

Communications Workers of America Oral History Project

Interviewee: Kohl, George

Interviewer: Debbie Goldman

Date of Interview: January 8, 2024

Place of Interview: Washington, D.C.

Page Total: 42

A raw transcript of the interview was first produced by machine via Trint.com. The raw transcript was then audited and edited by Debbie Goldman. The following transcript was then reviewed, edited, and approved by the interviewee. This is the official record of the interview. Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose

Debbie: This is an interview with George Kohl. It is January 8th, 2024. We're in Washington, D.C. Debbie Goldman is conducting the interview. Hannah Goldman is recording the interview. Jeff Rechenbach is on Zoom in Cleveland, Ohio.

Debbie [00:00:00] We're going to talk briefly about your own personal background. Then I'll move into the union.

George [00:00:04] All right.

Debbie [00:00:05] You were born, when, where, tell us a little bit about your community, your family.

George [00:00:18] I was born in California in the Bay area in 1951, the oldest of three boys who were two years apart. Then my family moved to Saint Louis, Missouri. It was in 1960. Thinking about that, in California my father had a series of jobs and a series of stories to go along with those jobs, including working for the telephone company. I used to use that on occasion that he worked for PacTel [Pacific Telesis]. I grew up in Saint Louis, Missouri, because I'm there from [ages] 10 to 15 or 16, 17, which I think of as the formative years. Growing up in the Midwest was a good thing because had I grown up in New York City or the Bay area I would have been a sectarian radical of some sort, but I never had to deal with those kind of people because in Saint Louis, when we played kickball there were four of us for Kennedy and 16 of them for Nixon. That was the kind of community [where I was] growing [up], but with parents who were left-wing parents.

George [00:01:40] One more story about that, which is not what you're here for. My favorite story. I'm in fifth grade, fourth grade. Castro's coming to the United States. My friend Freddy Peale says to me, well, my dad would shoot him if he came down our street. I go home. I talk to my mom and said, hey, Freddie Peale's father would shoot Castro if he was on their street. What would you do? My mom says, well, I'd bring him in for tea so we could talk. I go back to school the next day and tell Freddie Peale my mom would invite him in to talk. Then Freddie Peale and I had to have this big fight, and I beat the shit out of him. It was the last physical fight I ever had to have. He was down. I didn't know what to do next. That's growing up in Saint Louis. We describe Saint Louis as its ass is in the north and its face is in the south or vice versa. Faces north, ass in the south, incorporates the worst of both cultures. It was a good place to grow up in America.

Debbie [00:02:51] Do you want to talk a little more about your parents politics' and how that affected you?

George [00:02:57] Sure. My parents' politics were left wing. My father grew up in the South. Integration was incredibly important to him. His statement would be that the communists cared about integration so he joined with the communists in the 50s. By the mid [19]50s, they were disaffiliated or I don't know even how deeply affiliated they were. I never fully got those stories from my mother or my father, except for the fact they didn't like it by the mid [19]50s. So I'm five years-old when they don't like it.

Debbie [00:03:35] It being the Communist Party.

George [00:03:36] The Communist Party. But because the [19]50s were different -- They both came from middle-class families. My grandma on my mom's side was a clerk in the army. Her

husband died young. My mother lost her father and brother by the time she was 13. Her brother died in the middle of World War II, but in the States. Then on my father's side, we were Jewish immigrants. His father, my father's grandfather comes over to this country. His father works in various grocery stores in Cleveland. They came from Cleveland and they're all buried in the Jewish cemetery in Cleveland. With massive breaks in being Jewish so that the real one of the many revolutions would have been going from Orthodox Jews to Reform Jews to cultural Jews. I was not ever bar mitzvahed or raised that way.

George [00:04:42] Grandpa story goes, [he] liked to gamble and lost money to the Mob. Had to flee to the end of the earth. So in the [19]30s, ends up in Miami Beach, which is at the end of the road at that point. He goes into business there. He has a lumber yard. All the bars in Miami, on South Beach, all the beautiful millwork, woodworking work comes out of his shops, family lore says. They were wealthy for the time. I mean, he owned a mill. But never super rich. The family owned the beach underneath the Fontainebleau Hotel. But grandma didn't like sand being tracked into the living room, so they moved inland five miles in 1937 or something. There are a series of stories like that. He had a contract to build barges during the war and his claim was the congressman was crooked, whoever the contracting officer was crooked, but who knows. He had to send a crew up to Cleveland or wherever the barges were being built to add a foot to each barge because he had lousy specs, so he lost money. The only businessmen to lose money in the war.

Debbie [00:06:00] I'm going to pull you back from talking about him back to your own parents.

George [00:06:08] That's the milieu my father grew up in. He's chased out of Florida because he's trying to integrate the University of Florida in 1948 or 47. Ku Klux Klan comes to the house and talks to his father, who tells him, they're going to kill us if you don't leave.

Debbie [00:06:26] If your father doesn't leave?

George [00:06:27] If my dad doesn't leave Miami.

Debbie [00:06:28] What was his first name?

George [00:06:29] Daniel. Daniel Kohl. So he leaves, must have been 19. I don't know which year. It's somewhere between [19]48 and [19]50. They end up in California where he then does a bunch of these kind of factory jobs. He worked in an auto factory for five or six years till the Fremont plant closed down. Drove a cab, worst job ever he would say because he had to carry the drunks up to their wives' doorsteps.

George [00:07:02] When the Fremont plant shut down, it was the time that Sputnik had gone up from the Russians. There was lots of money to go back to school. He went back to school with a plan to be an engineer. His claim? My hands sweat so I couldn't make the drawings work. So he becomes a scientist. Then in 1959,[he] moves to Saint Louis for graduate studies with Barry Commoner at the Center for Environmental Studies that existed there. That's what brought us to Saint Louis. I'm ten years-old when we go to Saint Louis.

Debbie [00:07:37] He was a professor then at Wash U [Washington University]?

George [00:07:40] He was a graduate student at Wash U. Then at some point, five years later maybe, [he] becomes a professor.

Debbie [00:07:46] And your mother became an anthropologist?

George [00:07:49] So my mother. I'm ten. Three years later, my mom's in school. She goes back to school as well when they were in Saint Louis. Three years later, she's pregnant with my baby sister. And a couple, maybe within a year of that, so four years later she gets her doctorate. Then teaches at a small Catholic university called Webster College in Saint Louis. That was my first exposure to nuns. She invited colleagues from work over. I must be, what, 13 years old, because Martha was born. Yeah, 13, 14 years-old. These three nuns walk into the house, and the first one looks exactly what you think a nun should look like, dour skinny face, this that and the other. The second one walks in and she hops on top of our Saint Bernard and says, giddyap, giddyap. It was like my mind exploded, this is not what I thought nuns were.

Debbie [00:08:45] And what values do you think you got from your parents that then informed your work and CWA?

George [00:08:54] It was that unions were important, caring was important, people were important. They were particularly non-institutional. I think there was a conflict between the individual and people versus big ideas. This is why I describe it as I'm glad I didn't grow up in New York. They would have scorned the kind of the super-ideological people who only cared about systems but never cared about the people. They cared very much about individuals and people. I think that element of caring comes from them. And then a kind of social progressivism comes from them. But my generation was anti-war. For my dad it was integration. I was always, we're for integration, but it wasn't a cause celeb for me. To me it was the war, then environment, and then labor was always a theme underneath that, that labor was critically important and unions were critically important.

Debbie [00:10:15] I'm going to come back to that. I have another question. You mentioned that your family was Jewish, but not

George [00:10:25] Religious.

Debbie [00:10:25] Not religious, and it sounds like not affiliated with any Jewish organizations.

George [00:10:31] That's correct.

Debbie [00:10:32] And you didn't get Jewish education?

George [00:10:34] No. My mom's family, she was brought up in New York City Ethical [Culture] Society, and my dad was Cleveland Jewish, some kind of Orthodox background, because there's a Jewish cemetery in Cleveland and the headstones read in Hebrew.

Debbie [00:10:55] Would you say that Jewish culture, history, values were a part of your background or not?

George [00:11:06] I would say they are, but for me it's hidden. I have to read about Jewish values and Jewish history to understand, oh, that's where that comes from. It was never explicit in my generation, meaning my brothers and my upbringing.

Debbie [00:11:28] I'm going to jump to a topic we haven't talked about yet. Morty Bahr was Jewish, pretty assimilated, Larry Cohen was Jewish, very assimilated. Was there anti-Semitism during your years in CWA? If so, how was it expressed? If not?

George [00:11:54] That's a funny question. Only funny because there was: "the Jews were taking over the union and that was a bad thing" in the general ambiance. But given my background and upbringing in Saint Louis, I was mostly oblivious to it. I do remember at some point, Doug Thompson, who I liked, who is Caribbean African-American, I guess he was brought up in the United States, but he came from New York. He was a telephone guy. No, was he telephone or telegraph? Anyway, it doesn't matter. So Doug Thompson.

Debbie [00:12:31] Who eventually became an assistant [to the vice-president] in District 2.

George [00:12:36] Right. Then he went back to Belize and opened up a resort. His brother was a big shot in the Economics Department of the state of Belize, the secretary of the economy, [that] kind of level. Anyway, apparently I think he wrote a paper at some point talking about the Jews taking over, some kind of external threat of "them" taking over the union. But mostly I was oblivious to that, there's never been any... Well, [00:13:14] Dan Boone [0.2s] would tell anti-Jewish jokes. Dan Boone was an assistant from District 7, but it was the kind of jokes that growing up as I did, I didn't take it as Jewish jokes. In the jokes, you could replace the Jew with the Polack or with the Wop. You could replace any ethnicity in the joke, which is how I heard those kinds of jokes as opposed to understanding or feeling, wait a minute, this is really virulent and bad stuff. It was just, again, this is the Saint Louis element of water off a duck's back. It doesn't mean anything because it had no meaning to me. Maybe it had meaning to them, had meaning more broadly, but I was oblivious. So that was kind of how I suffered through it.

Debbie [00:14:02] Were there many Jews in CWA?

George [00:14:05] Not that I know of. The story had been that the telephone company liked to hire Catholic girls for the operators because they knew how to obey the rules and they were well-behaved. Certainly on the East Coast it was Irish and Catholic, it was a great craft job. It was a family thing. Beirne [Joe Beirne, CWA founding president] was an Irish Catholic. On the East coast anyway, it was a Catholic thing, Catholic industry, so to speak. I don't know if there are no Jews, but there was no Jewish presence that I was aware of until Morty [Bahr, CWA's third president] comes up. Morty is totally transformational as a character within CWA both in his self-awareness of who he is and then what he ended up doing for the union.

Debbie [00:15:06] We got to you talking about the fact that for your generation and for you the key politicizing event was the war in Vietnam. You left Saint Louis to go to college. I don't know where you went.

George [00:15:20] No.

Debbie [00:15:21] Talk about your politics, your post-high school politicization.

George [00:15:28] Two more stories. One story about high school would be, I played soccer. My mom wouldn't let me play football, it was too dangerous. So we played soccer. Saint Louis was a massive soccer town. The Catholic youth organizations had 50,000 kids. This is in [19]62 or 3, no, maybe [19]65. Anyway, playing soccer was massive, and all the Catholic high schools were real powerhouses in soccer. I played soccer and my friend was Matt Filla. The contradiction for me would be we play soccer. Sitting in a locker room they would say, let's go out and punch the shit out of those hippies who are leafletting against the Vietnam War. I was like, what the fuck do you want to do that for? And it's like that. That was my, again, contradiction growing up.

George [00:16:19] My junior year of high school I was tardy ten times, and they told me they'd suspend me when I was tardy 11th time. I realized if I just don't show up at all I won't be tardy for the 11th time. I would walk to school. I'd be late. It was a mile and a half uphill both ways in the snow. I'd walk to school and meet my friend who was doing work/study and we would go play tennis, and I would go back to school for my fifth period Russian class because I liked her for some reason, because she really cared. Then school would be over after the fifth and sixth period. Then I go play tennis again. I get the report card for that semester, and I've been absent [for] 35 days. It's clear to my parents I'm not going to make it through high school. I'm a junior at this point. They were worried about me, rightly so. My younger brother escaped with drugs. I wasn't into a lot of drugs like he did. But, something would have been in the cards of self-destructive something, some kind of rebellion. I don't know what it would have been. They looked for an alternative high school for me. There was a Quaker high school in Iowa called Scattergood. They called them and the school said we only take people for two years but try this new place up in Canada, Argentina. That was a good thing to do because it would also set me up to avoid the draft. I went to the last year of high school in a 20 person Quaker school in the middle of nowhere in British Columbia. As I like to say, I graduated in the top third of my class because there were only ten people graduating.

George [00:18:06] Then from Canada, I came back to the United States to Saint Louis, worked for three weeks in a furniture factory changing pine pieces to walnut TV benches. There I thought the revolution had come because somebody picked up a piece of wood and whacked the supervisor. If you got to work late, that is in the finishing department, you had to sit over the sealer vat, this massive unventilated room and 20 minutes into it you were as high as a kite. You couldn't even find your feet to walk outside for breaks. Somehow, I guess my father probably helped me find a job at the Committee for Environmental Information where I was a research assistant. Then I went to school for a year and a half. Then I dropped out. I got drafted. I was sick when I got drafted, so I got my notice to report to the physical. They didn't know what I had at the time. They thought I had leukemia. Then from leukemia it went to hepatitis. That's when the draft notice hit. The doctor wrote a nice note to the draft notice board, he's too sick to show up. They said come back in six months. Six months go by, I never hear from the draft board again. Someone must have stamped my file 4H, which is a permanent health deferment as opposed to 1Y, which is a temporary health deferment.

George [00:19:46] But I dropped out of school anyway. I met these people in Saint Louis who are Brazilians. They're friends of mine who do occupational health and safety work. They say you haven't seen the world unless you've been to Rio de Janeiro. I've been to Saint Louis, I've been to Canada, but I've never seen the world they say. I look at a map and I say, well, if I learn Spanish, I can go to 13 countries as opposed to Portuguese where I can only go to one. I had no idea of the history of French imperialism, or if I learned French, I could have gone to Africa and Southeast

Asia. I go to Mexico with my family for the summer because they were learning Spanish someplace. I stay on at the University of Mexico School for Foreign Students (UNAM) for a semester. That's done. My plan is to go to Tierra del Fuego, the southern tip of South America. While I'm at UNAM the coup in Chile against Allende [Salvador Guillermo Allende Gossens] happens, and there's this massive demonstration in Mexico, the likes of which I've never seen in terms of how they do a march. The crowd would march, people would hold the march for a while and everybody would run forward. It had this wave effect, which was very, very dramatic.

Debbie [00:20:57] 1973.

George [00:20:59] [19]72 or [197]3? [1973]73.

George [00:21:05] I go to Peru. I end up with some funny stories which are probably not relevant. But I do meet British people who hand me over to the British Peace Corps people, and I end up doing odd jobs at British Peace Corps postings. In Peru, you would go from Lima to the Central Highlands and down the Central Highlands to Cuzco. I ended up at the second stop of that route working at a hospital, I helped carry a pregnant woman in labor to the hospital, for example. From there I went down to the end of the road towards the jungle. From there I was on a boat, time gets measured now in terms of hours instead of miles. It's a half-day trip down the river, then it's a four-hour walk into the jungle. That's how I spent time and saw incredible things, as you can imagine. The one memorable story might be, I'm in what's called the eyebrow of the jungle. It's a little bit above [the] jungle and not in the highlands. There's a family that's clearly from the highlands because the women have, they're not called costumes, but they would be called something politically correct.

Debbie [00:22:29] They're indigenous.

George [00:22:29] Indigenous clothing or indigenous costumes and indigenous clothes. Symbols of their self-identity, which is clearly inappropriate for the heat of the jungle, but there they are, they're hacking with machetes, and the trees are bigger than I am wide and with machetes they're clearing land. There's the father, the mother, there's a nine year-old, then there's a four year-old, three year-old, two year-old. It's real clear the nine year-old came with them when they started to hack out this little farm. Then, the eight year-old, seven year-old, six year-old and five year-old all died. And then with the four year-old, they finally had enough established. It takes five years to establish the cocoa plants for cash crop and enough subsistence growth that the four year-old, three year-old, two year-old could survive.

Debbie [00:23:31] You were in South America for a period?

George [00:23:39] Then came back to the US to go back to school.

Debbie [00:23:43] Where?

George [00:23:44] At the University of Texas and spent two years there. Then I'm finished with school.

Debbie [00:23:51] And majored in?

George [00:23:53] Economics.

Debbie [00:23:54] Why economics?

George [00:23:56] Why economics? I've been to Latin America. I wanted to understand it and put it in a bigger context. I wanted to go to a Latin American Studies program. There were two. One [was] at Texas, one at Wisconsin. I'm thinking, it's a different era, it's late spring I'll come back. I applied to both programs, and I heard back from Texas first. I would have preferred to go to Wisconsin. Nobody in their right mind would ever go to Texas. Maureen, my now wife, and I took a trip down there to Texas, decided it was okay even though the air conditioning was called refrigeration. So I did Latin American Studies at [University of] Texas. At the end of my two years of school, I could take either a math course or a political science course and either become an economist or become a Latin Americanist. I chose the math course because that was easier, anyway I like math. So I think that's how I became an economist. Economics was always important, but it was more political economy that was important.

Debbie [00:25:01] Were you politically active at that point? Were you ever in SDS?

George [00:25:07] No, I'm trying to think. It would have been international. I was tied in to the International Latin American Studies group. We may have protested something, but there was nothing really organizational. I was working in the library a little bit, 15, 20 hours a week in the library and then going to school. When we talked about it, we talked [about] big theories of political change, but it was a coffee shop, non-organizational engagement.

Debbie [00:25:49] I am going to skip over. I know you did some jobs around international issues, right? I'm going to skip over that and jump to how you came to work for CWA.

George [00:26:39] I was in Washington DC working for nonprofits. I had worked for one about development policy and change, where I wrote about runaway shops and how that was the flip side of underdevelopment in Latin America, the destruction of Latin American economies. That it was the same political problem. I worked for SANE [National Committee for a SANE Nuclear Policy] for a little bit about conversion of the military economy. SANE and the military economy was tied in a little bit, but not much, with the Machinists who had a guy named Dick Greenwood who was phenomenal. Then I saw an ad in the newspaper looking for a research person, there were still classified ads in newspapers back in that day, and applied for the job, went in and interviewed for it and saw the whiteboard which they had listed all the applicants, on the bulletin board, the chalkboard, I think it's a whiteboard, a new innovation, a whiteboard. I look at all the people, and I say, oh my God, those people are much smarter and so much better, much more accomplished than I am. A lot of them spent their careers in Washington too. But because I had done environmental things and so knew a little something about energy conservation, and at that time, the Bell System was interested in energy conservation. Energy conservation was a big deal in 1980, which is when I'm applying for the job. This is my story anyway because I think I had that background, they picked me so that I could pick up that little bit of staffing work for Glenn Watts, who was the president at the time, for him to go and be engaged with the Bell System people or whoever he was being engaged with on the issues of energy conservation. I think that was it. Once I'm in CWA, in the Research Department as a researcher.

Debbie [00:28:41] And that's Ronnie Straw.

George [00:28:42] Ronnie Straw was the research director, and there were five, six, seven of us there.

Debbie [00:28:50] What was the role of the research department then?

George [00:28:54] The key role of the research department was to support Bell System bargaining. That was the key thing. Once every three years, it was very ritualized. -- This is 1980. We achieved national bargaining, in [19]74. [19]77 is the first round, 1980 is the second round. The research department plays a role in pulling together lots of information, which I don't know whether anybody ever looked at, but certainly made the point that there's a lot of background here and for certain kinds of things may have been important in terms of here's some options or here's some breadth of ideas or kernels of ideas. I would say in 1979, there had been this kind of massive explosion with operators and job stress. So in 1980, and there's no hint of divestiture really, we negotiated something. There's a one-day strike, which was rare for the time. We negotiated a series of programs in 1980, "we" meaning the CWA, about quality of work life, about technology change, and about the changing jobs, job evaluation. That triumvirate of programs tried to mimic in the private sector in the United States kind of what social democracy and what unions were achieving in Europe on a broader scale.

Debbie [00:30:40] You've talked to me a lot about the 1980 bargaining, and that this could have been the beginnings of the union having a larger role in issues that are not typically the area in which unions have a role, going beyond bargaining over wages and benefits and a bigger picture of influencing working conditions. You've now said it was an attempt to begin to have more of a role like in Europe. Where did that come from? Did that come from the president? You bargained language over tech change committees, you bargained language as you said, quality of work life which, we'll talk about in a second, that's almost in a category of its own. Job evaluation. This was also the year in which the operators finally got language with protections against the worst abuses of monitoring. 1979 was the big national mobilizations around job pressures, which really came out of the female operators and a long campaign.

George [00:32:12] I'm not sure where it came from. I think part of it might have been the environment and how we parsed apart the different elements of it. I'm not sure how that happened in the way in which it happened or who did it. Glen [Watts, CWA's second president, 1974-1985] ends up being incredibly thoughtful as a person, I think underestimated in some ways. I never had any dealings with him. He's at the top and I'm at the bottom of the hierarchy, so I really have no sense. But he was incredibly thoughtful as a person. It was a different time in the sense that there were lots of tripartite groupings to look at different kinds of problems, be it health care, be it the international order, be it work and the evolution of the economy. I think there was much more sense of business and labor -- Labor is big enough still to make a difference. We're on the decline, but we're not so [much on the] decline that we don't have any influence.

Debbie [00:33:33] "We" meaning?

George [00:33:35] Labor.

Debbie [00:33:36] For CWA, 1980, would you call that almost the apex?

George [00:33:40] No, I'd say it's [1984], or [19]83 or [19]86.

Debbie [00:33:45] Divestiture comes in 1984.

George [00:33:49] Right. My view of the [19]80s is that because of who we were and how change occurred its impact was a little bit slower for us. The nature of competition, we didn't get hit as badly as trucking, we didn't get hit as badly later on as the airlines and we weren't subject to NAFTA, the Third World kind of manufacturing pressures, except in Western Electric, which collapsed earlier. So we survived the industrial change better or negotiated through it better. I don't consider 1980 the apex. [19]83 in my mind was the end of the golden era where we don't have national bargaining anymore. It is totally clear, although at one level doesn't make any sense, totally clear that if you bargained for 500,000 people at once, it's a different deal than bargaining for 25 or 30,000, even 100,000, it's a very different deal.

George [00:35:04] The nature of the Bell System also was totally familial in the sense that everybody knew everybody. Ivan Seidenberg, the CEO of NYNEX [1995, CEO of merged Bell Atlantic, 1998, CEO of merged Verizon 2000-2011], worked in a crew in New York plant. The story goes, the New York plant guys covered for him so he could get his education. So he knew what they were like. Wives were or husbands or brothers-in-law were top executives. Everybody knew people throughout the system which I think also changed the nature of conflict.

Debbie [00:35:50] You mean lessened conflict?

George [00:35:53] Yeah. Lessened how that conflict was going to manifest itself. It was hard to call the boss, the boss, for many people. In one way, it's really easy because the boss on a crew, particularly [one who] was a jerk, was an asshole. But on the other hand, if the boss wasn't an asshole and was in fact your sister, it was much harder to be angry at the family member. In my view, anyway, it changes the nature of what conflict was. It was more interwoven as a company. This is 1980. Then later on when people from outside the industry come over, take it over, find all the slack in the system and they want to just make it an economic entity and the class tensions increase. One more thing. The phone company as a system had a mission. My view of the mission was encapsulated [in the] picture of a lineman struggling through a blizzard in Nebraska. He's putting back up the lines because the work had meaning. It didn't mean that everybody wasn't gaming the system at the same time. It's this contradiction between everybody gaming the system and how can I make my life better or the crews' life better or get paid that overtime to do the mission work, which is providing an essential service for America. There's a bigger, higher part of what the telephone company was.

Debbie [00:37:35] Jeff, does George's description of a family feeling within the Bell System that tamped down certain kinds of conflict between the workers and managers resonate with you?

Jeff [00:37:58] I think it absolutely did. It was a very paternalistic arrangement that existed in the Bell System. Obviously, a big portion of that came from being a monopoly. There was really no real contention between the cost of providing the service and the wages that we were paying, because they get that back in their rates every year when they'd go back to their local [regulatory] commissions. It was definitely that feeling when I arrived in [19]71 and for the first ten years that I was there.

Debbie [00:38:40] You were talking with Larry [Cohen; in a different interview] about how your local developed mobilization. That was in the [19]80s, not the [19]70s?

Jeff [00:38:52] No, no, no, that was the [19]70s.

Debbie [00:38:54] So you lived that contradiction?

Jeff [00:38:58] I see the contradiction. But as I explained, part of my push towards a mobilization type of model really came out of my own personal naivete. I didn't know any better that some of these structures that were already in place within the Bell System, at least within Ohio Bell at that time, were long-standing. That's the way things were. I sort of rebelled against that and it resonated with a number of people. As I mentioned, our first real conflict came for service reps, who on Monday mornings had to take their break at ten minutes after eight, ten minutes after they arrived on the job. It was paternalistic bosses. That's the way it has to be. It's been that way for 40 years. I don't know how many years before that. We just pushed back, but that didn't take away from the sense that they still felt very paternalistic. They still felt this overall sense that this was a good, safe place to be. I got hired at the phone company because my mother said the guy across the street works at the phone company. You should apply there. That's a good job. You could retire from that job. That was the sense, and in 1971, you could get hired anywhere. In Cleveland, you could have been in an auto plant, you could have been in the steel mill, you could have been in any kind of machine shop. There were jobs all over the place. The phone company had that resonance that this is a nice, safe place to land.

Debbie [00:40:54] George, let's jump to 1984.

George [00:40:58] The other footnote I want to make for Ohio Bell is they never had a grievance procedure. So either the issue was important enough to strike about or do something about or it wasn't. I think that also would have been part of the --

Jeff [00:41:10] We talked at length about that. We were unique in the Bell System that we did not have arbitration. Conducting a grievance strike was our only option to get a grievance resolved. Or the company just flat out said no.

Debbie [00:41:28] I'm going to jump up to 1984, the breakup of the Bell System. That was a big change. Talk about it.

George [00:41:40] Let me digress first about me in the research department between 1980 and 1984. I'm [a] junior in the research department. The raison d'etre of the research department is to provide support for Bell bargaining. GTE is a far cry second, even though there might have been 80,000 members back then. Maybe even 100, anyway, 80,000. I end up being assigned the dredge work of the research department, which is supporting organizing in whatever forms that means. That means in 1981 or [198]2, I forget which, I meet Larry Cohen in New Jersey, where the big state workers' campaigns takes off. I do a big fat paper about the lagging wages in the public sector in New Jersey, which they can wave around. I sometimes said It could have been a cover sheet and 50 blank pieces of paper. The key purpose was that it be waved around. But there were lots of words and charts and graphs in there. I worked with them, the NJ organizing committee, or celebrated their organizing drive and knew a lot of the local people who were on the committee there as a result of that work. Then I supported their bargaining. This was all because I was [the] junior in the

research department doing the “unimportant work” of the union, which was okay with me. I thought it was important. Then, I ended up, not so much, but doing some work on the field organizing campaigns, which was different, [in] Texas. CWA stopped going after big state units and competing with other unions for units in the public sector in Ohio where we lost before we got out of It.

George [00:43:37] I go back one more step just to say, in 1980, Watts hired an external organizing department. That's seen as a controversial move amongst the CWA board. It's debated that this is a controversial thing that a) it's an organizing department, but b), he's bringing in outsiders to run it. He brought in some SEIU people to run it. There's a big deal in 1980.

Debbie [00:44:06] Who was the head of it?

George [00:44:07] Bob Muscat was the head of it. Ken Margolies and John Tanner were the other two that Bob brought with him over from. SEIU. They had huge conflict with the CWA district structure, particularly Marty Hughes in Ohio about the shape of that organizing campaign and, and who was going to be in charge of it and who was going to control it and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, which I didn't know all the details of. So that's the early 80s.

George [00:44:48] Then, you have to remind me whether we have [19]83 bargaining.

Debbie [00:44:54] Right.

George [00:44:55] Where we build on some of the things. But we know that divestiture [is in the offing].

Debbie [00:45:03] The [AT&T/DOJ divestiture] consent decree was 1982. So you knew what was going to be happening. You knew that AT&T was going to become the Lines, Western Electric, and Bell Labs, and you knew that there were going to be seven Regional Bell Operating Companies.

George [00:45:21] Right.

Debbie [00:45:22] I think one of the issues in 1983 had to do with what was going to happen to the pensions and what would happen to people in choosing which company they'd go to and those sort of issues.

George [00:45:36] Right.

Debbie [00:45:38] And there was a strike, I think, in [19]83.

George [00:45:40] There was a 26 day strike, which I went back and read about, but not enough to know the details. So [19]83, we know divestiture is coming. As you just said, people are upset and have to make life-changing decisions, which company I'm going to work for. I think we thought that there's going to be more work in the information side of the industry, which was more heavily deregulated, and so that was seen as a good thing. AT&T raised itself up as we're going to be the golden child, and the Bells are going to be pedestrian.

Debbie [00:46:20] Information-side meaning computers?

George [00:46:23] No. Information-side at that point meant the premise technicians who went into the house and installed telephones. We had 40, 50,000 people who installed telephones in the early [19]80s. They worked under each Bell System contract. John Agee had to consolidate that into one contract which was called AT&T Information Systems, or ATTIS. That bargaining was full of fights like whose snow policy is better Ohio or Michigan, was the kind of classic case, but massive trade-offs at that level. But x number of years later, there's no one left in that business. As a business, I think we thought it would survive better than it did. I'd have to look back to see. NCR was purchased by AT&T, but I don't think that came until 1990. [It was 1991]. That was the trajectory that people thought would happen with AT&T. It was a miscalculation in some ways. We were wrong that ATT would succeed in that competitive computer, data business.

George [00:47:36] I would say that bargaining [1983] would be the apex. That would be the inflection point where we hold our own just fine. It's clear from that bargaining, Bahr wrote about it in his book. This is the first time you have all the different Bell guys at the table who have interests, and they're beating their chests about how we're going to take away this, we're going to take away that, we're going to change this, we're going to change that.

Debbie [00:48:04] You mean the management.

George [00:48:05] Yes the management side. Whoever's managing bargaining for AT&T had their hands full in terms of they still control that, which ultimately is why they could sell it, but they had more pressures, I think, on their side than they've ever had before in terms of, management anger that we overpay in the South, we overpay in US West, whatever it is was out of kilter because it was the national contract. Those pressures manifest themselves in [19]83, but get resolved. I don't think that there were any major concessions in [19]83 that I recall anyway. I'd have to go back and read it, but I don't remember it as a concession contract or change contract, for that matter. But forward progress stops. We still have the programs. Going back to the European programs of quality of work life and tech change, etc., we still have those programs. We never quite realized the potential in things like tech change. It really is too big and so outside the mold of what is U.S. bargaining and so we, the CWA, were under-resourced compared to what the Europeans could do. On the union side, on our side, we couldn't keep up and couldn't or didn't have enough muscle to insist on knowledge and resources to deal with the changes.. It was a time in which the Automatic Call Distributors (ACDs) are new technology at that time. In terms of job pressures and job design, when you had switches that could only allocate work in a small geographic area, you needed lots of offices in small geographic areas. The change occurs when the Automatic Call Distributor comes in and the computing and ultra-fast digital signaling comes in. You can put a call distributor in Albuquerque that controls calls from Albuquerque to Salt Lake City to Denver to various areas around. So all of a sudden, the dynamics around how an operator works, how service calls are handled, is changing from other regions. Service rep work is changing as well versus the economics for the company in terms of small offices and big offices starts to change. We could get in front of it a little bit and we could talk about, well, how are we going to mitigate that change? But we couldn't get to a place where we could control what the next generation of Automatic Call Distributor is going to look like. Or who are the people who are writing that software code? Can we write code that is different? We would say, well, we should be able to write code so someone gets a one-second, or two-second break before the next call comes in or we should be able to do different things, but we never really had the ability to do those things in terms of designing new technology. In the same period in the [19]80s, the internet as a switching system was invented. I remember we knew it was important and we knew digital switching was important. It was inside AT&T Communications. It was inside

George Kohl Interview – January 8, 2024

Gerald Souders' local from Cincinnati, or wherever he was from. I had a conversation at that point with [Jim] Irvine, head of the ATT-COM unit, saying this is really important new technology. We need to be ahead of it. This is going to be the controlling technology of the new economy.

Debbie [00:52:02] Are you talking about packet switching?

George [00:52:05] I don't know what I'm talking about. I think I'm talking about packet switching.

Debbie [00:52:10] When you said internet, because digital --

George [00:52:14] Digital switching wasn't happening. And so this was

Debbie [00:52:16] Going from analog to digital --

George [00:52:19] Digital and packets. The people setting up the lines for packet switching. You needed a transmission line to have your packets flow, even if you have routers on either end of the digital line, something has to transmit that. It has to know here's a list of routers where it could go.

Debbie [00:52:42] You have to go to fiber, right?

George [00:52:45] At that point part of it was fiber and part of it was micro towers. It was developing.

Debbie [00:52:51] And when you said Gerald Souder's local. Where is this? And is this AT&T?

George [00:52:58] It's AT&T. It must be 4050, a "50" local, anyway in Cincinnati. We knew this was happening. Can we do anything about this? Jim [Irvine] says, we tried to.

Debbie [00:53:13] Irvine, vice president, of the bargaining unit with AT&T.

George [00:53:23] We did, but what AT&T did is, you had these guys who are communication technicians, comm techs, who are the people who technologically set up these lines. On Friday they were comm techs, management came in and said, well, we're setting up a new thing now. On Monday, you're going to be management. You're gonna have to wear a tie to work and you're going to get a different title. Same desk. Same job. Same person. And they're now management. So stripping work from the bargaining unit on the top end which is controlling the new economy, or it's going to control the new economy because it's very early. I ask: Can't we convince them that you should be in the union and I don't know how systematic the conversations were, but there was at least one conversation or two conversations which come back. No, they don't want it. They like the tie, they like to be management. So that is a dynamic at that point. It was a reality.

Debbie [00:54:35] Do you know what point this was, either of you?

George [00:54:37] It's got to be in the early [19]80s. I have to think when Irvine becomes vice-president. He was a national director before then. I'd have to look and see, I don't remember, but it had to be early [19]80s. In my career, Jobs with Justice is [19]87 and my work changes dramatically at that point. So it's pre [19]87. I think it's probably between [19]84 and [19]87, probably after divestiture. But we were doing a lot of work on technology in [19]82 to [19]85 if you're trying to

parse it. We discover automatic call distributors. We discover this new thing. It's going to be the internet packet switching and digital switching and digital transmission. I think that's the time frame it had to be. That same dynamic then continues forever, meaning, even years later, I think this is 2010, Ralph Maly is fighting about Engineering Associates at AT&T. Big bunch of them, top craft in the union. And what their work is. And then AT&T peeling off pieces of that work and taking it and making it managerial work as well. It was always a conscious erosion of work at the top pay scales by AT&T, by management, whichever company it was, to skim off top craft work, the more sophisticated work.

Debbie [00:56:32] Did this happen before the competitive pressures? During the monopoly era?

George [00:56:42] Not so much.

Debbie [00:56:42] During the monopoly era, the union would get that work and it was more planned and gradual.

George [00:56:49] I think that's a good question. It would be interesting to see. I'm sure there was a struggle over that, where the work belonged. There was clear delineation in the minds of management and [company] Labor Relations about what was traditional telephone work and what wasn't. There was this very fuzzy line in our [the unions'] minds of traditional telephone work and why aren't these functions traditional? On[the] management side, it was very clear, no, that's not traditional. Salary-graded people were a professional set of titles in Bell Labs, that was not traditional telephone work. I think in management's mind, traditional telephone work is, operators, service reps, craft who deal with customers. Whether you're a service rep who deals with business that might not be traditional telephone work. Some places, it obviously was, because we represented those people. They kept drawing a box of what was traditional work and shoving it in there. We wanted to expand it.

George [00:58:03] That flows from Danny Fetonte, particularly, out of the Southwestern Bell [campaign] and Vic Crawley, their work around gaining card check [at Southwestern Bell subsidiaries, including Mobility]. The language around card check speaks to traditional telecom that the people who are (I'd have to read it again to make sure) subject to the card check agreement are traditional telephone work people, and then we would have to have fights about what does that mean. Under the rubric of traditional telephone work, people in the wireless industry did install equipment, who sold the equipment, customer service stuff, that was traditional work. But we wanted to take it up a step to the programming people. That was not traditional work in the management's mind so the card check agreement would not apply to them.

Debbie [00:58:54] Let me just jump in. I think you jumped.

George [00:58:56] I have jumped.

Debbie [00:58:58] The fight for card check neutrality at Southwestern Bell Wireless. You're saying one would have to read the agreement, but you think that agreement covered titles that were similar to --

George [00:59:15] It wasn't just titles. That's my point. My point is that the big deal between CWA and the telephone company would have been, you the union can represent traditional telephone

workers, whatever that meant. As that boundary changes, what does work mean? They drew a line which said, no the internet and packet switching, that's not traditional work. That's new work. But the flip side is, when we got to the wireless industry they were okay with defining [that] as traditional work because I guess they'd worked out a system where they knew the system worked. Salespeople are traditional work, people who are installing equipment are traditional work. And there's a level of traditional work that we're okay with the union. We can live with the union doing that work.

Debbie [01:00:08] It took a fight of five years in [Southwestern Bell] wireless.

George [01:00:11] Right, but then you hit the point where you're able to make a compromise and the compromise is traditional work is okay. But we're [management] not going to blur the line. There's a cap. There's a technological cap, whereas technology begins to change a lot, there was a very hard cap that the company was not willing to move beyond. We were not able to mobilize people or people in those jobs at the time above the cap, by and large, with a couple of exceptions, were not willing to mobilize themselves or organize themselves to say, no, we want to be in the union. We're happy to be above the cap and we're not like those union people. We're not traditional telephone workers.

Jeff [01:01:01] To be fair, there was some of that pre-divestiture as well. There were engineering titles, marketing titles where, as you describe, those people in those jobs were enamored with the thought of being management versus a craft job or in a union. So it was easy to sort of peel some of them off over the years and erode those. John Ryan, his job title was marketing representative. [John Ryan was president of local 4309 in Cleveland, add years.] Over time, I think, there were maybe half a dozen left in the whole state as they eroded those away. The other thing about card check is we can't minimize the regulatory pressure that was placed and that really made that possible. It was less about okay, that does fit in the telephone mold and this doesn't, as they needed our help [in the regulatory arena].

George [01:01:57] Absolutely.

Jeff [01:01:57] And we weren't going to offer it to them without some quid pro quo.

George [01:02:01] Right. But if we had demanded even a bigger quid pro quo, we wouldn't have gotten it. That was what I wanted the point to be, on the technological side and the managerial side, they were unbending, unyielding on that point.

Debbie [01:02:26] As the digital and packet switching and DSL technology became a bigger part, I think one of the roles that you played, and others, was seeing what's the future, let's not just forget about the past or even the present, but where is the industry going and how do we bargain for it? There was a lot of push to negotiate language that gave us the union jurisdiction over new work. I'm thinking particularly about some of the NYNEX contracts. It was very detailed, the agreements about new work and lots of debates about where is the demarc point [demarcation point], which I don't understand at all, but do you want to talk at all about that or is it too vague in your memory?

George [01:03:30] It is and it isn't . Let me just think for a minute. (pause) To Jeff's point. There was still massive regulatory importance to telephone companies in the [19]80s.

George Kohl Interview – January 8, 2024

Debbie [01:03:54] Particularly Bell companies.

George [01:03:56] Particularly Bell companies.

Debbie [01:03:57] AT&T also because AT&T is now competing, it's regulated by the FCC, which is still regulating AT&T in order to minimize its power so that the new entrants, MCI and Sprint, can succeed.

George [01:04:14] Right, exactly. At that point, long-distance telephone revenues are huge to different companies. There's fights about who's going to get the long-distance revenues. The Bell companies want to be in the long-distance market and AT&T doesn't want them in there. And so there's --

Debbie [01:04:32] They're not allowed in it. [The 1982 divestiture agreement barred the Regional Bell Operating Companies from long-distance service. The 1996 Telecommunications Act allowed the Regional Bells into long-distance after they opened their local networks to interconnection. The Regional Bells began getting permission to provide long-distance service around 2000.]

George [01:04:33] Yeah. But there was a time where they could then apply to be in it.

Debbie [01:04:37] You're jumping way ahead.

George [01:04:39] Yeah. But to your point –

Debbie [01:04:43] After the Telecommunications Act of [19]96 the Bells could apply to go [into long-distance].

George [01:04:48] Is that right?

Debbie [01:04:49] Absolutely. Between divestiture in [19]84...

George [01:04:52] From [19]84 to [19]96 is only 12 years. The Baby Bells were still very dependent upon the decisions made at state level Public Service Commissions. Our influence in the different public service commissions varied significantly. In some surprising places we had more power than in others. I think I remember in the southwest, either New Mexico or Arizona, Arizona there was an elected PSC, and we actually would play a role in those elections. So we had more say in Arizona than you would have thought that a union like us would have been able to have.

Debbie [01:05:37] I think Pennsylvania was another place we had a lot of influence through individual relationships.

George [01:05:43] Right. There's massive efforts in Pennsylvania, and the political effort to sustain those. Democrat, Republican didn't matter, we just cared about the PSC and what the PSC is going to be able to deliver or not deliver for us and how to forge either a coalition or a smokescreen of a coalition. But a theory that aligns our work with consumers' work and benefiting consumers.

George [01:06:15] But it was in the Verizon [territory]... This is almost ironic. I can't remember exactly when the GTE... Let's back up. There's a set of mergers that start taking place. You have

George Kohl Interview – January 8, 2024

Bell Atlantic South and Bell Atlantic North, which is Bell Atlantic and NYNEX that are merging. Each of those merger discussions was tremendous leverage for the union to make guarantees.

Debbie [01:06:41] 1997.

George [01:06:45] This is jumping way ahead.

Debbie [01:06:47] But it's important. This is the year after the Telecommunications Act, when cable can get into telephone markets, local Bells can get into long-distance [after opening their local networks to competition], long distance can get into local. A response of the Bell companies, then, is we've got to merge.

George [01:07:04] Okay. So that's what triggers the mergers. Okay.

Debbie [01:07:07] Bell Atlantic/NYNEX is the first one.

Debbie [01:07:13] Think about 1989 and the strike.

George [01:07:16] Right. So many things to think about. The point I was going to make about the [19]97 time frame then and the NYNEX/ Bell Atlantic mergers. The key thing, which is kind of contraindicated, is that we care about the future. We are going to protect the past. This was Morty's [Bahr} genius. We're going to protect the past. He was able in the bargaining to draw a circle around offices that you couldn't be force-transferred beyond that very small circle. In terms of job protections, it was enormous. That's looking to the past. Well, this is dealing with the future, but it's protecting people in the past. Anyway, but that was jumping forward.

George [01:08:12] So jumping backward then to I think it's the [19]93 agreement. I'm not sure [whether] it was the [19]93 or the [19]92, or the [19]90, which agreement in the [19]90s it was. But we knew about the importance of Mobility. We knew about the coming importance of fiber optics. We knew [work] related to fiber optics and DSL was going to be new technologies that were going to be displaced through the network. We knew, too, that the possibilities for subcontracting were substantial. So we formulated an approach which tried to 1) gain exclusive recognition, knowing that exclusivity, which was a) rare, but b) knowing how important it could be when you had it, and then c) we probably made a too-long list of technologies because we weren't totally clear on what we wanted, what would be critical, and didn't want. But the key one (technology) would have been fiber optics. We knew that fiber optics to the home, or fiber optics in the network, all things fiber optics. Fiber was going to be the new copper. If we could hang on to the work associated with fiber optics we have a grasp on the future. The big reach was anything related to fiber was going to be union work. The thinking at the time would have been, that's even if it's going to be wireless stuff, because all the central offices are going to be connected with fiber. If we can get the fiber and everything that's related to it as union work, we'll make this big stride in protecting future work. That was the idea back in the early [19]90s. So there's lots of language about that. What we end up with is exclusive representation, and then this long list that you mentioned about different kinds of work that is going to be ours to do. What they did –

Debbie [01:10:06] Who's they?

George [01:10:07] The company. NYNEX. It was NYNEX management at the time. We had gotten ourselves positioned in the bargaining give-and-take that this was what we were talking about. We were talking about our proposal which was somewhat rare because we were pushing the envelope with our proposal as opposed to responding to their proposals. In their first response to our proposal, they incorporated, in management's view, too much of our language. So we were in a good place there and then we didn't know at the time either that the level of acquisitions was going to change as well. We didn't forecast GTE and Bell Atlantic and NYNEX were going to become one. This is kind of beyond the scope of what --

George [01:11:24] I don't know if it was late [19]80s. I believe it was [in the] late [19]80s.

Debbie [01:11:30] NCR was late [19]80s. We should clarify because you kind of mushed it together.

George [01:11:39] Definitely mushed it.

Debbie [01:11:40] AT&T, after divestiture, has this vision that it is going to become the place in which computing and communications come together. They're allowed into computing at divestiture, something they'd been barred from before that. So they purchased NCR [in 1991]. The way I see it is in the [19]80s, AT&T, and I think Bob Allen at this point is the CEO, is struggling to figure out what is the business plan for AT&T and they buy NCR. CWA has a big fight over representing NCR, which we can talk about. Then after a few years [in 1996], AT&T sold NCR, which is another example. The competitive pressures are huge. AT&T is shedding 100,000 jobs. We're preserving our wages and benefits, fighting over health care already but preserving them basically. But the issue is really job security. People are traveling all over the country to save their seniority, save their job. And that, I think, becomes the focus of AT&T bargaining, where there's a lot of bargaining around, I don't know SIPs and VIPs [early retirement sweeteners] and things like that and retraining. In [19]89, there's the Alliance [for Employee Growth] negotiated so that people can get paid to retrain, even to leave the company. In the [19]80s, the local companies which employed more people, more of our members, there's seven RBOCs [Regional Bell Operating Companies]. Competition is cream-skimming some of the business, but it's not hitting the consumer at all. It's much more stable. We still represent about two-thirds of the people at the Bell companies. I came [to the CWA research department] in [19]92, but this is when I think "Wall-to-Wall" becomes important, because there's this sense that both the Bell's and AT&T as they're moving into different businesses, whatever they might be, sometimes purchasing them, sometimes going overseas, that they're creating these new subsidiaries as nonunion.

George [01:14:24] Right.

Debbie [01:14:25] The fight that you were talking about, which was over job titles, as I recall, and this is where Wall-to-Wall came in, was also a fight over getting representation in these new subsidiaries.

George [01:14:42] Um-hum.

Debbie [01:14:43] I'm not sure why I jumped in on this.

George [01:14:49] It was a good jump in because I'm conflating two different things. One thing I would say is that AT&T being subject to competitive pressures first, kind of foreshadows what might be happening in the Bell companies. So it informed us as to what to think about in terms of Bell companies, one, and then two, the frontier where we were able to get to in terms of protecting job security. I don't know if it was unique for the telephone company, it was unique for that generation anyway.

Debbie [01:15:26] Which one?

George [01:15:28] The generation that's working in the telephone company with 15 years' service in the [19]80s and [19]90s.

Debbie [01:15:33] Like Jeff's [Rechenbach]. You mean they expected this to be lifetime employment?

George [01:15:37] Yeah. They expected it was going to be lifetime employment. Good job. There was a huge hiring bump in [19]68 after the Vietnam War, in terms of Vietnam vets who came back, which is an interesting bump thing. But the frontier of that, as you said, we were able to negotiate all kinds of notice and kind of amelioration programs which are incredibly important and in AT&T become even more important in terms of two years. But I think a lot of those [being] mimic[ed] in the Bell companies. Because we had all those programs in the early [19]80s, they just weren't so substantial or so important or the focus of AT&T bargaining I think later on.

George [01:16:31] Jeff, did you want to jump in on that?

Jeff [01:16:39] I don't want to go further down this rabbit hole with this, because I really want to talk about Jobs with Justice in that era with George before we run out of time here. I'm kind of afraid [that] if I say more, we'll just keep going down further.

Debbie [01:16:54] If we have more time, we can go down there. I do think it's important, though, to mention one thing, which is the pattern bargaining.

George [01:17:02] Um hum.

George [01:17:05] AT&T would come first. Absolutely. The expiration would be in May. Then the Bell Companies' expiration would be in August. This was certainly true in the [19]90s.

George [01:17:26] There was a long history of pattern bargaining in telecom, which starts from when it was one big company. The union and the company somehow would agree on we're going to bargain at Ohio Bell or wherever we're going to bargain, and that's going to set a pattern for the rest of the country. So there was this notion of patterns within the company. In America, there was also other bargaining in big steel, in auto, there was pattern bargaining that took place. There may have been a specific quid pro quo with an earlier agreement with AT&T, but we must have thought that we'll have more leverage with AT&T setting a pattern. Since AT&T was a brighter star, oh, we'll have more success setting a pattern with AT&T, than kind of leaving it loose and picking one of the Bell companies. There was a recognition that they were going to be different. Then the national focus, there would have been a residual feeling that AT&T is bigger, therefore we can focus on it. Better to focus on one in the beginning and then let the others approach that pattern. But the other

thing that had come up in terms of the pattern. The [19]83 or [19]86, had to be [19]86 bargaining, is the first time the Bell companies have some flexibility or they're going to prove how tough they are.. It was the first time that we ran into lump sums, which reduced the ongoing base wage commitment. This I remember. In the old days, we had a wall phone at home and a 3 ring binder notebook by the wall phone and Marty Hughes called at one in the morning and said, this is good, George. I got him up to a 2% lump sum. No, no, Marty Hughes, you want it to be the other way around. Conversation goes on. Doesn't compute. Anyway, lump sums get introduced into contracts at that point, and then it takes us a while to educate people, though, what's the difference between a lump sum and a base wage. How does it impact earnings and grow wages over time? I mean, people got it, but people didn't get it at the same time. Plus, you're solving a problem. You're making a deal with the company. The company wants to keep its wages down. A big lump sum sounds like not a bad thing. It's funny.

Debbie [01:20:03] In one sentence, what's the problem with it?

George [01:20:06] In one sentence, the problem is, over the long-run, the lump sum is spent in the year that you get it. But you don't ever get it the second, third, fourth, or 20th year after that.

Debbie [01:20:17] You don't compound as you go forward.

George [01:20:19] Right. You get the thousand bucks this year, but you don't get the thousand bucks the next year, the next year, the next year, the next year, the next year, the next year, which if it's built into the wage you're going to get it forever. Other industries were doing the same thing, auto at some point had 10% lump sums. We would be paying attention to what other industries were doing as well. So that's [19]86 lump sums.

George [01:20:44] Health care became a big issue in that period. You have the famous NYNEX "Take a Stand", we're not going to pay premiums.

Debbie [01:20:57] 1989.

[01:20:59] which Morty [Bahr] writes is a misunderstanding between him and the CEO from the bargaining period before where they wanted premiums in [19]86. He said, you're going to get premiums and he ended up saying we can discuss it again in [19]89. So in [19]89 we'll have the health care expire before the [19]89 bargaining. So we'll discuss it. In Morty's mind there's another bargaining, in the telephone exec's mind, it meant, okay, I got health care in [19]89. That leads to a bitter strike in [19]89 over \$1.17. The premium charge was going to be \$1.17.

Debbie [01:21:39] That the members would pay, a small premium on their health insurance.

George [01:21:42] Yeah. We weren't going to pay a buck a month.

Debbie [01:21:45] What was the slogan in [19]89?

Speaker 3 [01:21:49] Probably "Health care for all, not health cuts at NYNEX".

Debbie [01:21:51] You got it.

George [01:21:52] Yeah. We were able to align with other unions. The Mineworkers were fighting about health care. We had a big march over Brooklyn Bridge led by a tank. We had access to the National Guard facilities or something. Some tank came rolling over the bridge with all of CWA marching behind it, marching on the telephone building.

Debbie [01:22:11] This is in New York City?

George [01:22:12] New York City. Yeah, in [19]89.

George [01:22:15] Then retiree health care became a major bargaining issue then as well. Retiree health care was a problem because the [Financial] Accounting Standards Board determined that the real financial health of a company is reflected by its future commitments on health care. When you add up what the future commitments on health care for retirees is, it ended up being billions of dollars. At one level, the telephone industry never had trouble paying its workers retiree health care on a cash basis year after year. My argument would be, so what, it's just a paper change, who cares? So write down \$10 billion someplace, everybody knows you owe it, and we'll go on business as usual. But they used it as a massive cudgel to attack retiree health care. Later on we learn, I don't know why we didn't know it earlier, because we asked, but we never knew it. They made assumptions, the companies did, that they would get 15% or 20% cost sharing on retiree health. So when they filled out their financials, they worked into their financials, in the future telephone workers will pay 30% of the cost of retiree health care. That meant when we didn't pay 30%, it was a big deal for the companies and they would take a charge of \$1 billion to offset that loss. Then they got really serious about it when, if you do it once, that's okay, if you do it twice, that may be okay, but at some point it's clear that the promise you have made to shareholders in your financial statements that you will have a 70/30 cost sharing, company paying 70, you (retirees) paying 30, is not true. You're really just lying to shareholders about it. Therefore, you have to take the booking of a whole loss. It became gradually more and more serious. The last place, this is jumping way ahead, I think right before I left, we were on strike at Verizon and we're in the Secretary of Labor's office, and there's the CEO, new CEO, whose name I just blocked on, McAdams I think. Right.

Debbie [01:24:54] You're talking 2016 then?

George [01:24:56] Yeah. 2016. The guy before the Dutch guy. Anyway, [Lowell] McAdams. Because it's the Secretary of Labor's office he's brought into the negotiations directly, and we're talking about retiree health care. McAdams is saying that he has a problem. He has this problem [he] doesn't want to recognize \$2 billion worth of cost. It's not a \$10 million problem, it's a multi-billion dollar problem for him. We get to a point where he says something to the effect of, my problem is not the level of what we're paying for health care. My problem is that we keep raising it and therefore my shareholders don't have, and my accountants say to me, you don't have any level of cost shifting, it's a forever commitment. We proposed back then, okay, is that really the problem? Conversation. Yes, it really is the problem. Well, in that case, then let's take whatever the top, we're paying probably \$36,000 a year for single, anyway, \$36,000 a year is the number that sticks in my head, for coverage. We'll add a little bit to it to cover this current contract and then we'll cap it there and costs above this \$40,000 a year for health care for retirees will be the cap. And the company will agree to that. There were programs that cost, say 36,000, there were programs that cost 29,000, depending upon which of the options people picked. In the NY telephone world, everybody [who was a long timer] liked the Blue Cross/Blue Shield Unlimited plan. But the reality was more and more of the younger people were going into PPOs, all kinds of things which cost less, so that there

was a shrinking population at this \$40,000 figure. So we said, we'll cap it there. You'll always offer a plan that has no premium to people and every X number of years that we need to we'll meet and design a plan that has no premium, which meant that co-pays would rise, or something else might, because health care costs are like a balloon, you squeeze one end, the cost pops out someplace else. We'll design something that has no premium and those people who want to keep this plan that now costs \$45,000 a year, [if] they want to keep it, that's fine, they'll pay the premium on top of the 45 grand that the company is contributing to meet their medical costs.

Debbie [01:27:37] And this is about retiree health?

George [01:27:39] This is about retiree health. Then it goes on from there in terms of saving money on the funding for it, which is a mechanism to create a fund to fund it, which then kind of diminishes. So that over time, by 2016, we had effectively not really had retiree health in the companies. We have some support, but not really full coverage.

Debbie [01:28:06] That's a huge topic. Let's footnote that. Jeff was very eager to hear about Jobs with Justice. You want him to start at the beginning to talk about the origins of Jobs with Justice?

Jeff [01:28:19] Yeah. I'd like to hear George's take on the whole thing. I could do this with George for hours. This is great.

George [01:28:32] I'm happy to do it again. I realize I went into the office to read, particularly this period in the early [19]90s to read some of the bargaining stuff, [19]96 to 2000. I took lots of notes and I realized I should have read also 2000 to 2015 because what the fuck did I do between--- I was talking to Patrick [Hunt, retired from CWA research department] on the way over here and I said---

Debbie [01:29:02] Patrick Hunt.

George [01:29:04] I didn't read anything between 2020 and 2015. I don't remember what the fuck happened during that period. He says, well, that just confirms what I always knew. Top management never did anything anyway.

George [01:29:18] Anyway, Jobs with Justice. I'm in the research department. Boy, there's a story.

Debbie [01:29:30] You can tell it.

George [01:29:36] I can tell it. We'll put a bracket around it to see whether it gets edited out. The story would be, I'm in the research department. My boss, Ronnie Straw doesn't like me, he's chasing me, and he's chasing me out in an aggressive way. It was really a funny time for me. This is back on the question of lump sums. This is a worthwhile story? Yeah. Anyway. I'm sorry, we're getting to Jobs with Justice, we'll get there. This is on lump sums. When we have our first set of contracts with lump sums, we don't know how to report it out. We're reporting it out, we won 10% wage increases because we're taking the 4% lump sum and we're adding it to the three-year 2% base wage increases we got after that. I said, you can't do that. That's wrong, not understanding what I was saying even, but this was technically wrong. I mean, I'm naive. Johnny Carroll, who is the executive vice president, was in charge of Bell bargaining. Ronnie Straw, the research department director reported to Johnny Carroll. [Johnny Carroll] takes me to lunch, which has never happened to this kid, at one of these restaurants. He, Johnny Carroll is saying to me, just tell me what you're saying. I

don't really understand what you're saying. We spend lunch, me explaining to him, trying to draw pictures, trying to figure out different ways to say it. It was hard to say in one sentence. It was a new idea, and I would get tongue-tied and way too complicated in details. But from Johnny Carroll's perspective, which I only realized many years later, his problem is, is he's gone out and he's told people we've gotten 13% wage increases, we've gotten 10% wage increases, and you have the schmuck who works for him saying, that's not right. You're wrong about that. And Ronnie Straw, I don't think understood it either, but I don't know. Or maybe Ronnie Straw just knew that he was stuck saying it. I'm not sure. At the time I didn't think he knew what he was saying. Anyway, so that would be [19]83. That might have been perceived by him as my arrogance and this is why he needed to get rid of me. But who knows? I'm working in [the] research department, that's [19]83, Ronnie's trying to push me out. I started applying for different jobs. I got offered a job at the Steelworkers. [Steelworkers president] Lynn Williams is an incredibly smart, personable person, as Glenn [Watts] would have been in, as Morty would have been. I'm in awe of these people.

Debbie [01:32:29] President of the Steelworkers.

George [01:32:32] President of the Steelworkers. There was a point as well, in New Jersey, Cohen wanted me to come up there and be a rep in New Jersey, and I didn't really want to, and it was a good thing that I didn't. But meeting Morty Bahr, at the time, again, I'm a little kid, he's a big union leader from New York. That's a big deal. Forgot where I was going.

Debbie [01:32:56] I think it's how you got to working on Jobs with Justice, special projects person.

George [01:33:01] Okay, I'm working [in the] research department, Ronnie Straw is trying to fire me. Cohen thinks this is a bad thing and probably says something to Bahr. Dina Beaumont was an assistant then, as was Ted Watkins.

Debbie [01:33:20] And Bahr is now president?

George [01:33:22] Bahr is now president. This is [19]85, [19]86. They concoct a scheme without really telling me anything about it. Let me just think through what happens. The sequence of events would be I'm working in the research department, I'm having these conflicts, they're trying to resolve these conflicts. Ted Watkins calls me up to his office, which is, again, a big deal for an underling and says, George, I understand you're having some personnel issues. We're trying to work this out so you can come work for the president's office. He describes a job, you'll come work for the president's office, we'll put you in a little cubicle, you'll have this. He's telling me this in a way that later on I understand he wants to be able to describe it this way to Ronnie Straw, that they're not doing something good for me. They're doing something not so good for me.

Debbie [01:34:20] Ted Watkins position is?

George [01:34:22] He's the assistant to the president. He came with Morty from New York and he was Morty's hatchet man. He was the one who delivered good news and bad news. When Ted wanted to see you it was serious, whatever it was.

George [01:34:34] I think about that as I'm walking out, that doesn't sound so great. I ran into Dina Beaumont in the hallway who at that point was Morty's other assistant, and she threw her arm around me and said, George, it's so great that you're going to be working with us. I shake my head

and think, I don't know Dina, Ted described it to me, it didn't sound so good. I go back down to my office. She called me half an hour later, said, George, come up here and talk to me. And I said, this is how you could tell I had one foot out the door, right? I say to her, well, Dina, I'm busy right now. I'll come see you later when I'm done with what I'm doing. Which again, I never would have done as a kid in a big bureaucracy. I go back up and she paints a whole different picture about how wonderful this is, and this is the way that they're taking me out from underneath for Ronnie Straw and this is the way in which Ted needed to describe it, because he's talking to people, not to insult Ronnie Straw too much. So I became a research assistant in the president's office. We go through in [19]86. This is a time where Lotus has just developed as well. This is the other thing I'd say about all the technology we've been through.

Debbie [01:35:51] Lotus, the version of Excel.

George [01:35:54] No, I mean Lotus, the program that was a key spreadsheet program, Lotus 123 version.

Debbie [01:35:57] Spreadsheet.

George [01:35:58] The spreadsheet program for Lotus 123, which allows you to sort things in version two, not version three. We're on strike someplace, and I'm able to actually take the spreadsheet and sort it [in] different ways. This is how we can have a support program for the different locals. (We didn't talk about United and GTE, anyway, that comes later.) I'm in the president's office doing special projects. First, I am an important research assistant. I'm a research assistant in the president's office, and it goes on for a couple of years. They promote me to director of special projects. Can't even be a couple of years, has to be a year. They promote me to director of Special Projects which is a great title because there's no responsibility and total freedom to run. What happens then in the winter of [19]86 is we're organizing MCI facilities in Detroit. They shut them down in a particularly brutal way, which if you've got the story from Larry Cohen, you've probably got the story. Christmas hotel rooms, escort [the workers] back up to clean out your desk, one by one. Meeting with Conyers.

Debbie [01:37:13] John Conyers, a congressman from Detroit.

George [01:37:15] Conyers says, "We need jobs." Larry says back, "We need jobs with justice." At that same time, SEIU lost a building contract for downtown Detroit. The Autoworkers had the first, I don't know if the first, but the first of a series of big plant shutdowns or maybe massive shutdowns. I guess "we" would have been Larry and I, I'm not sure who the "we" was, but anyway, Larry and I [see] there is a coalition here to be formed and how are we going to follow up this Conyers meeting. Yeah, we need jobs, but we need jobs with justice. It was my contacts amongst other people in different unions, we were able to bring together ten unions who were going to be on this page that we need to fight back against plant closings. [In] 1980, we got Reagan with the PATCO destruction. We have International Paper, where Chainsaw Al Dunlap is just chomping this shit out of the Paperworkers. No, no, no, he [Al Dunlap] did something else. Paperworkers [are] fighting permanent replacements for the first time. Paperworkers go on strike and they're permanently replaced, which is just mind boggling change in terms of what the expectation is about strikes. Then you have later on Chainsaw Al [Dunlap]. You got Frank Lorenzo, who's a robber baron operating in the airline industry and clearly a bad actor [01:38:50] that's just almost known at the time. [1.9s] We're putting together a coalition to fight back in the early part of [19]87. We

conceptualize it as a series of rallies and demands about jobs with justice, because this is what we need.

Debbie [01:39:14] Jobs with Justice means union jobs. Is that what “Justice” is?

George [01:39:19] It was more ephemeral than that, because what we wrote in the early part of that year, we would have written a pledge card. The issues would have been employment security, which reflects the Autoworkers plants shut down, as well as our own kind of stuff. Health care for all, which would have reflected our stuff and everybody's stuff. Right to organize. And another one. We'll have to look it up on the internet. Right to organize, which reflected our MCI stuff. And decent wages and employment, decent standard of living. [The Jobs with Justice pledge card had these five issues: "Stand up for our rights as working people to a decent standard of living; Support the rights of all workers to organize and bargain collectively; Fight for secure family-wage jobs in the face of corporate attacks on working people and our communities; Organize the unorganized to take aggressive action to secure a better economic future for all of us; and Mobilize those already organized to join the fight for jobs with justice" (<http://www.jwj.org/about-us/our-history>)]

George [01:40:01] So those were the four [five] elements. These are the four [five] things that we're for and that we need in the American economy. If we sign this pledge card and we promise to be there for my fight, as well as five other fights during the course of the year, we can turn this around and we can start winning again. That was the pledge card. This was the pledge card for individual commitment. Institutionally, it was conceptualized as a series of rallies to put this on the map as a real demand leading into the [19]88 presidential campaigns. We're going to kick it off in Detroit in the spring with the Autoworkers around May Day. No, Labor Day. Let me just think this one through. When was our convention?

Debbie [01:40:55] It was Miami.

George [01:40:58] It was Miami. But what month was it? It was in the summer because we would have cheap hotels in Miami.

Jeff [01:41:06] July in Miami.

George [01:41:08] Yeah. I think it was in June.

Jeff [01:41:09] It was sweltering.

George [01:41:13] There's this vision, we're going to put this on the map in the media as a real political demand of the labor movement. We're going to have the Autoworkers with a massive march in Detroit. We'll have something else, I can't remember what it was. And we'll have the CWA convention in Miami where we already have a captive audience of 3000 people. In Miami at the time, Andy Banks, who was with Florida International University, was working with the Machinists union guy named Charlie Bryant, the lodge of which was Eastern Airlines. Mary Jane Barry, who would have been the independent flight attendants head. He [Andy Banks?] was tied in to the local milieu of labor as well. The Autoworkers couldn't pull the trigger on their massive march. The heartbreak of the Autoworkers occurred in [19]87.

George [01:42:18] I can't remember who the second one was, but that didn't ferret out as well. That left the kick-off to be the CWA convention. The CWA convention in that year--- [Frank] Lorenzo was taking out Eastern Airlines in a vicious way.

Debbie [01:42:40] The CEO.

George [01:42:41] The CEO. The first of many robber barons. They [the Machinists] were fighting back. It was an active fight-back campaign. Because that was the thing in the [19]80s, do you just give concessions or do you fight back? We were trying to create a movement, no, you've got to fight back. So we're going to kick off Jobs with Justice, put it on the map at the CWA convention. We rent the hall next door to the CWA convention. Lots of logistics about how are we going to make sure the CWA people go to the rally, and they don't go to the bar. How do you open the doors? How do you get people in there? All that works out. Actually, Cohen is going nuts because he's worried no one's going to come. If you can imagine, John Ryan and Seth Rosen and a third person say, well, we'll help phone bank the flight attendants' list because we're relying on Andy Banks and the independent flight attendant union to bring their people, the Machinists to bring their people. We're being told, no problem, no problem, no problem. It turned out they were correct. There was no problem. 12 or 15,000 people show up. In constructing the first one [JwJ rally], we had a thing where we wanted people to speak to--- it wasn't going to be a typical rally with every major leader speaking. It was interesting for me to tell Bahr, we're going to have 12,000, 10,000 people in this auditorium and you're going to sit in the audience and just hear the stories of individuals, much less other people. He was fine. He'd been speaking all day, but he would have been happy to speak.

Debbie [01:44:31] Who spoke for CWA?

George [01:44:34] It was a worker who had lost--- I don't know who spoke for CWA. I don't remember. I don't know that we had a CWA speaker.

Jeff [01:44:51] Didn't we have one of those Detroit workers?

George [01:44:52] Did we?

Jeff [01:44:54] I think so.

George [01:44:55] Did we? Okay. I just don't remember. That would have made sense. It would make sense that we would have had a Detroit worker, or there would have been a jobs person, and a health care person. We would have had a person who symbolized each of the different issues and then each of the different industries, which would have been airlines, and us, and manufacturing.

Debbie [01:45:15] How much of this was Larry Cohen envisioning this and structuring it?

George [01:45:22]. If you imagine, Larry has a vision, we're going to do this. And Morty is incredible in this period because this is risky, it's outside the comfort zone. It's risky. And he's fully in. Larry is the assistant, he's fully in. So that the political support for whatever stupid mistakes I would have made or stupid things I did was 100% assured. Plus, I'm naive enough to not even understand that shit like that can happen to anybody.

Debbie [01:45:59] Is part of the risk that the AL-CIO is opposing this?

George [01:46:03] That comes later. So the risk is definitely that the AFL-CIO is not doing anything, that it's moribund. This is something that they should be doing. We've been arguing that they should be doing things like this for years and they're not doing that. The other thing that we did to make it different from the AFL-CIO was, we said it's a citizen/labor coalition. Citizen Action was a key founder of Jobs with Justice. It's different from just a labor rump group or labor faction. It's a different kind of coalition.

Debbie [01:46:32] Was there a people of color organization:?

George [01:46:35] No.

Debbie [01:46:40] It was Citizen Action?

George [01:46:45] I'm just trying to think. I don't think people of color was a big deal in 1987, to be blunt. Yeah, there was CLUW [Coalition of Labor Union Women], there was Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, there was African-American sentiment, but it was not a political force. Then for CWA, it was a point where women were a political force, so you could talk about what was happening to women, and that was new and different. Oh, NOW [National Organization of Women] was another key element of that coalition because NOW cared about women, whoever led NOW at that point.

Debbie [01:47:25] Elie Smeal, probably.

George [01:47:26] Probably Elie Smeal understood that women's wages and unions were linked. So she was part of it. There must have been an African-American thing, but I don't remember them being relevant. I know that in Miami, Johnson from the bus workers union was critical and he was tied into the NAACP. So there might have been lower levels of people. I must have had to tell somebody that we're going to have just people sit in the audience. Cohen would have supported that decision. I can't imagine I didn't tell him, so he supported that decision. Then we made a decision we're going to invite all the presidential candidates because this was how we are going to make it a political movement. But we're also not going to let any of them speak. We're going to put them in the audience as well. That was particularly important because we kind of recognized Jesse Jackson was running for president. He'd be the only one who would show up. For the Miami labor community, which had big Cuban elements to it that were progressive minus the Cuba situation, Jesse Jackson was despised. We didn't want to fracture the nascent coalition with Jesse Jackson coming. So we sent out the letters to all the presidential candidates. The other backstory would be Barbara Shailor who's at the Machinists, is my running partner in this. She's also deeply committed to the Jackson campaign.

Debbie [01:49:12] The Machinists are the ones that are fighting Eastern Airlines. Right?

George [01:49:16] They're the AFL union fighting Eastern Airlines. The independent flight attendants are also fighting Eastern Airlines in an equally important but kind of marginalized [way] from labor. Yes. It was within the Machinists structure, it was their lodge, like a CWA sector, they had Lodge 100, which would have been the mechanics who dealt with - I don't even know if they had the ground support system - anyway, the mechanics who dealt with Eastern Airlines.

George [01:49:46] Okay. So I get to the big day. I'm laughing because Andy Banks says, oh, we gotta photograph, we gotta film this. We gotta do it on 16 millimeter film because it'll be so much more dramatic. And then that film just disappears. The other funny story would be, we roped in, I guess I had roped in ACTWU [Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union]. There's a series of progressive unions that you could count on. ACTWU was one of them. Bill Patterson was working there. Bill, what can you do to help us build this thing? Well, I can get you some T-shirts. So you got us 10,000 T-shirts. Andy Banks says, well, I can get them printed down here in the South cheaper. Fine, Bill, send them to Andy. Andy prints out 10,000 T-shirts. He puts a fucking palm tree on every one of them. (laughs) Whereas I had intended these shirts to be Jobs with Justice to be used in any place. This is funny until we're talking about [the fact that] we need a Jobs with Justice banner. Francine Zucker, who was CWA's PR director, says, yeah, you need one. It'll cost you three grand to make it. Andy Banks says I got a retired sign painter who can do it and we don't need it on silk, it can be on brown paper, basically, and it'll look just as fine. And indeed, he was right. That cost us [a] couple hundred bucks.

Debbie [01:51:19] What other unions were in there?

George [01:51:22] CWA would have been there. IUE [International Union of Electrical Workers], ACTWU, AFSCME [American Federation of State, County, Municipal Employees]--- Lee Saunders, who became the president of AFSCME, at the time was working in the AFSCME research department and I know Lee from that. SEIU [Service Employees International Union] was not, no, Mary Jane Collins. Yeah. SEIU was involved. The Teachers I don't think were really involved.

Debbie [01:51:54] ILGWU? [International Ladies Garment Workers Union].

George [01:51:54] James Parrot would have been involved. Autoworkers nominally, but disappointingly. Machinists --

Debbie [01:52:03] Steelworkers or Mine Workers?

George [01:52:06] Mine Workers were big. Ken Zinn at the Mine Workers was big. Steel?

Debbie [01:52:13] All these names you've mentioned are your generation of staffers, right?

George [01:52:19] Right.

Debbie [01:52:20] And it was their job to get the---

George [01:52:22] Get the president to sign off. Right. And then they could use---

Debbie [01:52:26] It wasn't Morty [Bahr] to the presidents of those unions?

George [01:52:30] Morty would have sent the initial letter asking other unions to join him, but the follow up was underneath the presidential level. It was helpful to other union staff to say, because Morty was so respected, that they could say to whatever other union president they're talking to, hey, this is Morty Bahr's thing. Different unions had different "things" that they did. Morty supports us on this, this is Morty's thing, you should sign on to this. This is an okay thing. The other unions

would have known that the guardrail was Morty Bahr. That was an acceptable guardrail for them, because Morty Bahr was so well respected inside the labor movement. So then it was staff that ran around to get other unions involved. And it was partly, Cohen would say, we need this to be a volunteer effort with unions reallocating part of their resources to make Jobs with Justice work. We do not want an external staff-run external organization. This is going to be internal quote unquote, volunteer efforts by unions committing staff to make this thing work.

Debbie [01:53:38] These are wonderful stories about the convention. Finish anything you want to add and then I want to hear more about how you build Jobs with Justice. One of the things that's interesting to me listening to you, as I would ask you the name of a union, you would say a staffer of your generation. That in itself is a very interesting phenomenon. Most of these were not people who came out of the ranks of the unions, correct?

George [01:54:13] Um-hum.

Debbie [01:54:14] And so it's a kind of activism of transforming the union movement.

George [01:54:21] In some ways. Yeah. I mean so---

Debbie [01:54:24] How would you respond to my comment?

George [01:54:26] Responding to your comment would be we would have seen or I would have seen the AFL-CIO and its bureaucracy captured by these conservative Social Democrats who have a name that I don't remember what it is.

George [01:54:41] The Shachtmanites?

George [01:54:41] Whatever they are. They cared about foreign policy, the Cold War, that was their deal. And the labor movement was going to be on the right side of the foreign policy questions and screw any engagement with anybody else. If that engagement could be construed as communist influence, because the key thing that they were fighting against was communists. So I'm jumping ahead at this point. No! Let me go [back]! Never mind. I'll jump ahead. Tom Donahue was secretary-treasurer of the AFL-CIO. And Morty's good friend. He came over to see Morty to tell him two years later as Jobs with Justice is spreading across the country. Morty, this is terrible. Look what the communists are saying about this. He brings him a file folder of *People's Daily's* [the Communist Party newspaper] papers where we say we're going to have a march in 16 cities. Their front page would be a map of the U.S. with stars in 16 cities. We say we're going to fight against Blue Cross Blue Shield in these ten cities. Front page story. Donohue is bringing this stuff to Morty saying this is terrible Morty. You're going to be Commies. Morty was definitely not a Commie and didn't like Commies. Anyway, he sent me the file folder with a kind of a FYI, and that's kind of like Donahue's attempt to squish it on those kinds of grounds. So it didn't work--- I think that was another boundary we were dealing with, it was the end of the Cold War era. We needed to have a different major contradiction that we were going to be fighting against, as opposed to the Communist influence.

George Kohl Edit P2.mp3

Debbie [00:00:00] I forgot to introduce this. This is an interview with George Kohl. We're now two hours into it. It is January 8th, 2024. We're in Washington, D.C. Jeff Rechenbach is on Zoom in Cleveland, Ohio. Hannah Goldman is recording the interview. She is in Washington, D.C.

George [00:00:32] We're talking about the rally. We have 10,000 people there. We have these very powerful local speakers as well as ours talking about the different issues, brings tears to people's eyes. Morty [Bahr] is in the audience listening and is being moved by these talks. A guy who was very important named Frank Jackalone who worked for the Citizen Action affiliate, Florida Consumer Federation, [was very important] in terms of prepping these people and getting them comfortable with their statements.

Debbie [00:01:07] What's his name?

George [00:01:08] Frank Jackalone.

George [00:01:27] He did a great job preparing these people to make their statements. They were just mind boggling. We're keeping everybody very short. The thing was moving along. But at the very beginning, in a nod to protocol, we had the mayor welcome us to Miami, and he's going on and on and on. I guess I am in charge, but I always had some problems accepting that notion. Andy Banks is going nuts, "He's going on too long. You got to do something about it. You gotta do something about it." They shove me up on the stage to do something about it. I walk up to the mayor and thank him very much. He's in the middle of his thing, something about soaring like an eagle. I chime in right behind him, "Yes, soaring like an eagle, it's exactly what we're going to do. Thank you."

Next programmatic crisis is [that] Jesse Jackson does show up for the rally and people, meaning Andy Banks at this point is just hysterical that Jackson's got 12,000 people in the audience. How is he not going to speak to them? We knew that he was coming. I had the stage set up so that these massive speakers were set right by the stairs, one, and then two, we offered Jackson a room right off of our room to do a press conference right after our thing. Barbara Shailor wants him to speak to these 10,000 people. They're her members. It's like his crowd. This is what should happen. So she pushes him forward, and he walks on his tiptoes across the stage in front of the speakers and sits down in the chair right next to where the speakers are going to be speaking. It's all ready to go. Banks went crazy. You got to do something, George. I'm thinking, yeah, I got to do something. I walk over to Jackson and I whisper in his ear "Mr. Jackson, security is very concerned about you here. See that seat right next to Jan Pierce [CWA district 1 vice president]. That's what we were saving for you and that's safe." He hopped up out of his chair and went right down and sat next to Jan, and it was [a] crisis averted. That was how that crisis was averted. Later on, Barbara, who was pretty pissed, but we were friends, sends a very funny thing about the incident. (She died of jaw mouth cancer [in 2019].) It's a huge success, this rally. The emotions within CWA were kind of powerful. The speeches are powerful. People are moved by it. I don't know if it's the first, but it's the first in a long time, of individuals telling their stories in a profound way and making the political point. It's kind of like a trend.

George [00:04:27] The next question is, how are we going to follow this up? Again, the goal had been to make Jobs with Justice the pivotal point in the [19]88 presidential race, one, and then two, the energy that it released, particularly across the South, was pretty substantial. This thing had kind of two rules. One was at the top, labor unions, at least the nine progressive unions that were signed

on to it, the presidents were for it. It was not an outsider thing. So a local could get involved in it and it was sanctioned. That was one. And then two, it was we're not going to tell you what to do. We don't have any staff or money. There's local freedom and local autonomy to do whatever you want, whatever your fight is, take it on, just put it under the banner of Jobs with Justice and by taking your local fight, making it part of Jobs with Justice, we will create this movement for Jobs with Justice. It was those two elements, I think, that allowed it to grow and multiply across the South. Then different unions picked it up to do different things. The Mine Workers had a bunch of issues. Pittston, I don't remember, comes after that, I think. [The United Mine Workers strike against the Pittston Coal Company was in 1989.] They didn't make Pittston a Jobs with Justice fight, but it was in the spirit thereof. Their guy in the South was an African-American guy whose name I'm blanking on from Birmingham, [he] was big in it as well. But again, across the South, where there weren't strong labor councils, there was no real opposition to it. In the North and in some parts of the Midwest, depending on who labor was, there was enormous opposition to it (laughs), and they wanted to squash it. Or there was a grudging acceptance to it because some big enough affiliates were part of it that it was okay, and it had a citizen element to it, therefore, it wasn't a duplication of what the Central Labor Council [CLC] was. It really was a duplication of what several Central Labor Councils should have done. And then, people like in Cleveland, John becomes CLC president---

Debbie [00:06:49] John Ryan.

George [00:06:50] John Ryan becomes CLC president, kind of on [a] Jobs with Justice-like program. In Missouri, there was a guy, Duke McVey, who was head of the State Fed[eration], who was for it. In Missouri, Jobs with Justice ends up being later on an important political arm of the AFL-CIO because he saw its potential instead of as a threat. In New York, forget about it, it was marginal and it did have some role later on, but generally was marginal. The more established and more effective a labor movement was, or the more bureaucratic and more ossified the Central Labor Council was, the more they saw Jobs with Justice as a threat to their existence and were trying to smash it.

Debbie [00:07:34] Within CWA, were the organizers part of the driving force?

George [00:07:41] Um hum. Within CWA it was whatever network we could work. That was then the second point, an important point, that within unions, within CIO unions in particular, the organizing directors were very important resource-heavy people so having the organizing directors be supportive of Jobs with Justice, meaning Cohen being supportive of it, meaning Mark Fleischmann at ACTWU---. Anyway, whoever the names were, Andy Stern at SEIU being supportive of it, Paul Booth [AFSCME organizing director] being supportive of it. In fact, Paul tells his own origin story of Jobs with Justice, and his story is nothing like mine. His is a Paul Booth story, which I wish I could have written down before. That's why I knew Jobs with Justice was a success when everybody was claiming credit for its creation. But the organizing directors were very important because they control significant resources within unions, and it enabled them.

Debbie [00:08:40] Jeff, join in on this. Maybe Cleveland is a good case study. What were some of the achievements, innovative things that Jobs with Justice did?

George [00:08:53] I have not a clue. I don't remember that it was local. I will say two that pop up that I know something about. One would be, at this point, Morty and [William] Winpisinger

[Wimpy] from the Machinists are the two international presidents committed to this. In part, Wimpy's committed because it's about Eastern Airlines, and Morty at one point jokingly complains that it must be Saturday because he's with Wimpy again at some rally someplace. Morty and Wimpy were rallying the troops all along about why we need to fight with Jobs for Justice and proselytizing for it. Not only was he benignly for it, it was central to some of Morty's own work and certainly some of his own time. We did a big rally in Iowa, the State Fed, which was progressive, a guy named Mark Smith was secretary-treasurer. He did a rally of 2 or 3000 people in Iowa. Morty and Wimpy are there speaking, and it's again trying to put Jobs with Justice on the map as a key political issue. I say we failed at that. But we did what we could do.

George [00:10:13] The other big success story, which I know of only because it's CWA is in Nacogdoches, Texas. Danny Fetonte and Sandy Rusher were the organizing directors of the district [6]. We had organized a place, Stephen F. Austin University in eastern Texas, which is the Confederate part of Texas. Black cafeteria workers were there, and even walking into the white administration building was a big deal for them. They organized, they were bargaining a contract, and we mobilized 3000 people to go to Stephen F. Austin, to Nacogdoches, Texas, and do a march there. Nacogdoches hadn't seen anything like that. That would definitely be a civil rights/economic/union march. That was a big, big deal. Even the conservative people in the union who wouldn't necessarily like it, and this would include a guy named Albert Bowles who would have been opposed to organizing outside telephone. Albert had connections to the rail unions. He got the rail unions to cut the train off so that the train wouldn't disrupt the march, so that everybody was engaged in a way, which was wonderful. I got to ride the wave of and be connected to, if only vicariously, all these wonderful people in the labor movement who could make things happen, who did make things happen. My role in some ways was mediating this. We're not going to interfere. There would be certain unions or certain presidents or their staff would say, well, we can't do this in North Carolina, or wherever it was, we can't do this, it's blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. That's not our role, there is local autonomy, locals can do what they want to do. Providing locals with autonomy was a key buffer role that I played in making this happen.

George [00:12:19] Then we started trying to do annual meetings, and the first annual meeting is 20 people. We work on it. The next one is 30, the next one is 100. It starts to grow and gets too big. The format for these meetings was awesome and tricky in terms of what are you trying to do? But in my mind, one of the last, best ones would have been in Denver. Relatively small so that you could have one open circle. Once you got beyond one open circle, the dynamics of the meeting changed. Once the open circle got too big, it was hard to do. Or once it happened too many times, so that some of the key people who were pushing it within their unions had other demands on their time, it would fade away. Support would fade away. But the last one that was significantly successful was in Denver. We were fighting with health care costs, [the] funding of Blue Cross/Blue Shield. The slogan was "Cut the Red Tape." The people who were there were all leaders in their local communities or national support people who could make things happen in their unions. We did an action at the Blue Cross/Blue Shield headquarters in Denver, where we wrapped a building in red tape, which is another whole story about the red tape, which I want to remember someday. We got this beautiful six-inch red tape. Whole debate. "It's one inch, so much cheaper. Is that better?" "Nah, six inches. You need a big piece of red tape to wrap the building. It's got to be visible." We did that action and wrapped the building in red tape, and then everybody went home and did a whole bunch of them as well. I was going to say 40. (We also had a hepatitis scare which is another story.) But that would have been a success. Then it got big enough that we broke the rule that George as Special Projects is going to be donated to run this thing. We hired staff. Hiring staff

George Kohl Interview – January 8, 2024

began the kind of (pause) erosion, I'm trying to think of you have a mineral, you have water running, it soaks the minerals away a bit. Anyway, there's a

Debbie [00:14:45] Leaching?

George [00:14:47] Leaching is too strong. Anyway, [it] began to suck away a little bit of the institutional support and commitment. People would say, "Oh yeah, I'm for Jobs with Justice" as opposed to having to spend time doing it because we have staff now that's beating time to do it. It became less core to what the work was, because it was farmed out to somebody else to do that work. But it still continues to grow. Then they, the staff and the organizers, the first one was [00:15:16] Bob Nicholas, he ended up at AFGE. And there was Carin Zelenko, who ended up at the Teamsters and then the AFL-CIO. Then there was Fred Azcarate, who came out of the USSA, United States Students Association, and Citizen Action. He was terrific. Following him was Sarita Gupta.

Debbie [00:15:47] You've skipped somebody who went to the Department of Labor. Woman. Maybe she wasn't a director, maybe she was number two with Fred.

George [00:15:58] Could have been.

Debbie [00:15:59] You know who I'm talking about.

George [00:16:00] I'm sure I do, but I don't remember. Next one is Sarita Gupta who came out of Chicago. By this point in certain areas, actually, the SEIU had taken over the Central Labor Council in Chicago. Tom Balanoff from the famous Balanoff Steel [Worker] family was their head. He was involved early on, was supportive of it so that you had certain several Labor Councils becoming important, being able to use it. Sarita came out of Chicago and she was the next director.

Debbie [00:16:30] Mary Beth Maxwell is who I was thinking of.

George [00:16:34] Right. So Mary probably

Debbie [00:16:35] Number two with Fred.

George [00:16:37] She was number two.

Debbie [00:16:37] They were partners.

George [00:16:38] Yeah. Then, Sarita. Then we get into the big fight for EFCA

Debbie [00:16:45] The Employee Free Choice Act.

George [00:16:46] The Employee Free Choice Act. We never say EFCA, we always say the Employee Free Choice Act. I can't remember what years those were. Cohen's [CWA] president by now, so that's 95 to 2000? [Larry Cohen was CWA President 2005-20015].

Debbie [00:16:59] Obama period.

George Kohl Interview – January 8, 2024

George [00:17:02] When was he president?

Debbie [00:17:03] 2008. [Obama was elected president in Nov. 2008, president Jan 2009-Jan 2017]

George [00:17:04] 2008. We, meaning Cohen, set up American Rights at Work, which is going to provide the framework for the Employee Free Choice Act. My argument, which I lost, was that it should be part of Jobs with Justice. It was set up [as a] separate [organization]. Then later on they merged and [that] changed the character of Jobs with Justice. The other thing is that, recognizing that organizing directors were important, Jobs with Justice was a place for them to get together. The unions that formed Change to Win were all together forming Jobs for Justice. What was ironic and interesting is that when [John] Sweeney is elected president of [the AFL-CIO. Sweeney was AFL-CIO president 1995-2009], Change to Win takes over the AFL-CIO. [Change to Win was an alternative labor federation, founded in 2005, with SEIU the driving force.] Morty [Bahr] was a Tom Donahue guy [AFL-CIO secretary-treasurer 1979-1995; Donohue ran against John Sweeney for AFL-CIO president in 1995 and lost]. Morty, who was core to Jobs with Justice, was not part of the cabal that became the AFL-CIO. Other organizing directors [from] other unions were more focused on doing program[matic work] there and competing with Jobs with Justice. They had the resources there and that was their platform to do solidarity work.

Debbie [00:18:25] There was the Union Cities program under Sweeney, which I think was trying to use the Central Labor Councils to become like ---.

George [00:18:32] Jobs with Justice. Exactly, exactly.

Debbie [00:18:38] Jeff in Cleveland, you had a very active Jobs with Justice. Do you want to talk about that?

Jeff [00:18:49] It does relate back to having one person as a driving force. John Ryan takes over the Central Labor Council. Jobs with Justice in effect becomes an arm of the Central Labor Council, with John supervising the work and driving it. We had really a terrific coalition, religious groups, a guy from the United Church of Christ, Reverend Bob Stroman was fantastic. We were able to do a lot of that work. When John left the AFL CIO, it just collapsed. We still have a woman here who runs it, but frankly, it isn't engaged at all in the labor movement anymore. It's kind of run off in its own path and doesn't really connect with labor in a meaningful way any longer, unfortunately.

George [00:19:45] That's my experience with other Jobs with Justice [locations].. That comes after the big fight for the Employee Free Choice Act and the changes of staffing at Jobs with Justice as well. You're right about Workers' Rights Boards. They were an element [designed to] hold up these cases of these incredible individuals who have risked a lot to organize or suffered. How do we hold them up? Well, you hold them up with a Community/Labor Forum that hears the case and then goes to the place that did the harm and tries to put pressure on them to right the wrong.

Debbie [00:20:33] Do you have a sum up then? Do you think it was the right vision of what was needed at that time---the tension between institutionalizing something as opposed to just coming out of volunteer energy and passion.

George [00:20:59] Those are different things. Anyway, what I was going to say was that it was the notion of a coalition of the willing. Identify a big enough coalition of the willing who are willing to

move forward along your path was, I think, the critical thing. Then the critical thing was real institutional support, which meant some money and some staff time. And then a willingness to trust Bahr that we're not going to interfere and tell locals what to do, but we're going to respect that result. That was a little bit unique compared to the AFL-CIO in terms of "No, no, this is what we're going to do. And no, you are not going to be against the Vietnam War in Colorado." So I think that would be it. And then, as a fight back movement, it was not quite big enough. It never is. Forces of the economy were so big, that was sad. But in that whole era, we came close to a bunch of things in terms of change, or the possibilities of change, but never quite made the changes that we would have liked. Unfortunately, I sum up my career as I helped the labor movement go from 17% to 6% of the private sector. That's not exactly a ringing endorsement for anything I say.

Debbie [00:22:29] I was getting to the big picture questions. But before we do, I'm going to ask you to do something that I should have done at the very beginning. We got as far on your timeline with Jobs with Justice. Don't give detail underneath, but let's just flesh out the timeline. Then you became research director.

George [00:22:54] I was director of special projects. Then I became research director [00:22:56] [0.0s] and then I became an assistant to the president.

Debbie [00:22:59] Which presidents?

George [00:23:01] [Morty] Bahr [1985-2005], [Larry] Cohen [2005-2015], Chris Shelton [2015-2023]. Ron Allen retires. I replaced him [as assistant to the president.]

Debbie [00:23:15] During your period as research director and assistant to presidents, what would you say were some of your greatest accomplishments?

George [00:23:32] That's a good question. I have to think more about that. Well, I don't know. For me personally, it was the growing ability to take pleasure in the fact that I hired Debbie Goldman, and she was just terrific in customer service and women's stuff. Or Louise [Novotny]. I mean, when I first became research director, I knew more than everybody. It was a big transition for me personally to let go of things and to be able to be pleased, enjoy, and be supportive of the people who are doing great things.

Debbie [00:24:23] You were mentioning another name. I wanted you to say that name.

George [00:24:26] In the health care fight, we -- Louise Novotny and I -- me [in the beginning] but then Louise Novotny took it miles beyond wherever I could go. We were important in the health-care fights, important in the analysis of health care, and important in the amount of recognition of the problem and then trying to figure out ways to go around the problem. There's a woman, Cathy Schoen, who worked at SEIU, who was a big-time health care expert, who was our mentor. She told us about this new thing, PPOs [Preferred Provider Organizations]. As a market force, if you can gather the customers, you can get a discounted deal with the other guy. We were able to introduce that to AT&T and AT&T actually accepted it and it put off health care cost shifting a different way. We made big fights to try to break class solidarity amongst the employers by pointing out to AT&T, "you know, national health care, you would save \$3 billion a year" and that \$3 billion was not worth their while to sign on to a national health care or a Medicare for All bill. It was stunning, it was remarkable that they weren't interested in that. I think we played a big role in the health-care fights.

Debbie [00:26:10] Both in bargaining and in policy?

George [00:26:13] Bargaining and policy. Yeah. But it was primarily policy in linking them. It ended up in minimizing the amount that we paid in bargaining, so for our members it was the right linkage. But we never made the real thing we wanted to do, which is eliminate the issue from bargaining. We were able to save members lots of money over ten years because, had Bahr and NYNEX bit in [1989] on the \$1.17 or \$1.72 in premiums, it would have just gone up from there. The other reality is that once you start health care cost shifting or health care payments by employees, the question of who should suffer the consequences? Is it the sick person? Is it the whole unit? Premiums are actually not the worst way to go. But we had already created for ourselves this thing that premiums were off the table.

Jeff [00:27:15] At one point Morty had Dick Notebaert, the head of Ameritech [1994-1999] at the time, convinced to go along with this. I flew into Milwaukee to make some big pronouncement with Clinton.

George [00:27:27] Right.

Jeff [00:27:27] Then Notebaert got some cold feet and sort of backpedaled a bit on it. I think he finally came out just [that] he would support the employer mandate. [The employer mandate required employers who did not provide health insurance to pay into a public fund.] But that was it.

George [00:27:41] Right. Exactly.

Jeff [00:27:43] He got a lot of pressure from his telecom peers to back down.

George [00:27:50] Telecom peers and other peers.

Jeff [00:27:52] Yeah. Right.

George [00:27:53] Other businesses that were customers. I'm your customer, you're going to screw me like this. He was the exception at that point.

Debbie [00:28:02] So mentoring and developing the research department ---

George [00:28:10] Yeah. It was personally satisfying.

Debbie [00:28:12] Would you say that as well with the organizers? The relationship ---

George [00:28:18] The relationship was terrific on my end. You think from 1980 where organizing is the butt end of the union, [so] junior guy gets the assignment. I think once I'm [research] director, I create this dynamic [that] organizing is the most important thing we can do. And in fact, any organizing request that comes in, it's going to be handled the next day or maybe within three days. And then we were still doing files on paper back then. So every organizing request went into a red folder. And if a red folder shows up on your desk, it's going to be handled right away because organizing is the most important thing we're going to do and it's often time sensitive. Time goes on. Organizers can do a lot of that themselves. But back then, resources were on paper and

consolidated. I think creating a mindset that organizing was important or, in my little area, it was important. Then within the union, that was a massive conversation that I say happened three times in the history of the union. In 1980, Glenn Watts hired an organizing department, which is controversial, but we pushed through. In [19]85, the question is, is it going to be Bahr or Booe [as national president]. Bahr is the organizing candidate and Booe is a more traditional candidate. [Bahr wins.] Then Cohen gets elevated [to organizing director] and then it's going to be Cohen or Pisha [in a contested election in 1998 for executive vice-president]. [Sue Pisha was the vice-president of CWA District 7 at the time.] That election was the key election. Then Cohen became president [in 2005]. Those are three referendums of the union on the question of organizing, one by fiat and the executive board not opposing. Glenn Watts. The second one, the executive board voting to endorse Morty after Morty and Jim Booe make a deal. The third one, the [1998]convention, by the skin of 5000 votes, by the skin of its teeth, voting for Cohen over Sue Pisha were the three kinds of referendums [to determine] what kind of union are we going to be. Local leadership ratification of that.

Debbie [00:30:40] Do you want to add to your achievements?

George [00:30:43] If I could look at a list, I would say oh, yeah, that was good that I did or I was involved with. Most of it I see as being a useful, productive role within the organization. A place where I could solve problems or things would come my way, and I would figure out ways to make "it" whatever the "it" progressive or positive thing happen. I don't think of it as big programmatic things. I think of it as kind of incidental, greasing the skids kind of thing. Be that as it may. So Cohen came up with whatever the Growth Funds and the SIF funds ---

Debbie [00:31:29] Strategic Industry Funds.

George [00:31:31] I would administer that and organizers would have ideas about what they wanted to do with it. I would help them shape what the idea is and then process the paperwork to make it happen. Or we're doing a mobilization thing. I just blocked on Nick's last name. The assistant from District 3 who was a local guy who became the assistant to ---

Jeff [00:32:04] Richard Honeycutt [CWA District 3 vice-president, 2015 - present].

George [00:32:13] Okay. So, Nick [Hawkins]. Nick was terrific, I love Nick. He came from a local, so he didn't really have a good sense of how [to] do the levers of power of CWA bureaucracy work. So I could say to Nick, this is how it works and so you want to do this, you should do that. You want to accomplish this goal, do that. I could help lots of people accomplish their mobilization and political goals or funding goals or resource flowing goals towards those programs.

Debbie [00:32:50] What were some of the biggest challenges that maybe you or the union wasn't able to sufficiently overcome?

George [00:33:05] I thought of another thing that I was involved with which was the whole filibuster fight.

Debbie [00:33:14] This was during the Obama period.

George [00:33:17] This is the filibuster fight. This is Cohen's insight, that we can't achieve --- I don't remember when the insight comes. It's probably after the Employee Free Choice Act failure, where we have 58 votes, committed votes, we have 60 votes for the Employee Free Choice Act, but we can't get on the floor. [Senator] Ted Kennedy and [Senator Robert] Byrd would have made 59 and 60. We could get one of them on the floor, but you couldn't get them both on the floor at the same time. You needed the 60 votes to override the filibuster, which was blocking consideration of the Employee Free Choice Act. Meanwhile, Cohen had been in a committee that had negotiated a watered down version or some version less than what we wanted. [House Speaker Nancy] Pelosi had passed it several times in the House. Had we gotten Byrd and Kennedy, who were both sick, on the floor at the same time, we would have changed labor law, which would have been a massive accomplishment. But because we couldn't get them on the floor, we couldn't break the filibuster. Then Cohen's insight comes, well, the filibuster is undemocratic. We have to change that. That leads us down this massive rabbit hole of Senate rules. You couldn't pick more unlikely candidates (well, actually, Cohen surprised me) but more unlikely candidates than Cohen or I to understand the rules that govern Senate lawmaking. That was a big fight in terms of coalition building. Convincing coalition partners that this was an important way to go was a big deal because the people who were for abortion were against it because they needed their person to be able to filibuster the move of the Right Wing to pass something on abortion rights.

Debbie [00:35:19] Opposed to abortion.

George [00:35:20] Thank you. The environmentalists on Alaska oil drilling in Alaska didn't want to risk that, because without the filibuster, they wouldn't be able to stop oil drilling. In the African-American world, I don't remember whether they had to be convinced or they were more amenable to begin with. I think they were more amenable to begin with. I guess because the Voting Rights [Act], maybe they should have been anyway. I'm not sure why they were more deeply involved in the coalition.

Debbie [00:35:53] Maybe the Voting Rights Act had already been gutted.

George [00:35:55] I don't think so. I think that that would have been their risk. Ben Jealous [NAACP president, 2008-2013] was the head of it. So I'm not sure what was going on. Common Cause, Bob Edgar, former congressman from Pennsylvania, was the head of Common Cause [2007-2013.] He came and spoke to the [CWA executive] board at one point about why the rules were no good. But discovering him and discovering individuals who were powerful --- Carl Pope was at the Sierra Club [executive director 1992-2010, chairman 2011], discovering individuals who were powerful voices in making the case that Senate rules had to change was a big step forward. After a couple of years, we did change the Senate rules, although our guys, the Democrats, wouldn't go all the way to do the Supreme Court and left it to them [the Republicans. In 2017, a Republican majority in the Senate voted to eliminate the filibuster for Supreme Court nominees.] Then when they did the Supreme Court, we got screwed. But in that fight we also ran into [Senate Majority Leader] Harry Reid from Nevada. Our local in Nevada was important to the Reid electoral machine because we had people who could generate votes outside of Las Vegas. I just blocked on her name. [Liz Sorenson] Anyway, our staff representative was central to this process of mobilizing votes outside of the urban center of Nevada. John Doran was key in Reno to mobilize votes. At headquarters, we knew that they were critical to Reid so we had a way to talk to Reid through them about this. Then Reid, I'm not sure when he changed or how he changed and it certainly wasn't just these two people, but we had a way into the office. It was important for us to know what was

happening. Then I ran into these two billionaires who would speak to Reid as well, and would give his fundraiser millions of dollars or hundreds of thousands of dollars because dark money was not the same. And it was be, "oh yeah, we had dinner with Harry last night" and blah blah, blah, blah, blah blah. This is like another world for me. But that was fun too. Stanley Sheinbaum? It doesn't matter. The whole filibuster fight and then getting to the place where they actually took the vote --- The procedural vote was the chair makes a ruling, ruling is contested, and you have to have a vote to overrule the chair on the ruling or sustain the chair on the ruling, procedurally fascinating. Whatever.

Debbie [00:38:41] How about the Trans-Pacific Partnership fight?

George [00:38:44] I think that was enormous, too. Shane Larson was critical as well.

Debbie [00:38:54] CWA Legislative director [and assistant to the president Chris Shelton and Claude Cummings].

George [00:38:54] Legislative director. I think my role was some of the materials and some of the thinking around it, making sure that the resources were out there. And then Shane really [was] driving that program. We would kick ourselves. In some ways, we think, and some of it's true, we created an environment that could elect Trump because we were so effective in terms of pillaging the Clintons and creating the atmosphere around the TPP [Trans Pacific Partnership] and trade in the industrial states that he had fertile ground to plough as well. We were effective in that work.

Debbie [00:39:35] How did the external environment change over these 40 years of your union career?

George [00:39:47] It's a long time. What is so fascinating to me, when I read something that I had written in the [19]80s, I was bemoaning the fact in the [19]80s the textile industry is going from 17% organized down because of the runaway shop phenomenon. The fact that there's a textile industry that's 17% organized in this country is mind boggling. But it was that dynamic and it was newish in the [19]80s, new enough to have an impact in the [19]80s. Runaway shops, NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement, 1994], the internationalization of the economy becomes a big deal. America's push down on workers to work for less became omnipresent in that period. The whole social compact about unions broke down as well. The fact that there would be permanent replacement of strikers, which was unheard of. In CWA, we had two different questions around that. One was will they replace us? And there was an argument inside, no, we got too many people. They can't hire 10,000 people all at once. Two, [it] depends on who they are and who is breaking the union, maybe they could. Bahr changed it into a thing that we don't want to be predictable. If they know we're going to strike, "no contract, no work", which was our mantra in [19] 83, [19]86, and in some places it continued to be. But there was education done that no, if they're expecting us to strike at this time, this date, they can prepare for it, deploy their managers and be ready for this strike. If we don't strike, just think of it, our argument went, they'll have all those managers and contractors lined up and they'll be paying them already. They got a double payroll that'll be more effective than a strike. Bahr introduced the notion of and we supported him in that introduction of working beyond contract [expiration with] mobilization. In [19]95, we worked [beyond expiration] for the first time in a Verizon South contract. It went on for months.

Debbie [00:42:21] [19]95 it was still called Bell Atlantic.

George [00:42:24] Yeah. Bell Atlantic South. We end up, this is again Bahr's genius, we spent five months at the Mediation Services [Federal Mediation and Conciliation Services]. Then he was willing to take \$7 million, which at the time was a lot, but he contrasted that with what would be a week's worth of strike benefits, and do a massive cable TV buy which in [19]95 was new, unique and effective. We had a sloppy contractor that was named Larry the contractor, which was the first name of the operations guy, whose name I forgot, Larry something or other, drove him nuts.

Debbie [00:43:09] Babbio?.

George [00:43:11] Babbio could have been down here. Maybe.

Debbie [00:43:13] I think he was in the North.

George [00:43:16] Anyway, it was Larry somebody, drove him nuts. We ended up at the FMCS. I was with Bahr at the FMCS settling that and doing the numbers. That was a time where we tried to get them to recognize this is billions of dollars that you could save on retiree health care. I can't remember what the settlement was, but it was after that the settlement came.

Debbie [00:43:49] I asked about big external changes.

George [00:43:53] They were big external hops with little ladders going down.

Debbie [00:43:56] Of course, that's how you experienced things.

George [00:44:02] What's so funny to me now is that the change in regulation and deregulation and what the telephone company meant totally transformed over this period. It was this business where people took [a] service business [that was a] monopoly [and] regulated [and transformed it] to [a] competitive [industry]. Those were massive changes, as opposed to you look back at it today, and that's "just the way companies are and behave." If you started today, you wouldn't even recognize it. The union and the people in the union and the companies went through this massive transformation. Part of that emotional energy and energy of people "no, we're entitled to this." Coming out of that era that they were entitled to it helped to fight back. We're entitled to health care. We're entitled to a decent standard of living was part of the reason why CWA members and CWA didn't get dragged down as quickly as some of the others. Plus it's bigger, plus it all couldn't run away. But Western Electric and Western Electric Manufacturing and Bell Labs --- We had at one point the Merrimack Valley [Massachusetts] plant had 7000 people working in it and now there's nothing there. We actually ran an organizing campaign amongst engineers. This would have been outside the card check agreements so they had to be elections. This would be in the [19]80s. We had engineers who, when they saw the divestiture coming wanted to sign up to be part of the union one, and then two, as their jobs were changing from electromechanical engineering work to software coded engineering, they needed a path to get from one kind of occupation to the other kind of occupation. And I can't remember. We had three elections stacked up, [Merrimack Valley first up where we won, number 2, I don't remember but I think we lost, and number 3 in North Carolina where we lost but I don't remember what happened exactly. The second big transformation was the introduction of competition, which today is obvious, but was a big deal. And it is true that the amount of physical craft work just plummets, with plug-and-play, which was a new invention that you can actually send out a telephone to a house, you could plug it into your own cord and it would

work. That was a big deal. Not to mention then in the 2000s, I guess, you get wireless telephone beginning to emerge. I looked it up. We have 12,000 members in 2000 in AT&T wireless. But it goes from 0 to 12,000 over a multi-year period. Five, ten-year period. Long-distance was still the big money maker in the telephone industry. Now, no one thinks twice about a long-distance call because it just doesn't exist. The wireless technology totally--- Well, first you had computerization, digitalization, and AT&T was not as nimble as it needed to be to become Cisco, or didn't buy Cisco instead of NCR. And then two, the amount of work is much less with all the digitalization.

Debbie [00:47:32] And the outsourcing.

George [00:47:33] And the outsourcing.

Debbie [00:47:35] One of the things I didn't hear you say is financialization.

George [00:47:42] But doesn't come until later in the telecom industry.

Debbie [00:47:48] What does later mean?

George [00:47:49] I don't know, the 2000s.

Debbie [00:47:51] Well you were still there for 20 years.

George [00:47:53] Yeah. It doesn't come until much later. It begins in US West where US West was a telephone company, gets bought by a fiber optic company, long-distance razzle dazzle. [Qwest bought US West in 2000.] I can't remember the crook who owned that one. [Joseph] Nacchio was part of it. They were the razzle dazzle part and their finances were much better than US West's finances. The financial industry, the analyst community, somehow believed that [it] could buy US West and rather than the profit margin being -- made up number -- 10%, it'll become -- made up number -- 20%, which was just absurd on the face of it. But they were able to leverage their ownership of fiber optic rights-of-way along railroad lines to buy this massive company with 25,000 people at the time and then run it into the ground, and actually went to jail ultimately for some of the lies and things that they did.

Debbie [00:49:17] This is Qwest?

George [00:49:18] Yeah. This was Qwest. This is how US West became Qwest. That's Nacchio who went to jail. He was at Qwest. He was US West/Qwest. Anyway, that was the first place we saw it and the other places we didn't see it quite so much. We did see it actually, post [19]97, when you get the merger period and you get the kind of divestment of wireless. We saw wireless as the future. PacBell [Pacific Bell] was the first company that wanted to sell, divest its wireless business or sell it and merge it with Qwest, I think. Anyway, they were going to divest it from the telephone company [which] was the key part from our point of view, and we wanted it part of the telephone company because we wanted a place for people to move for jobs. But we could not convince PSCs [public service commissions], and I don't know why at this point. So this [would] be a major failing, because it was an obvious case that the government gave the telephone company the rights to build wireless. [The FCC gave each RBOC one of two cellular licenses in 1984.] Now the telephone company is going to take their rights [licenses] that we gave them to build wireless and sell it over here for billions of dollars. And we the people, the ratepayers who created this, don't get shit

(emphasis) out of this deal. How could that be legal? But it was or we didn't hire the right --- That would be an interesting case study if we had had the resources --- We also had an ethic that we could do it ourselves. Was there anybody who could make, or high-powered lawyers, who would make a difference in those kinds of cases at the time? I don't know, but we didn't have the resources or the mechanism to grab that money to hire those people. So that would be another financialization case where what was the telephone companies got ripped apart.

George [00:51:06] Some of this is theoretical, the way in which the wage and the numbers of technicians and people who went back and forth between companies was not mammoth numbers, but it was a notion of where they could go, and particularly on the service rep side, there should have been some. But service reps get attacked by the fissuring of work and the outsourcing of work. And AT&T, this would go back into the [19]80s, was the worst of that, which is a story I can leave for another day. Financialization is what you asked about. Later at AT&T, you get a series of people who come into AT&T, you get AT&T itself trying to leverage its own resources to become some version of what it thinks the information industry is going to be. The purchase of TCI [1998] and then spinning off of TCI

Debbie [00:52:02] The cable company --

George [00:52:03] the cable company to Comcast [2002]. The union had our hooks into a massive part of the cable industry via AT&T. We got to a place where we had a bunch of units that had been organized, and we were inches away from a contract with them. There were some key complicated issues, complicated local issues. In the West, the cable companies, I'm making this up, let people park at home whereas in the East, they had people come to work to pick up the trucks. In the West [they] loved taking their trucks home to work; in the East they loved that work time didn't start until you were at work and going out. Having one consistent policy was too hard for us. Those were the kind of local items that we didn't have resolved. But, had we had the sufficient will, which we didn't quite have, we could have held up all of AT&T bargaining to say no, you the company have to resolve this and here's our proposal to resolve this. We had a proposal to resolve it and we're not going to settle over here until this is solved. The conversation always would be with the leader in charge [of AT&T bargaining}, do you want me to hold up bargaining for 50,000 people in order to solve this [for potential members]. My answer would be yes, that's exactly what I want you to do. Most of the time, the answer would be I'm not going to do that. (laughs) But we came this close to having a big chunk of the cable industry organized, but a) the guy who owned it, whose name I'm blanking on from Denver -- [John] Malone was a real pig, a real libertarian and a libertarian billionaire. He owned a big chunk of AT&T, which was the other thing that never played out fully or I didn't see it play out fully, was [that] his 10% ownership of AT&T would have had an impact on how the CEO viewed the future and viewed work.

George [00:54:18] The other thing we never could quite do that we tried to do is we, the employees, owned between 7 and 10% [of AT&T] through employee stock ownership plans. We would have owned 7 to 10% of the company as well. In theory, if you had a 5% interest in a company, you can control it in some ways. That was true for Wall Street, but why it wasn't true for us or why we couldn't organize that is one of the mysteries that I never figured out either although we did a variety of things to try and exercise that muscle and exercise that power. So, the financialization a) came late to the industry and then I think the other forces of technology, meaning at AT&T shutting down of all the manufacturing work in the United States and then b) the splitting apart of the customer service rep job, which they started in the [19]80s, well, they started probably

forever. The key story there is the TransTech story in the middle [19]80s, they [AT&T] set up an independent subsidiary, which is 5000 call center people. They hired people from different Kelly Girls at the time, different temp agencies to be the employees. There was no way to organize the unit and we couldn't bust that. Later on they spin that out and it becomes Cincinnati Bell Information Systems, then it becomes Convergys, which now has 200,000 seats or three around the world.

Debbie [00:55:48] It's been bought. There's another name right now. [Concentrix, 2018]

George [00:55:52] But now we have actually an organizing campaign at Teleperformance with the International Federation [UNI Global Union Federation], where we actually have a neutrality agreement. That would be the other thing that I think we're known for, that the CWA administrations I worked with believed that if you neutralized employer animus towards the union, people would organize. People wanted a union. So you had to take employer animus out of the picture. Getting to card check became critical. We tried different variations of that, but it was card check at the end of the day. Some people would argue about access and different things. The people who did that work emphatically argue that it's card check that really matters.

Debbie [00:56:53] And neutrality.

George [00:56:56] But neutrality can be written in lots of different ways. If you just have neutrality, you don't have neutrality. Whoever the employer is actually makes a difference. At the Amalgamated Clothing [and Textile] Workers [ACTWU], for example, for a while they had neutrality between [Jack] Sheinkman [ACTWU president 1987-1996] and whoever was the head of Xerox [Paul Allaire], who were buddies. They had neutrality and ACTWU organized bits and pieces of Xerox, which was amazing. So it's based on relationships. In the early [19]90s, when David Mintz [lawyer for CWA district 1] worked for Jan Pierce and wrote a neutrality agreement

Debbie [00:57:34] In District 1.

George [00:57:35] In district one, and wrote a neutrality agreement for NYNEX, vis a vis the cable thing, it was three pages of great text, but never meant anything because the company didn't implement it. David thought, we CWA District One thought, we're taking wages out of competition here, so the company shouldn't oppose us. But they did. There's a massive ideological component, which is your neutrality thing.

Debbie [00:58:07] My last big picture question then is how would you sum up how the union changed over the 40 years?

George [00:58:16] The thing I didn't really talk about, beginning in [19] 87 or [19]86, anyway, since the middle [19]80s, you could see convergence happening. You knew the convergence was going to be a big deal of some kind.

Debbie [00:58:32] What do you mean by convergence?

George [00:58:34] We didn't have it totally right, but we meant communications and information services. Information services really also means media. Along this umbrella of technologies, both the creation of content and the delivery of content were the two big elements that were coming

together in some different ways. This was Morty's insight. I'm laughing because his first pronouncement when he was elected as president was, I'm going to organize IBM. And Larry, the organizing director, reads it in the paper the next day, just like everybody else has, like, yeah, right. We had an effort there, but we never quite got IBM organized, although amongst their professionals there was a big deal about pensions, that we worked with them on and got thousands of people signed up on a program, but we never got more than a thousand members, I think.

George [00:59:50] Convergence was a big deal. We knew it was coming. And then, recognition of the different other unions that were part of that. Each one had a story. The ITU [International Typographical Union], which was the printers union, was going down the tubes. In part we told the story over and over again. They got guaranteed payments for their people, but their people then could be fat and happy and so all the work left. That was our lesson for everybody. Just don't take care of who you got. You kind of have a future, too. They [the ITU] were going to go to the Teamsters. [Thomas} Donohue, [who] didn't want that to happen [as the secretary-treasurer of the AFL[-CIO], comes to Morty and says you should affiliate with them. So that was our first affiliation. Later on, at the Jobs with Justice convention, I think in Miami, NABET's [National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians] on strike

Debbie [01:00:46] The broadcast technicians.

George [01:00:46] Broadcast technicians. Bahr bans NBC or somebody important from the convention. They threatened him with jail. He says screw it. So that won us -- And then, Jeff's guy broke his arm. Who is that? A CWA local leader got in a fight in the picket line. Jake somebody. Anyway, his arm was in a cast. Not Sal, but somebody like Sal, but skinnier than Sal.

Jeff [01:01:28] Oh, Joe Minnow.

George [01:01:29] Joe Minow. Is that the name?

Jeff [01:01:31] Yeah, yeah. He got arrested. A federal marshal arrested him.

George [01:01:36] Maybe he didn't get his arm broken. Anyway, he was pivotal to this kind of bonding between NABET and their identification that this guy put himself on the line for us. That was a bonding moment. Once NABET and the other one -- ITU [International Typographical Union] were in -- The Newspaper Guild came.

George [01:02:00] In terms of transformation of the union -- Let's go back. First, in this current era we lost the fact that as the telephone part of the union changed, the union executive board and the union's governance structure over telephone changed. We used to have many more districts. We consolidated them. We used to have many more national directors for different segments of the telephone industry: sales, which was equipment installation of central office equipment, as well as regional companies. That got merged as the industry changed. So we had lots of structural changes within the telephone side of the union. Then the telephone union itself and the growth of the public sector. How the public sector is going to be represented became a flashpoint political issue. Then, we have these other segments coming in that are merging with us. But what we lost in this current era [is] the fact that we had lots of changes in the governance structure. So to make change in the governance structure today, this is not exactly your question, but it bugs me. You get people whose self-interest is, you know, I like being a vice president of CWA. Who cares that I only have 3000

members left? I'm not going to make structural changes. And our [merger] agreements are such that it made it difficult to make those changes.

George [01:03:21] So, one [important change] was telephone communications -- conduit and content -- [and the] merging all these other unions. There's a story being told about that. The public sector grows in importance. Then the telephone side gets decimated, particularly recently in terms of layoffs and downsizing. Then, but throughout, we're able to unite or try to unite around [the fact that we're] a mobilizing union, it's a fighting union, it's a democratic union. The different occupations that we represent are similar in one side or another. We were the biggest service rep women's union in America at one point. And around the globe, telephone workers and public workers were in the same union because of the same ethos of service, same ethos of monopoly, same lack of competition. So there was a reason why we and telephone people were alike, or we in the hospital sector were alike.

Debbie [01:04:36] I want to stick with this for a little bit. Other unions were not able to transform themselves. CWA did in a very challenging environment which you've talked about, union decline in general, technology, regulation, going from being one industry to many industries. You can pause and think about it. What factors led to CWA being able to transform itself and survive?

George [01:05:26] [pause] It's a good question. A) we recognized the change and we tried to negotiate the change and stay in front of the change on the communication side. And then B) the communication side was really the backbone of the union for many years. There was a second backbone, which was the public worker. They were counterbalanced in terms of the economics of the union, so when there were all these tax fights and the public sector was being decimated, telephone was not. So there was a kind of financial solid footing to it. And the other unions that came in, there was a consolidation that took place that wasn't full. I think other unions, and it'd be an interesting thing to look at other unions-- The Steelworkers consolidate a bunch of unions who were manufacturing unions and their name now is like ten miles long with all the different elements of who they [merged with]. They would have faced similar problems, but they were not as well balanced in some ways. The other thing would be the Auto Workers who had enormous panache, also under Elizabeth Bunn, trying to organize university workers to have a substantial presence in the public sector. I think auto declined that much more rapidly so the --- The lack of economic ability for employers to take all of telephone offshore or the threat of that I think provided us with the ability to stand and fight and to maintain something. We fought all these battles about fissioning, subcontracting. We kept the eye on [that], it was part of the employment security we're entitled to jobs of the future mentality of telephone. Our eyes were on that, my dad worked here, I worked here, my kids should work. There was a thing that I think helped us look at the future in terms of trying to preserve that. But everybody would have been trying to preserve it. But we were grounded enough in the different elements and what quite consciously comes out of the PTTI [Postal Telephone Telegraph International, precursor to Union Network International, UNI Global Union.] period is we need different financial footings for the union. That was a conscious kind of a conscious view of how to plan for the future.