-conception. Late 19th century, early 20th century. Danny was walking through the lobby and somebody in the lobby sees him and says, "Dan Canter's smiling, somebody's taxes must have gone up again" (laughs) because we were the Tax the Rich Party. We won a huge, like a \$5 billion tax increase on the wealthy in 2009 after the fiscal crisis, and we were one of the few states that didn't have to massively cut social services. And Cuomo, people forget this because he later pivoted after Occupy Wall Street [2011] and after the rise of the Fight for 15 [minimum wage]. All of a sudden he became a big liberal. But he ran as an austerity candidate in 2010 and explicitly ran against the public employee unions and formed his own [political action committee] C-4 called the Committee to Save New York, which had like \$20 million in it, which he accumulated in anticipation of a budget fight with the public employee unions, which the Building Trades contributed to.

Debbie [01:44:09] We could go on a long time. This is fabulous. I'd like you to take a step back and a retrospective. The next generation is going to be listening to this. What would you like to tell them?

Bob [01:44:39] What I would say is, I have felt over the years, and I said this to you earlier, I felt incredibly lucky because I didn't truly understand the culture and the traditions of CWA when I landed there in 1986. What a great union it is. I don't say that lightly, but having been in the labor movement now, having worked in the labor movement for 45 years and now being out for almost two, you look around the landscape. And I do really deeply believe that CWA is unique. In terms of its traditions of democratic participation and at least in the northeast, in terms of its militancy. I do think New York is different. I think the history in New York, which I don't actually completely understand that, is it really that different in Philadelphia? I don't know. There just is this legacy of these incredibly long strikes that endowed the New York telephone workers with this enormous pride and self-confidence. And I think in the work that I've done, as you know, there's an irony to it because I think a lot of the democracy is a legacy of the company unions and the need to forge an alliance on a voluntary basis. It was not a very top down process. [Joe] Beirne [founding CWA president] and his colleagues had to persuade everyone, the 180 different independent company unions that existed in 1937 to come in and over time gradually give up their autonomy. [It] wasn't like [Walter] Reuther and GM, we have the national contract and you will fall in line, right? The fact that we had annual conventions until, whenever it was, 2010 and we still have them every two years and that you can appeal the national union's decision not to take your case to arbitration on the floor of the convention. Other unions are like, "what, that's ridiculous". It creates a lot of problems, but it also creates a vibrant internal culture. And obviously we have rank and file leadership. In a lot of other unions, there's probably a halfway decent chance I would have ended up as a local officer. But that wasn't going to happen in CWA because of the tradition of rank and file leadership. And on top of that, the rank and file leaders, in many cases, are such extraordinary people. I mean, I was just incredibly fortunate. Jan Pierce was obviously in many ways a mixed bag and kind of a tragic figure in my opinion. But working for Larry [Mancino] and Chris Shelton and for Dennis Trainor, they were all wonderful people and they are wonderful people.

Bob [01:48:12] So the question is what are the coming generations going to do to nurture these traditions? I do give Larry Cohen a tremendous amount of credit for the way in which he introduced a kind of politicized organizing culture and integrated it with these other traditions in the union. Things like the mobilization program and the symbol of the CWA Triangle. This simple but brilliant notion that our union rests on a bedrock of representation and bargaining, which now includes mobilization. But you can't have a firm organization unless you've got political and social movement building and organizing. I look around, for example, watching the UAW guys now, mostly guys, trying to completely renovate this moribund institution that has been staffed with mostly political hacks for all these years and has a very tightly controlled internal culture that finally turned into corruption. Watching these guys try to rebuild that and thinking, god, they would so benefit from having had the CWA model for the past many decades.

Debbie [01:50:03] And what has this meant for your personal life for these 45 years of being connected to this?

Bob [01:50:15] We talked about this indirectly at the beginning before we turned the mic on. In a way, it's kind of a retrospective, the fact that I've been able to do a little bit of consulting that involves CWA stuff has meant that I have been able to continue to be in touch with people who I

really love and respect an enormous amount, really, really good people struggling every day to try to make the union more effective. Whether it's Hae-Lin Choi, my successor, who I adore and think is doing an incredible job, or Shane [Larson, national assistant to the president at time of interview] or Heather Atkinson from IUE. These people are not just colleagues but really have become friends and what more could you ask for? Yeah. I just had a meeting with Dennis [Trainor], a zoom meeting, because there's legislation that passed in New York that the DSA [01:51:21] [0.3[Democratic Socialists of America] passed called the Build Public Renewables Act which instructs the New York Power Authority to enter into renewable energy markets. They basically operate hydropower now and not much else. Cuomo, in his effort to defang us in terms of the Working Families Party, appointed Dennis to the [01:51:45]NYPA Board about [0.4s] eight years ago. We're meeting with Dennis, but it was such a pleasure to still be able to work with him even on a limited basis.

Debbie [01:51:59] So much we didn't cover, but any last items or thoughts that you want to be sure to include

Bob [01:52:05] No, I think we hit the high points in terms of the ways in which CWA is special and how lucky I feel and the opportunities I've had. I feel like I contributed in some measure to building the mobilization culture and trying to introduce a broader political perspective at the rank and file level and developing these traditions of political education and hopefully keep these things going.

Bob Master P2 Edit.mp3

Debbie [00:00:00] This is March 25th, 2024. This is the second recording with Bob Master. And Bob, do you want to be identified as Robert or Bob?

Bob [00:00:11] Bob.

Debbie [00:00:13] Bob is in Brooklyn. Hannah Goldman is recording in Brooklyn and Debbie Goldman is doing the interview on zoom. I'm in Washington, D.C..

Debbie [00:00:25] Bob, I believe what we wanted to do in this session was have you talk about CWA District 1 and strikes and particularly the strike in the year 2000 against Verizon and the strike in 2016. I know you've done a lot of research about District 1 and strikes. So if you want to set the background or a framework for that discussion. It's your microphone.

Bob [00:01:06] Yeah. Okay. Just briefly, in terms of the history, as I think we discussed last time, there was a seven and a half month strike at New York Telephone in 1971 and 1972. The New York plant bargaining unit held out for those seven months after the rest of the country had gone back to work. And even though the gains of the strike were pretty limited, a dollar a week in additional pay for top craft, a 15% differential on Saturday and full agency shop. That's an interesting story, Debbie. I don't know if you know it.

Debbie [00:01:54] Why don't you tell it.

Bob [00:01:55] The national agreement had a grandfathered agency shop. Doubling back over myself again I was always amazed when I came to CWA that it wasn't a union shop because most of

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the CIO contracts, at least the ones that I was vaguely familiar with, were union shop contracts. After 30 days you joined the union. But CWA was an agency shop.

Debbie [00:02:22] Can you explain the difference?

Bob [00:02:23] Union shop means you have to actually join the union as a condition of employment after you've been there for a month. An agency shop means you have to pay a set amount, which in the case of AT&T and the phone companies, was 100% of the value of the dues. So there was actually no savings. But you could ideologically object to joining the union. You'd have to pay the fee, but you didn't have to join the union. So that was kind of surprising to me because when I came it was 1986 and basically all the major industrial contracts were union shops. But as it turned out, they [CWA] didn't get any agency shop until this strike in 1971. The version that was settled on in the national [AT&T] contract was a grandfathered agency shop, which means if you were not a union member before the contract, you could continue to be a nonunion member and you didn't have to pay anything. And as a consequence of the [19]71 strike in New York, they got full agency shop which was then extended to the rest of the corporation subsequently, I don't know exactly when.

Debbie [00:03:46] The corporation meaning Verizon, or rather NY Tel?

Bob [00:03:48] AT&T. The Bell System. By 1974 there was national bargaining and a full agency shop.

Debbie [00:03:58] My understanding was in [19]71, another gain from that strike was national bargaining.

Bob [00:04:06] That is what Chris Shelton once told me,, we went on strike to get national bargaining. But pretty much everybody else says that's not actually the case. . The members didn't give a damn about national bargaining. But national bargaining actually came out of that. There was a back and forth between [Joe] Beirne [CWA president] and the company officials in 72 and 73, whatever, and they finally agreed to national bargaining. [CWA would bargain with AT&T over economic and other key issues that would be incorporated into all the Bell system contracts. Then there would be so-called "local" bargaining with the AT&T subsidiary companies on more local or regional issues.]

Debbie [00:04:40] As long as we're talking about agency shop and union shop. When did the Beck decision come, if you remember, and what did it say?

Debbie [00:04:53] I don't know when it happened [The court case Beck v CWA was decided in 1988] but what it said was members [correction, CWA-represented employees who did not want to join the union] were eligible to be rebated for costs incurred by the union that were not related to representation and collective bargaining. My only understanding of it was every year we had to send out a notice in the CWA News in eight point font or six point font or something that said if you want you can get the money back that you've given the union that doesn't go to representation. [These employees are called "agency fee objectors." Once a year, they were given the opportunity to notify the union that they objected to paying the portion of union dues that did not go to representation. This was not a rebate but rather a forward-looking reduction of about 20% from the regular dues amount.]

Bob [00:05:34] So in any event, there were these limited gains, the dollar a week. I mean, this is \$1 a week, I think whatever the settlement was, if it was \$266 for the national top craft rate, it was \$267 after seven and a half months and the 15% differential and full agency shop. Initially, a lot of people thought it was a defeat, a sell-out, etc. But, and this is a really interesting story and we could spend a lot of time on it. When I interviewed Tom Smucker, who was a rank and file guy in 71 who had been to college but hadn't taken the job at the phone company because he was a radical, he took the job because he needed a job but stayed. [He] later became the editor of the [local] 1101 newspaper, *The Generator*. He said that the [Ed] Dempsey team, which got elected in the aftermath of the strike, very skillfully transformed what had happened in 71, which was kind of a disorganized strike which didn't produce much, into a victory and celebrated the fact that they held out against the Bell System for seven and a half months, when really nobody thought that was possible. If you talk to Gay, who was a telephone operator then....

Debbie [00:07:06] Gay Semel

Bob [00:07:07] Gay Semel. She said everybody expected to lose and everybody expected to be broken on some level and so surviving was a victory. Anyway, by the time [19]74 rolled around, local 1101 put out a button which, some of the people I interviewed still had samples of, that said "7 more in 74." So there was this mentality of, we did it before, we can do it again. We can hold out, we can beat this company, etc. That just became part of the tradition and the lore of New York plant workers that got handed down generation to generation. And people remember having these conversations. All of the workers I interviewed [told me that] when people would first come to work at the company in the 90s, the old timers, there were still people who had been around in [19]71 and in [19]89. (imitates gruff voice:) "I've been on strike longer than you worked at the phone company. Listen to me kid." That kind of stuff. There are a lot of those stories and an understanding that the sacrifices that were made in '71 and '89 were something to be elevated and emulated. This is what my research is about and we could spend a lot of time talking about it, but probably not here.

Debbie [00:08:57] Well, we definitely want you to finish writing it.

Debbie [00:09:00] Yeah, well, that means I have to start writing it. I'm not making any progress these days and we'll see. It's a pretty big undertaking, as you know. (laughs) So in any event, there was this culture of militancy. The one final point I'll make, my favorite quotation about this is from Chris Calabrese, who ultimately became the vice president of local 1109 in Brooklyn and was really the leader and the architect of the Cablevision organizing campaign. He's just a tremendous guy. You know what he said? He came to work at the phone company, I think, in [19]94. He was one of the recipients of this inherited knowledge about these strikes. And he said, we were young, we didn't have families. We just wanted to go on strike, we thought every strike lasts forever and that's what we wanted to do. We wanted to show that we were as strong and as militant as the previous generations. So there was this culture in New York. Until 2003, it was a culture of "no contract, no work." That changed. Morty [Bahr] was very skillful, I think, in developing the strategy of letting the company think that we were going to go on strike in 2003. If you remember, they put up hotels full of scabs on expiration, waiting for us to go out and we worked without a contract for 5 or 6 weeks, I think it was, and got a good contract without a strike. But there was also this sense of real pride that even when strikes had kind of disappeared from the labor movement, as they mostly did

after the PATCO air traffic controllers debacle in 1981, CWA was still able to strike and keep winning.

Bob [00:11:15] I don't have a lot of memories of the 2000 strike, except for, I would say, two big areas. One is starting in [19] 98 we began to recognize that there was a big historic transformation going on in the industry from wireline service to wireless service. The education that we had developed in [19]88 to prepare for the [19]89 strike became a kind of institutionalized practice in advance of these strikes. I think in [19]97 and [19]98 and then again in [19]99 and 2000, although I'd have to go back and look at my stuff to know for sure, we did a lot of education about how if we didn't organize wireless, we were going to be screwed. In [19]98, obviously, the strike was only two and a half days. We did not draw the line in the sand then around organizing wireless. But in 2000, we really did make the strike about winning organizing rights. And we got a signed neutrality agreement [covering Verizon Wireless] which I think subsequent experience demonstrated was not as airtight as we had hoped and was really not ever honored by the company. One of the big lessons we learned was if the company really doesn't want to enter into a cooperative agreement, having a signed piece of paper doesn't necessarily guarantee that you're going to be able to do it, which was a big, big disappointment. But the education that went on, I think we did a very, very good job, although in the end, I remember we coupled the demand for organizing rights at Verizon with a demand about the movement of work, which was a very, very big issue for the rank and file. There was a sense of, because NYNEX and Bell Atlantic had merged, there was a sense that a lot of work could be moved out of New York and New England to the Mid-Atlantic states. And so we put caps, which I don't remember the details of, on how much work could be moved. You're nodding like you remember it better. Maybe it's in your book, I don't know.

Debbie [00:13:56] Actually, I have a whole chapter on the 2000 strike and everything you have said is documented. I think you summarized it well except one point. The merger in 2000 was with GTE.

Bob [00:14:11] Right.

Debbie [00:14:11] And the fear about the movement of work to either nonunion GTE areas or areas with much weaker [and lower wage] contractual protections.

Bob [00:14:24] The other thing, of course, that I remember about the 2000 strike was the very unfortunate ending, which for your listeners there was a division between District 1 and District 2/13 or might have been 2 and 13 still at that point, they hadn't merged yet. The District 1 version of it was that the Mid-Atlantic district or districts, when do they merge to become 2/13? Do you remember?

Debbie [00:15:01] I don't think they had merged yet but they were bargaining for what was called either Verizon South or Bell Atlantic South. So there were two vice presidents, and I believe it was Vince Maisano in District 13. Some issues that he needed to have resolved for his plant group.

Bob [00:15:27] Our people felt like we're not even, whatever it was -- It was actually a lot of people. That was a big strike. That was like 86,000 people or something, right?

Debbie [00:15:37] Right. Because it included the IBEW in New Jersey and Massachusetts. So it was like 86,000 workers.

Bob [00:15:49] Our leadership felt we're not keeping people on strike to resolve Vince's unresolved arbitration problems. I'm airing our dirty laundry here. Vince came up and they had a picket line at 395 Pearl Street, I think was the address. It was a big central office building very close to my office. I was there and 1101's leadership crossed the picket line and there was an enormous, enormous amount of bitterness between District 1 and District 2 and 13 for some period of time afterwards. So those are the things I really remember about the 2000 strike.

Debbie [00:16:36] I just would add one other thing. This was also the time in which the service reps had gained enough power to put stress relief on the agenda.

Bob [00:16:48] Right.

Bob [00:16:48] And that was a major achievement for that group within the union. They were able to actually win certain stress relief provisions, particularly the ability to close off the phones for half an hour, four days a week which sounds minimal, but it really was reducing the speed-up that they were undergoing.

Bob [00:17:18] Right. So that was 2000. Before we jump to 2016, I want to spend a couple of minutes talking about 2011 because we were on strike in 2011 for two weeks. It was really a thrilling two weeks. The public response was like nothing we had ever seen before. The horn honking and the expressions of support from regular people. It was the first strike that I remember where we used a lot of video. We hired a company to do a lot of video. We made these two and a half, three minute strike videos interviewing workers and there was this kind of organic anti-corporate sentiment among the workers that got expressed very clearly and strongly and eloquently in a lot of these videos. It was a weird strike too, because in the leadership of the union in the run-up to the strike the basic rap was we're not going out right away if we go out at all. I can remember so vividly, I got a call from Chris Shelton the Saturday morning of expiration basically saying come to the Rye Town Hilton, which was where bargaining was taking place in Westchester. We're going on strike tonight. And I'm like, "what?!!!" We're completely unprepared. We had done the mobilization stuff but we were really not preparing for a strike. And for whatever reason. Chris got really pissed off and he was like, we're going. And we went and all of a sudden we were in this huge struggle. The reason I think it was so interesting to me was what we didn't know when we went out was that six weeks after we went on strike, we were already back for a month, by the time this happened, Occupy Wall Street happened. And we said to ourselves, oh, that's what was happening when we were on strike. Like all of that popular anti-corporate anger that had been brewing since the 2008, 2009 financial crisis, we had tapped into that excitement, and then it obviously exploded into Occupy Wall Street. I remember very, very clearly, Jon Kest, who was a close friend of mine who would tragically end up dying of liver cancer the next year. But he was still fine. He was the head of what had become New York Communities for Change, which had been Acorn. And we were like, this Occupy Wall Street thing. This is ridiculous. Let's take bets on how many people are going to show up because the flyers said like 10,000 people are going to come. The first day like 500 people came and we're like, oh, that's ridiculous. And then, within 3 or 4 days we're like, "this is not ridiculous. This is incredible." The point that I wanted to make was -- So we went on strike for two weeks. There was this tremendous sense of energy. The workers were totally into it and the public seemed to be totally into it. We got calls from union people around the country. What you're doing is great, that kind of stuff. This was before the Chicago Teachers strike which happened in 2012. So it was a very highly visible expression of militancy in the context of the aftermath of the financial meltdown of 2008, 2007, 2008, whatever.

Bob [00:21:48] We went back to work and we worked without a contract trying to figure out how to put pressure on Verizon. It ended up being for another year or 13 months or something, which fast forwarding, turned out to be pretty demoralizing. It was a slog. It was my job to try to maintain the mobilization campaign on the job for those 13 months. I've got to tell you, people just felt like nothing we're doing makes a difference, by the time you got into 6 or 7 or 8 months out. But when Occupy happened, we connected our fight to Occupy. All of our strike signs: On Strike at Verizon. We are the 99% and Stop the Verizon 1%. We did joint rallies with Occupy Wall Street. One of the more exciting things that we did was, Pete Sikora, who was on the staff then, planned this march where we literally had 15 local leaders and rank and filers walk from Albany to New York, which culminated in a rally at 140 West Street. Then we all marched from 140 West Street to Union Square. I think it was around November 15th, there was a massive demonstration, like 35,000 people in Occupy. And we walked across the Brooklyn Bridge and there were Occupy images projected onto the Verizon building as we were crossing the bridge at night time. We even had, I think, as part of that, I don't know if it was that time or a different time, we had Verizon workers sleep out at Occupy in Zuccotti Park. So, for a while there, we were able to feed off of that energy. It was not sustainable. We actually, even when [Mayor Michael] Bloomberg threatened the first time before he actually did it to send cops in and clear Zuccotti Square, we had CWA leaders show up at 5:00 in the morning to be prepared to confront the police, to block them from clearing the square. I remember Jimmy Trainor, Dennis's brother, and Dennis were there. I said to them, the Occupy people have been with us on the picket line, we got to be there now to help them. We didn't have like 100 people or anything, we had maybe 5 or 10, but we did do that. So there was this real connection. By December, my recollection is the cultural tensions between the Occupiers and the telephone workers were emerging. Our guys got kind of tired of the Occupiers and became somewhat alienated. But for a couple of months there, particularly September, October, November, there was a real synergy that took place.

Debbie [00:25:08] And it was basically anti-corporate.

Bob [00:25:11] Yeah, very anti-corporate, very anti-corporate. And it was natural for our people who were very happy to attack the boss as a corporate villain. I can't remember who it was. Was it McAdam, or it was after Seidenberg at that point?

Debbie [00:25:37] Do you remember what the issue was that there was no contract for a year? Was it around health care?

Bob [00:25:45] I think it was primarily health care. It's funny, if I ever do write this book, I'm going to have to get this straight, get the bargaining history straight because at some point we ended up agreeing to 401Ks for new hires. It might have been in that contract negotiations, I don't remember, and health care was continually an issue in all those negotiations.

Debbie [00:26:17] Do you know the story of going back to work after two weeks? Was this a national leadership decision?

Bob [00:26:24] Yes. The decision, ultimately, was made by Larry [Cohen, president of the national union] and it was pretty controversial, I would say, in New York and certainly among the New York local leaders. I don't know if you interviewed Chris about it, but when I interviewed Larry about it, he was like, you should ask Chris. So I kind of left it alone. (laughs) But what Pam Galperin, for

example, who was one of the interviewees in my research, told me was that it left this kind of lingering sense of the national [union] doesn't really want to fight anymore and they're afraid to strike and led to a lot of trepidation and some conflict in 2015, 2016 when we made a strategic decision, Dennis really made a strategic decision, not to go on strike at expiration and to postpone beginning the strike until April which was five, six months after expiration. A lot of the local officers, particularly from Pam's local 1101, and Local 1109 were like, strike, strike, strike. And Dennis was like, not yet, not yet, not yet. But there was a sense of this is like 2011 again, you're not going to let us go on strike, you're afraid, blah, blah, blah. But anyway, I just wanted to tell the 2011 story just because it set the stage for 2016 in terms of how we kind of connected to the larger zeitgeist that existed in the society at both points as it turned out.

Debbie [00:28:17] In 2011, obviously, you had to coordinate with the bargaining unit in the South. Then it would have been Verizon South.

Bob [00:28:30] Yeah.

Debbie [00:28:31] And also there's always the IBEW in New Jersey and New England.

Bob [00:28:37] New Jersey, I can't remember specifically. That relationship was always more problematic. By that time, IBEW, their footprint had shrunk quite a lot. I think the sale of [Verizon properties in]] New Hampshire, Vermont and Maine [to FairPoint] had taken place. So they had contracted down to Massachusetts and Rhode Island. But, Miles is still around as far as I know. After [19]89, Miles Calvey, who was the president of the big Boston IBEW plant local, was basically always joined at the hip with us and that was always a very, very cooperative relationship. Jersey was always up and down. I can recall some meetings in our office with them, but they never really bought into mobilization. Miles did, partly because he had been under the influence of Steve Early for many years and later Rand Wilson. Yeah. I think by that point, the Northeast was kind of the anchor of that bargaining. Although I think ultimately, Larry brought Steve Weissman in and he was part of the bargaining and our attorney in New Jersey. I think that contract was ultimately settled in Washington. I don't know the details of the bargaining per se.

Debbie [00:30:27] And maybe this is more relevant to the next strike you're going to talk about. Another role that you played, if I'm correct, was to reach out to politicians and to have the mobilization and the leadership and the members reaching out to politicians. Did that occur in 2011?

Bob [00:30:50] Yeah, yeah. I don't remember specifics again, I'd have to go back and look at my stuff. But for sure, by that time, we would always have a parade of elected officials at our rallies, coming to the picket lines. That was certainly true in 2011. It was certainly true in 2016. Jumping ahead to 2016, obviously the big, big thing there was we had decided to endorse Bernie Sanders in December of 2015 at the national level when Chris [Shelton] was president and that was, as Bernie would say, huge. We were the largest union in the country to endorse Bernie.

Debbie [00:31:52] Take a little segue then to talk about that.

Bob [00:31:55] Well, I mean. It's interesting. We had a retreat of our District 1 political cadre activists in July of 2015. It was upstate somewhere. I don't remember exactly where. We had this discussion about the 2016 presidential race. And I really, really distinctly remember, these activists

saying to me, “Bob, you always told us, we have to support the people who support us. And this is a perfect opportunity. Bernie has always been there for us.” And I'm thinking to myself, Bernie, this was July now of 2015. And I'm thinking like, that's insane. Forget it. It was Hillary Clinton. We just thought she was going to kind of sweep the field. I was jaded and pragmatic. But it always stuck with me that these guys, it was mostly guys, were like, no, we've got to take a stand on principle. That kind of percolated. And then, of course, I'm sure you remember it, all of a sudden, it seemed like every rally that Bernie held, there were 25,000 people there. That summer is when it started. I remember there was a rally in Dallas or something that had like 10,000 people at it. I'm thinking 10,000 people in Dallas, like, I get 25,000 in Seattle, but 10,000 in Dallas. Something is going on.

Bob [00:33:46] So then for me personally, I was very, very deeply involved at that point in the Working Families Party. We were going through a simultaneous process. I made the argument very strenuously inside the Working Families Party that there was no way that the Party could survive if we didn't endorse Bernie. We would just be missing the boat so completely that we would be irrelevant. The Party at that point was still in pragmatism mode, like the sort of opening to the Left that Bernie initiated hadn't really happened yet. We didn't fully understand that there was going to be this whole world of politics that was to the Left of where the progressive unions were. There was no AOC [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez] at that point. There was no Squad [the four Left congresswomen - Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Presley, Rashida Tlaib], there was none of the stuff that has defined the last ten years politically. And so we went through this process and WFP did endorse Bernie, but not that much earlier than CWA. Then Larry, of course, left as president of CWA and was working on the Bernie campaign. I think Chris in some ways had the same gut feeling as those activists in upstate New York in July. This is a guy that's really stood with us, and we were, I think, pretty nervous about not being with the person who was most likely to be the nominee. But I think ultimately we felt great about having endorsed Bernie. In truth, I remember also having a conversation at some point with Stephen Lerner [long-time SEIU organizer who led Justice for Janitors] in the fall of 2015 in which I was kind of talking out loud to him about should we endorse Bernie, should we not endorse Bernie? And saying out loud endorsing Bernie could really help us in our contract fight because we knew that Bernie would be really comfortable walking on a picket line and bashing the Verizon executives. Whereas Hillary when she ran for Senate in 2000 was not dying to come to our picket lines. I think we did get her at one point to come to a picket line, but I'm not sure. She was definitely of the kind of traditional mold of Democratic politicians. “I don't interfere in collective bargaining disputes” kind of thing. “That's up to the union and the company. I support a fair contract.” That kind of mentality. We knew Bernie was not going to do that.

Bob [00:37:09] My joke after the strike was, remind us never to go on strike again unless it's one week out from a Democratic primary in New York state in which a socialist is running for president, because it was incredible. Bernie came to the picket line the first day. If the primary was April 20th, we went on strike like April 10th or something, and he had just been endorsed, Larry was with him, he had just been endorsed by TWU [Transit Workers Union] local 100 at their headquarters in Brooklyn Heights. We had a massive picket line at 395 Flatbush Avenue Extension [in downtown Brooklyn not far from the TWU headquarters]. Bernie came to the picket line. There were like 2500 people on the picket line there. It was just amazing. The interesting thing is Hillary insisted on coming to the picket line too on that day, even though we hadn't endorsed her. Our picket line was on 42nd Street outside of the flagship [Verizon] Wireless store, I think between Fifth and Sixth Avenue or Sixth and Seventh Avenue, I think between Fifth and Sixth. And she came and was very warm and Dennis was warm to her and so on and so forth. We were like, you can come tomorrow.

She's like, no, I want to come today. Then we went from there. Bernie was doing a mass rally in Washington Square Park, massive and they set aside a whole bunch of seats for our strikers. We got a shout out from Bernie and I think the next week there was a rally right before the primary in Queens. This was basically the high point of my entire career. I got to represent CWA and be a speaker at Bernie's rally in Long Island City. I don't know if you have a mental picture of it, but this is the western edge of Queens where the big Pepsi-Cola sign is that you can see from the FDR Drive in the East Side. an incredible backdrop of Manhattan behind the stage and all that kind of stuff. There were like 8000 people there and a bunch of guys from the Queens local came. There were two different rallies. There was the warm up rally. I was on the junior warm up team and then Danny Glover and some other speakers were in the real rally when Bernie came. But that was the most fun I ever had in my job. (laughs) It was really fun. But in general by that time, Bernie, I would argue, had captured the spirit of 2011 of Occupy Wall Street and what became the political expression of it and, man, we were really riding that wave.

Bob [00:40:22] I would say 2016 kind of culminated all of the lessons that we had learned over the decades about how to run a strike. A combination of the internal mobilization, which was complicated because we waited for so long so a lot of the mobilization training had been in early 2015 in anticipation of an August 2015 expiration. Then we didn't go until April of 2016. It was a very conscious strategy by Dennis that he wanted the issues on the table to be reduced to a handful of issues that would give us good standing with the public. So he had to persuade both our bargaining committee and the South bargaining committee that we were not going to take a stand on the nickels and dimes of health care. We were going to basically give the company a lot of what they wanted on health care cost shifting, and we were going to make the demand be about jobs. And so the strike became primarily about the preservation and the restoration of jobs, which was an issue that resonated with the public. I remember, we hired Berlin Rosen.

Debbie [00:41:48] A PR firm and a polling firm.

Bob [00:41:52] There was a woman named Lynsey Kryzwick who was assigned to work with us. She was fantastic. We had like eight issues on the table and like the fifth or the sixth issue was offshoring. Lindsay says to me, that's your issue. I'm like, it's actually not our top issue. And she's like, no, no, that's your issue. This strike is going to be about offshoring jobs because that's what people care about.

Debbie [00:42:18] And which is really customer service.

Bob [00:42:22] Yes, it was customer service, but then it opened up a whole avenue of activity, which I'm sure you remember. It turned out that the call center workers in the Philippines were spontaneously slowing down FiOS (fiber to the home Internet and video) orders. Somehow it got communicated to us. I'd have to ask Tim [Dubnau, Deputy National Organizing Director who was then the District 1 Organizing Coordinator] the story. The FiOS customer service stuff was wholly transferred, I guess, to the Philippines and the workers were like, nah, we're not doing this. These people are on strike. We're going to slow it down, whatever they were doing. So we sent a delegation of commercial reps with Tim to meet with the Filipino workers. And I'm sure you remember this. They got there and they were surrounded by a Verizon paid-for SWAT team and trapped inside a van for some period of time. The company completely overreacted. When the contract was finally settled, which was in Tom Perez's office at the DOL [Department of Labor], there are some great stories about that. Did Dennis ever tell you any of those stories?

Debbie [00:43:39] I don't think so.

Bob [00:43:40] Just great stories. One of them is [Verizon CEO Lowell] McAdams said to Dennis: "Man, that Philippines trip. That was a brilliant idea." You never know, those guys never really show their hand. They don't want to show any vulnerability. Because there were a lot of articles and who knows? I don't know why it would be that embarrassing to them, but it was. My favorite story, there are two of them. Perez basically locked these guys in the room at the DOL and was like, "we're not coming out until we settle." So one night, Dennis tells the story, McAdam was like, "I got to leave. It's close to midnight. My pilot goes off duty at midnight." And Perez said, "I don't care, you're staying." (laughs) It just goes to show you the kind of disparity in experience. But then when they settled, it was like 3:00 in the morning, Perez says to Dennis, "you got to sign." Dennis says, "I'm not signing. I got to talk to my committee." And Perez says: "No, you got to sign right now we're done." And Dennis is like, "no, we're not done. I promised my committee I would run the settlement past them." At 3:00 in the morning he assembled the committee. He resisted the pressure of the Secretary of Labor who was our closest ally and helped us to get to the end because he was so committed to the rank and file participation of the bargaining committee.

Debbie [00:45:24] Dennis did tell that story.

Bob [00:45:26] Yeah. Which I always took as kind of emblematic of how Dennis operates and how much work he was willing to put into fighting with the committee and wrangling with the committee until he got them where he wanted them, but then also respected them to the point where he wasn't going to make a settlement without them. The other thing that was different about the 2016 strike was we had organized the 5 or 6 stores, whatever it was, of the Verizon Wireless stores. They were actually CWA members in Brooklyn in the interim between 2011 and 2016. Which meant that we could picket and not just informational picket all the Verizon Wireless stores all over the country. And so we tried to mount this pretty gigantic effort involving all of our allies in the labor movement. We had DSA [Democratic Socialists of America] chapters and people all over the country leafleting and picketing Verizon Wireless stores. That was an effective tactic because, as I think I said to you last time, we had stopped picketing central offices, except in a token way decades before. We had focused very much on following the work, following management scabs and picketing homes and businesses where they were working and so on. But then this wireless thing -- I mean, honestly, there was a big wireless store at the corner of Water Street and Wall Street which was literally within shouting distance of our office. Those guys from [local] 1101 were so noisy, it drove us crazy and we were on the 37th floor. I can't imagine what it was like if your office was right above the wireless store. And they were out there for hours with air horns and screaming. So there was a lot of that.

Debbie [00:47:59] How long was the strike?

Bob [00:48:01] The strike was seven, six weeks. It was 40 days or something like that including the amount of time it took to ratify.

Debbie [00:48:16] Was there much scabbing, especially in the South?

Bob [00:48:21] No, I don't think so. Once again, we had a very robust social media presence. We had a lot of video. One thing we definitely learned was paid media, and by this I mean TV or radio

advertising. Radio advertising was almost useless. [It] was only useful, really, to reinforce the spirits of our members. We just couldn't do paid media on a scale which rivaled Verizon. They spent so much money on TV ads. As you know, you turn on the TV, you can't not see a Verizon Wireless ad all the time. But I think we succeeded in making the fight about good jobs in America. That was a winning message. Oh, the other really interesting thing is, and I don't remember the name of this, I'd have to go back and look at my interview with Pam. There was an extremely onerous supervisory system [called the Quality Assurance Review, QAR] that the company had put in place, certainly in New York City, but maybe in the whole footprint where there was a lot of monitoring of people and a lot of discipline.

Debbie [00:50:07] Are you talking about the outside plant people and/or the service reps?

Bob [00:50:14] Well, the service reps have kind of always been subject to this review.

Debbie [00:50:17] Yes.

Bob [00:50:17] This was more on the plant people.

Debbie [00:50:20] They started GPS monitoring?

Bob [00:50:23] It was worse than that because that had been around for a while. Right.

Debbie [00:50:27] But you had to do certain number of jobs in a certain amount of time, that kind of thing?

Bob [00:50:34] Yeah, but I think it was more like the punishments, the suspensions, the pressure had really ratcheted up. There was a name for the system [QAR]. That became an issue at the bargaining table. When I talked to a number of the Left journalists who wrote about the strike at the end I thought it was really important to stress that we had made a shopfloor organization issue a strike issue. Historically when we think about the big picture of the postwar era, it was like we bargain about wages and health benefits. This is very similar to your story that you wrote about. The organization of work was totally up to management, like we never really contested that. And this was contested. The bargaining committee refused to settle until the company backed off and basically repealed and has stayed repealed [the QAR.] It has not come back. Shopfloor conditions, as I understand it, [from] my most recent conversations, there's way less conflict and tension in the work location than there was before the strike. Pam talks about that people were so angry and so demoralized by how bad the supervisory system was that they just were like, we got to go on strike because this is unbearable which is not how you think of an outside plant technician's job. You know what I mean? Then there was a nationally televised debate just days before the New York primary. And Bernie [Sanders], literally by name denounced McAdam on the nationally televised debate. He had been in Buffalo the night before the strike started, he went and met with the local. Wherever he went he was talking up the strike. We were part of all of his rallies and so on. You had the Philippines, you had the messaging, you had the wireless picketing, we did children's rallies. All of the lessons that we had accumulated over the decades came together in the 2016 strike. Pam Galperin said going back to work the day after the strike ended was the greatest day she ever had on the job at Verizon. Oh, [local] 1101, there was stuff that we didn't really have that much to do with. They did a pretty significant and impactful campaign of picketing outside the hotels where the scabs were. The management scabs were being housed, and I give these guys a lot of credit, with the help

of the HERE [Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union] local in New York City the scabs were evicted from a bunch of the hotels. [Local] 1101 would go out at 5:00 in the morning and make a huge racket. Hotel management were like, we don't want any part of this. A lot of the scabs were sent packing. All of these things came together in kind of a coherent strike plan that was very effective.

Debbie [00:54:32] I want to ask one more thing about the 2016 strike. My recollection is that this was also a period in which the district tried to make the fight for universal broadband a part of the program in terms of the public and in terms of the jobs that we were trying to get. That it was good for jobs and it was good for the public.

Bob [00:55:17] Yep.

Debbie [00:55:18] Talk about what you did and also whether you thought it made any difference and whether the members cared.

Bob [00:55:28] Let me say generally that I regret not having pushed it harder and not having seen whether or not we could have really made that an issue in the strike. It was, of course, not a mandatory subject of bargaining, about investment. Right. And so, Gay [Semel] would always be in my ear, you can't say you're on strike over the failure to build-out [the fiber network] because that would make it not a legal strike. What we did do was we brought the mayor of Syracuse and the mayor of Kingston to the bargaining table before expiration in 2015, and we gave them the floor and forced Verizon to listen to them for 45 minutes or an hour about how their communities had been bypassed in terms of the FiOS build out. But we never drove the issue deep into the mobilization so that the members were thinking this was the issue. It always struck me that in terms of our opportunity to adopt a Bargaining for the Common Good strategy, this was our opportunity. But I think that in the minds of the people who were leading the bargaining, I just don't think it seemed realistic to them to make that a membership issue and keep people on strike about it. And I always wondered if we could have done more to try to do that. It was a fight that we had been having at a pretty public level, using the report that you helped us do or I think you did, which showed the geographies of where they [Verizon] had built it [Fios fiber to the home], and the economic disparities and so on. I do think, and I think I said this before in a different part of the conversation. I feel like the consistent work that we had done around those issues, "Don't bypass Buffalo," and the legislative things that we tried to do, gave us a lot of credibility with the political class who saw us as honestly fighting to get high-speed broadband to the whole state and doing it in a way that benefited customers and obviously it would have been good for our members, too. But I don't feel like we successfully made it a strike issue and I wish we had done more on that.

Debbie [00:58:46] As you compare the attempts to do regulatory interventions, and I'm remembering Richard Brodsky, who was championing this for CWA, contrast 2016 with the 1989 strike and the opportunities of regulatory intervention. It shows how much deregulation had defanged our ability to use the regulatory process to link worker issues and consumer issues.

Bob [00:59:27] 100%, I totally agree with that. I was just telling somebody the story from my interview with Chris Calabrese, who came to work in the mid-nineties. That was an era of tremendous leverage at the Public Service Commission. If you remember, and I'm sure you do remember this better than I do, the Bell Atlantic/NYNEX merger took place around 1995.

Debbie [01:00:06] 1997 after the Telecommunications Act of 1996 passed.

Bob [01:00:09] We got 2500 jobs out of that merger. There had been a whole issue around service quality and, led by David Mintz, who was the attorney for the district at the time, we intervened. As part of the PSC's approval of the merger, they required Verizon, at that time it was Bell Atlantic, to hire 2500 people, really unheard of. But what Chris said was that when he came in, the company was still subject to the "24 hours out-of-service standard." 80% of the out-of-service conditions had to be fixed within 24 hours. He said all the workers knew this and it gave them an incredible amount of shopfloor power, because management was being judged by whether or not they met the out-of-service standard and the workers were like, hey, you want us to finish this job, you better take care of this problem or that problem. It was a huge amount of leverage that within ten years had really kind of disappeared because now people had cell phones. I remember, it must have been 2000, I think it was during the strike. I can't remember this exactly, but I remember, the company just gave people a cell phone. We'll come back and fix your landline after the strike is over. Like, whoa, this was a big change. So, obviously in [19]89, they were idiotically applying for a rate increase in the middle of the strike. And, as I said in the last interview, we got 130 members of the legislature, basically all the Democrats, to come out publicly and oppose it. We didn't really have anything like that [in 2016]. We had been making these efforts to re-regulate, but it just wasn't possible.

Debbie [01:02:25] The competition mantra as a solution to consumer issues had won the day.

Bob [01:02:32] Exactly 100%.

Debbie [01:02:34] I just want to get on tape. One other person who was integral to the service quality fights was Ken Peres. [Research economist in District 1 and later at CWA national headquarters.]

Bob [01:02:40] 100%. Yep, yep. He led all of that work at the PSC for decades and he was great. He was dogged.

Debbie [01:02:52] So let's close out the discussion of 2016. What would you say the legacy of that strike was, both for the union and for the relationship with the company?

Bob [01:03:04] Yeah. Great question. It was very clear that 2016 was a generational experience. That the generation of activists who were in their 40s and 50s, many of whom had come after [19]89. So it's almost 20 years after [19]89, am I doing my math right, almost 30 years. There was a whole generation of people who had come after the [19] 89 strike, like Calabrese, like Pam Galpern. In many ways they had been waiting to have their [19]89 or their [19]71. These three strikes really loom large in the, not the imagination, because it was the reality of the experience of telephone workers. There really was this sense of "they had '89 and '71, now we have 2016." It wasn't as long, it was six weeks instead of 17 weeks or seven and a half months. Every time a strike happened in my experience, the more experienced workers were always like can the young people hold up? Now, there weren't that many young people in 2016 because there hadn't been that much hiring. But the younger people, will they really be able to carry that tradition forward? I think everybody felt like, yeah, absolutely. They did it.

Bob [01:05:08] It [the strike] felt like a big part of the national discourse about inequality and corporate power. I think people felt very, very proud. The interesting thing from the perspective of what does it mean in terms of the relationship with Verizon? It seems like we've entered into a period of peace and cooperation that really is more or less unprecedented. The problem, of course, is that the number of jobs continues to shrink as technology changes and fewer and fewer people have landlines. But from everything I've heard recently, everyone says it's very quiet at Verizon. I think there have been at least two if not three contract extensions already. Obviously I'm not there on a day to day basis, you begin to get a little bit of the worries that we had between 2003 and 2008, when we had a five-year contract after the 2003 contract fight. You start to worry that the mobilization muscle starts to atrophy and people worry about our ability to do what we need to do in the future. But, I think all in all, people feel pretty good about how things are going at Verizon. And Verizon, this started to happen right before I left, became more interested in applying for government grants and engaging in more [fiber] build-out. I think you remember they didn't even try to get any money in the first two rounds of Cuomo's build-out subsidies, but did get a big grant, something like \$90 million, to build-out someplace around Utica, in rural areas outside of Utica. They got I think a pretty big grant to do build-out in Syracuse. We've been working with them pretty closely. I haven't heard the latest from Becca. This is a complete tangent, but the UAW has made this call for people to line up their expiration dates with their contract in 2028. And, call me cynical, but I don't know why you're doing that because the auto companies are going to give you whatever you want in the next round of bargaining. There isn't going to be a strike. You proved that you could do it and the companies are not anxious to go through that again. That was very disruptive. So your success means that it's pretty unlikely that you're going to go on strike again in 2028. That's our experience. It was always true. We got three contracts 89, 92 and 95. We got several contracts after 2016.

Debbie [01:08:26] This is toward the end of our conversation. It's an opportunity for you to both summarize some of your major achievements, your analysis of what made the difference and also perhaps some things which you learned that you weren't able to accomplish. This conversation actually is about the past so that people in the future can learn from it. What are some of the lessons you would like to share with people going forward?

Bob [01:09:12] There are some very concrete things that we've really talked about, especially today. About what goes into running a good strike, tactical things that if we had a more unlimited amount of time we could talk about them. Obviously the bedrock of any strike and in any union activity is membership engagement. But then thinking about throwing everything at the wall and not ever really knowing exactly what is going to be the most effective thing. For example, the story I told about the Philippines and McAdam acknowledging that was something that hurt them in terms of public perception. So that's one level of it. I don't know if I said this in our last interview. I continue to feel unbelievably lucky to have landed at CWA because, really, I could have ended up having a career anywhere. The thing that to me is so special about CWA, I think you and I have talked about, I do partially attribute to our legacy of being a descendant of the company unions, is part of the explanation. There is this tradition of being very democratic and very decentralized, where locals and districts have a lot of autonomy and that can be a real pain in the ass sometimes. I always marveled that we would go to convention and locals would have the ability to challenge our decisions, whether or not to send a case to arbitration on the floor of the convention, which maybe it does happen in other unions, but doesn't feel like it. Then we'd have these debates, these lengthy debates from the resolutions committee over days, should we pursue this case to arbitration? So being in a place that was that democratic and in which members were at the center of the life of the

union was really, it just felt very, very special and I think unique. And then I do feel like, again I can't remember if I said this, I feel like because of Larry's [Cohen] leadership there was a generation of what I think could be described as left-wing staffers who brought a commitment to a broader conception of the labor movement and to tactical innovation. And that intersected with these democratic traditions, which were also traditions of militancy. One thing that my research revealed to me was, and I don't know if we've talked about this very much, but the national leadership under Beirne by the mid-fifties [1950s] was more or less drawing a conclusion that striking in the telephone industry was fruitless. Did I ever tell you the story?

Debbie [01:12:59] No.

Bob [01:13:00] In 1955, after the long strike at Southern Bell in which 250 workers were fired and ultimately something like 70 didn't get their jobs back or something like that, Beirne sends a memo to the Executive Board in which he says, I want you all to write a paper, not like I want you to write a memo. I want you to write a paper. Pro or con: Strikes in the telephone industry don't work anymore. I actually never got around to reading the minutes of the board meeting in early [19]56 when they actually discussed this. And he followed up. He had his secretary follow up. He had like a checklist, like, Walter Schaar he submitted his paper, and this one it's in their paper and so on. I think it was Schaar who was the vice president of District 4 or maybe it was somebody else, I can't remember. It's in my 100 page history of CWA, was like, "yeah of all the big industries, our strikes are the least effective because we don't interfere with production." They were obsessed with dialization at that point which had almost completely taken place in local calling and was moving into long distance in a big way. [Dialization means the ability of a person to dial a call directly without needing an operator.] And [he] said we should get something like the Railway [Labor] Act where we have basically national arbitration of all of our disputes. In the railway industry, it's bad for the unions, but in our industry it will be good for the union. It'll level the playing field. Meanwhile, up in New York, workers were going on wildcat strikes right and left, like they were paying no attention to these kinds of big picture considerations of the impact of technology on the efficacy of the strike, which is why [19]71 becomes so important because the system more or less kept running. But by [19]74, people had seen it as a victory. So, you have this tradition of rank-and-file militancy that then connects with, the shorthand I would use, Larry's vision that comes out of the 60s of shopfloor-based militancy and he institutionalized it through the mobilization program. To me, that's what really makes CWA unique. You have these long-standing traditions of shop militancy led by primarily outside plant technicians who have a tremendous amount of control over their work, very much embody this idea that you're super familiar with that "the management's brain is under the workman's cap." [Citation to labor historian David Montgomery] Then it intersects with this kind of 60s radical vision and plus you have this legacy of a lot of autonomy and a lot of democracy that to me stems from the fact that basically Beirne could never really be a top down ruler. He had to persuade all of these formerly autonomous company unions to come together. He had to get them to agree voluntarily to do stuff together. It wasn't like there was a single national contract the way there was at GM [General Motors] where it's like, if you were a GM worker, [UAW president] Walter Reuther determined your fate. When we came to work at CWA, you still had company unions representing the commercial reps and the operators in New York. Those organizing campaigns took place in the [19]80s, so they were still struggling to get people to agree to be part of the CWA. Obviously to this day, Illinois, New England, they should all be part of CWA but they're not, they're part of the IBEW. Those are my big picture takeaways and feeling fortunate to have been part of this union where we were able to help transform the union from one that in 1971 they had the determination but they had no organization. It was a terribly run strike and they

had no tactics. Morty actually was newly the vice president and he sent out weekly newsletters. They tried to do a bunch of different things but it was nothing like the [19]89 or the 2016 strike. Yeah, that's kind of my big picture view.

Debbie [01:18:27] Well it's great. One of the themes that Jeff and I are very interested in in these interviews is how CWA transformed itself in a period of massive change. Whether it was the technology of our major industry, the political economy and the politics externally, the regulatory framework, the changes demographically, the incorporation of which you see very much in District 1, whether through merger or organizing other sectors. You've alluded to it, but how would you sum up why it was that CWA was able to transform itself and remain vibrant in a very challenging period?

Bob [01:19:52] I think a lot of the factors that I was just talking about contributed to making that possible. It's a little hard for me to step back from my own experience in evaluating that. My entire time at CWA feels like it was unified by the mobilization model that Larry brought to the national union out of New Jersey. We talked about mobilization in [19]86 for the first time. But I had been working for the union for a month when we went on strike in [19]86 and there was no real program and it wasn't really organized. Larry became the organizing director and had a vision of implementing this mobilization model across the country. One of the first things that we did, and I can't remember if this was [19]87 or [19]88, he did this conference with the Boilermakers in Kansas City. Do you recall this at all? The Boilermakers had and I don't even know what a Boilermaker does, but the Boilermakers had done a piece on "running the plant backwards" that was in the Labor Research Review. It was about shopfloor tactics to exercise power without going on strike. One thing I will say parenthetically, if you read Morty's book [*From the Telegraph to the Internet*], I think he bought mobilization as an alternative to a strike, not as a preparation for a strike. He kind of had that Beirne mentality. Strikes are no longer effective in the same way. But the mobilization culture -- One of my consulting things is I'm working with the IUE and there's new leadership at local 301 in Schenectady. Wednesday night and Thursday I'm going up there to meet with them. And what we're going to talk about is basically implementing the fundamental principles of mobilization. Build the structure, educate people, ask people what they care about and organize to try to figure out a campaign that you can run that involves people to fight on an issue that they care about. It's the same stuff I've been doing since 1986. And give him credit, Larry had the vision of creating this as an overarching program in the union which would be integrated through the idea of the CWA Triangle, which was reflected in the mobilization. If you remember the first version of the Mobilization Manual was "Mobilizing for the 90s," and then we had to have "Mobilization for the Future" because it was not just for the 90s. And then there were all the things that came with that. I do think the CWA triangle idea, the sort of bedrock being bargaining and representation, but you can't have a strong triangle unless you're doing organizing and you're doing politics and social movements as well, is very valuable in terms of how you conceptualize what the union should look like. So I certainly didn't see eye to eye with Larry on everything, but I just feel like that vision really was -- Because once you have that as the core and then you start building around it, whether it's legislative and political action or social movements, it's Jobs with Justice, it's the fight on the filibuster, it's the strategic research that you led and that now Nell [Geiser] now leads that contributes to all these campaigns, the sort of variety of corporate campaign tactics that become part of a strategy. It all kind of comes together. I think that's the key.

Bob [01:24:36] One thing is I have a sort of a New York-centric perspective. So, it's a little hard for me to judge how deep those traditions of militancy, of shop control run in other parts of the country.

It's hard for me to believe that it's really different in Philadelphia and Boston. It's easier for me to believe it's not the same in Atlanta or Denver. But I don't really know. I do know that if you talk to people like Billy Gallagher, for example, who is a young guy, I don't think he's 50. His view is if the shop steward doesn't run the garage, then the shop steward is not doing their job. That is just how they thought, we do stuff, we exercise power. The boss knows that we exercise power and you're not doing your job as a chief steward or a business agent if you don't know how to do that. I don't know if it works that way in other parts of the country. But the intersection of that culture and the mobilization culture to me is what made it possible for CWA to thrive. Not without challenges. I mean the membership decline is serious. Sometimes I worry that we don't have a big enough vision in terms of organizing. I feel like the SEIU [Service Employees International Union] had this idea of putting together so many hundreds of millions of dollars and being able to invest in ways that we never really thought that big. I mean, our industries I think were tougher and the level of resistance was tougher. The cable industry was a lot tougher than the home health industry But I do think we are making breakthroughs. The New Flyer [neutrality agreement] and the Microsoft/Activision thing [neutrality agreement] are really amazing. So we'll see. But that's how I see it.

Debbie [01:27:00] That's great.