

Communications Workers of America Oral History Project

Interviewee: Rechenbach, Jeff

Interviewer: John McKerley

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John: This is John McKerley, the CWA Oral History Project interviewer, and who am I with?

Jeff: I'm Jeff Rechenbach, retired secretary-treasurer of CWA. We're in Cleveland, Ohio on August the 14th, 2023.

John: Jeff, as we talked off the recorder, these are biographical interviews, and so we always start at the beginning with when and where you were born.

Jeff: I was born July 18th, 1953 in Cleveland, [00:00:30] Ohio.

John: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about your parents? Who are they?

Jeff: My father was an only child of a German couple that immigrated here while my grandfather came before the turn of the 20th century. My grandmother came quite a bit after that. There was a big difference in age. They were actually married on Ellis Island so she could get into [00:01:00] the [United] States, and he grew up speaking only German until he started school. My mother was raised by an Irish mother and a Swedish-Norwegian father paper hanger, and my fraternal grandfather worked on knitting machines, and that's what caused him to emigrate here. The machines [00:01:30] were built in Germany, and so he saw an opportunity to come here and service those knitting machines here in the [United] States, and that's what brought him across the ocean. Anyway, my mother in contrast to my father as an only child, my mother was one of 13, so a large family there. That large extended family obviously had an influence on us growing up. It was a big part of who we were.

John: Okay. [00:02:00] Yeah, from what I know of early 20th century Ohio, that seems a pretty consistent in the sense of these different strains of European immigrants. It's interesting following the work internationally. That's really interesting.

Jeff: We see work being shifted overseas today. The work from Germany was being shifted to what I'm guessing was the land of opportunity, but maybe a low-wage haven as well. I'm not sure what the salary structures were of Germany versus the United States at that point in time, but he certainly saw it as a land of opportunity and a way to take his skills and make something bigger out of 'em. He lived in Jersey City for [00:03:00] a number of years, and then there was a knitting company in Cleveland that recruited him. So he moved to Cleveland, and we never really knew the story about how he and my grandmother came together. He did travel back to Germany and visit once in the early 20th century, but she didn't come to the [United] States until late in the 1920s, probably [00:03:30] 1927 or so, and then married, as I mentioned, my grandfather on Ellis Island in order for her to be able to immigrate into the country, which I guess was a fairly common thing back then. Weddings being held out there. They moved to Cleveland and as

is common with the immigrant experience here, some other German cousins and relatives wound up coming along. You've got the beachhead and now the rest of the family makes the journey. [00:04:00] He eventually built a double home in Cleveland, and my father's cousin lived upstairs with her husband. The neighbors were all German. I mean, it was just this little German enclave within the city.

Jeff: My father growing up, as I mentioned, an only child, was friends with two other German boys who were also only children, and they became our de facto uncles, even [00:04:30] though there was no blood relation there between the two of them. But part of that stream that came across, well, we're here. Hey, this is a great place. Come here, this neighborhood. We can take care of you here. We can help you get started. So that sort of consistently went through that neighborhood until obviously the outbreak of the Second World War, which then changed the dynamic of German immigration to the [United] States.

John: What neighborhood is that?

Jeff: [00:05:00] The street was actually West130th. I don't know that there's actually a neighborhood tagged to [it], it has a bunch of neighborhoods throughout Cleveland that have got these tags. It's sort of on the edge of what they would call West Park, but it just happened to be that little block of four or five blocks where most of the people living there were German immigrants. Across the street were Germans, [00:05:30] and West 130th is a busy street in Cleveland, and the blocks behind them were predominantly German families as well. It was interesting. When my grandfather died many years ago, my grandmother died many years after him, and my father inherited their house at the time, and then when he became ill [00:06:00] and no longer was able to, he had renters in there and could no longer maintain it. Our oldest daughter and her husband bought the house from my father.

Jeff: Looking at the deed, there were very specific exclusions of Negroes, Italians, Jews, which I had no idea that these things had even existed in writing, saying that you could not sell your house to anybody of color. [00:06:30] I don't know if Irish were listed, I think it was Negroes, Jews and Italians I think were the three that were on there. I wished I'd saved that original document, but it got processed when they put the new deed and obviously removed all the restrictions that were on there. That was a little bit of a history lesson for me about my background and the privileged [00:07:00] life that I led at that point in time. They weren't wealthy. This was a very modest home. In fact, my daughter sold it about 10 years ago now. I guess she bought it from my father for \$55,000 and she sold it for \$28,000, just not even 10 years ago, probably five or six years ago, I guess now.

John: Wow. That [00:07:30] is modest. Yeah.

Jeff: Yeah.

John: I want to dig into it just a little bit though. I mean, so paper hanging, skilled machinist, it sounds like, of a sort. Was there a union background that they carried with them? Were there associations like Turner's or things like that that they were connected to around here that were important to them?

Jeff: To my knowledge, and I'm [00:08:00] probably not correct about this, but I think I was the first person to carry a union card out of my family, my extended family of uncles and aunts. I can't be sure, but I don't know of them being in a single trade that I would necessarily identify. There was one of my grandfather's sons who also went into the paper hanging business, but to my knowledge, my [00:08:30] grandfather didn't have a union card. I don't believe my uncle Pat did either. And the paper hanging business was interesting. I mean, as a teenager, well, even 12 years-old, my grandfather would have me go with him on these paper hanging jobs, and I had to run the steamer and steam off the old paper, which was miserable, miserable job, nothing like they do today with the scaling and spraying [00:09:00] and peeling it off. It was just a nasty, nasty job, and I hated it, but you just did it. That was part of my, I guess, who I was in terms of a work ethic. You're just sort of, okay, not the greatest job in the world, but he was probably giving me \$5 or something to do a day's work, and I thought that was pretty great.

John: At that time you were a helper.

Jeff: Yeah, [00:09:30] right. Exactly. Exactly.

John: Yeah.

Jeff: And [it] wasn't every day, don't get me wrong, I was out there five days a week. It was like if he had a big job and was getting behind on it, then he would press some of the grandkids into service and have us come out. Me particularly, I was the tallest of all the grandkids, and so gave me a distinct disadvantage to be on that roll call to come on out and help out.

John: [00:10:00] You grew up here in the fifties, so something held your parents here, presumably then?

Jeff: Yeah. My father was originally a milkman and then got a job at, I want to make sure the progression, I guess he went right from that to -- There [00:10:30] was a military, not a base plant, the Cadillac tank plant. They made tanks here right out by the airport and he got a job out there working at the Cadillac Tank Plant, interesting that [they] called it Cadillac Tank Plant. The Cadillac was the government contractor to build these tanks. And it was interesting, every year we didn't go every year, but every year they would have a family open house

[00:11:00] at a factory that makes tanks. Talking about the military-industrial complex. It was just kind of mind boggling. But for a nine-year-old boy, who grows up post-World War II playing army with all of his buddies, it just was a very cool thing to do. There was a moat in the middle of the factory.

Jeff: The walls were, I've read about this since, were like eight-foot thick, and the ceiling was six-foot [00:11:30] thick because it was considered to be a bombing target at some point. So it was hardened beyond belief, but they had a moat right in the middle of the factory that they would drive the tanks through to make sure they would float. Then there was a track in the back of the building outside that they would run the tanks. So they would always have a tank go up these hills and run. And for a nine year-old or a 10-year-old boy, that was just the coolest thing ever. I thought, my dad is helping to make these, [00:12:00] but all the time he was doing that, he was also going to night school and continued to pursue a degree, and he got a degree in engineering from Fenn College and wound up in sort of an administrative job out there.

Jeff: But then Cadillac lost the contract. Chrysler got the contract, so they laid-off a bunch of administrative folks and he wound up in a series of different jobs after that. That [00:12:30] gave me a sense of how transient work is and how at the mercy of employers you are. He would go for a couple of months at a time, and one time even a year by this point, he's in his fifties and trying to find another job in your fifties was a real challenge, but he stayed at it and found something else and was able to ultimately have a decent retirement, albeit short, they didn't live very [00:13:00] long after they retired. But from there he worked at Bonnie Bell, which was a cosmetics place. He worked at Hunt Chemical. They made toner for copiers and for White motors. They made trucks, semi-trucks.

Jeff: Each one of those ultimately got closed as he went through his progression there. Hunt Chemical, [00:13:30] I think is still in business. That's the job he ultimately retired from, but White motors closed their factory here. Bonnie Bell closed their facility here, and so he was the victim, and Cadillac got the contract two years after Chrysler, but he had already gotten another job and was worried about where that was going to be. In fact, rightfully so. That was probably just after the end of the Vietnam War. And so wondering what is a munitions factory [00:14:00] going to look like five years from now, particularly one in the north when everything was heading south at that point.

John: Yeah. It's quite fascinating just how much his personal story maps onto the history of the region in many ways, isn't it?

Jeff: Yeah, it really does. It's that exact timeframe all this took place. So he was certainly a victim of that time. But again, [00:14:30] I never saw my father call in sick for work. He was in every day. We played softball together for a church

softball team, and he tore his Achilles tendon playing softball. At the time, I think I was 17 or 18, and my father was in his late thirties. I'm thinking, what is that old man doing playing ball? As it turns out, I played softball [00:15:00] into my fifties, but just thinking, why is he doing this? But he was in the hospital for a couple of days, came home with a cast that went up to his hip, which was his Achilles, but I guess they've got to immobilize the entire leg and then insisted on going back to work. We had to drive him to work to get in, and that's the work ethic [00:15:30] that he had. I presumed from my grandfather. My grandfather was already retired when I first came on the scene, or at least when my first consciousness of the relationship there came onto my brain. And so to see that I guess was, without realizing it, made quite an impression on me in the way that I approached work going forward.

John: [00:16:00] It's also interesting that you say that you were still the first person in your knowledge to hold a union card, that the UAW, for example, hadn't been able to crack open that safe.

Jeff: Well, the UAW did ultimately get the factory, but my father very quickly on wound up in a clerical position, and then ultimately when he did get his degree, he wound up in a little higher spot within the organization. So it was interesting. [00:16:30] At the tank plant, there's this huge facility which now is like a convention facility. They've turned it into the boat shows, car shows that kind of a thing are held out there, and it's right by the airport, I mean literally on the airport grounds. But then there's a low-slung building on the side of it, the administrative building, and he, for as long as I was aware, was doing clerical work in there, which the UAW [00:17:00] typically didn't organize back in those days. I think they're much more aggressive about it now. I think we all are in terms of trying to recognize that a worker's a worker. I mean, it isn't just a bunch of white guys that need to be organized, it's everybody to make a difference in the way that wealth is distributed.

John: Yeah, my first introduction to that was discovering to my surprise that the Packinghouse Workers, well, by that time it was the UFCW [00:17:30] local in the seventies and eighties in this small town in Iowa, had organized the clerical workers as part of their unit. That was my first introduction to that. Let's turn to you then. You've entered the story bits and pieces here. You're growing up in Cleveland, here in the fifties and the sixties. Let's talk a little bit about, and you've talked a little bit about the neighborhood too, but let's [00:18:00] sort of put you in a neighborhood context and in an educational context, what schools did you go to? What was that like?

Jeff: We lived two blocks over from my grandparents for the first five years of my life. Then when I was ready to start school, my parents decided they wanted to move to the suburbs. I wound up in Parma, Ohio, which is a suburb just south of

Cleveland. Without realizing it, it was part of the white flight, I guess that was coming [00:18:30] out of the cities. But when you're five years-old, it's the trauma of moving. You're moving, which I don't remember being particularly traumatized by it at that point. I guess when you're five, it really isn't a big deal. And so I started school. I went to school in the Parma school system. Parma also had a huge UAW plant, actually two UAW plants out there. There was a [00:19:00] Chevy plant, and the other plant was just off outside, but there was a Fisher Body Ford engine plant, which was just a little bit west of Parma, but a lot of auto worker families were out there. Literally I could walk to the UAW hall cutting through the little wooded area behind our neighborhood.

John: Hold on, let's just stop one [00:19:30] second. Okay, we're back after changing the battery. Okay. Okay.

Jeff: So I grew up, I mean literally it was a five-minute walk to the newly constructed UAW hall. In fact, my friends and I watched it being built because the Chevy plant was then just across the street. So the neighborhood that we were in was a lot of auto workers. A lot of my friends' fathers were working at the Chevy plant. [00:20:00] So that had an impression on me that just, wow, that's a cool job building cars. I didn't look at it as this was something beneath me. This was like, wow, can you imagine being able to actually watch a car get built every day? I thought that was just a really cool thing. So I grew up with that sort of background there. We moved from [00:20:30] that house to another house in Parma, a little further out there. They were building a new development. First time we owned a brand new house, which it was kind of cool, but by this time I had friends back in the old neighborhood so it was a little bit of a trauma to move out of one home to another.

Jeff: I spent a good [00:21:00] part of my -- from fourth grade through junior high school, living in this other neighborhood in Parma, which was more of a mix. I mean, it was further out from the auto plants, so I can't say there was any common thread that ran through the neighborhood. My father at that point was more of an administrative job. I drive through it now and it doesn't look upscale [00:21:30] at all, but it was certainly upscale from what we had. The little ranch home that we had originally in Parma, this was I think three or four bedrooms there. I have four siblings, a brother and three sisters.

Jeff: I'm trying to think what the sleeping arrangements were, but I think I had my own room, which I thought was pretty cool. I can't remember where everybody else is sleeping at this point in my life. [00:22:00] But the friendships that I had there, I still maintain some of those friendships. I'm chairman of the board of a small credit union here in town, and my best friend from junior high school I have on the board. So those relationships were important as well. And again, I was

oblivious to the fact that here I was living in this all white [00:22:30] neighborhood.

Jeff: This is just where we were and who we were. And you just didn't do the math. My father was a Republican, but a Teddy Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower Republican. He voted for Nixon. I remember very vividly. I was only seven years-old. My mother was Catholic, my father was Lutheran. [00:23:00] My mother had these Irish roots to her. So she was a big Kennedy supporter. I must've been seven years-old [at the time of the] Kennedy Nixon election, and she had me make a Kennedy for President sign and march around the living room with it just to get into my father's skin, I guess. I don't know. I thought it was a lot of fun. Wow, this is great. And then when Kennedy won, I felt like, wow, [00:23:30] I've got this connection with this guy somehow. In fact, it was just my mother trying to get my father's goat a little bit, I guess. But any rate, I suppose that helped shape my politics at some level without even knowing it at the time.

Jeff: I remember the night that the president was assassinated. My father and I were supposed to go see Cliff Robertson [00:24:00] playing John F. Kennedy and PT 109 at the Parma Theater. Of course they had closed school early. We all went home early. The first male teacher I had, Mr. Tanner was my third grade teacher. I remember him coming into the room crying that the president had been killed. I went home that night, just couldn't understand it. [00:24:30] I mean, it just didn't make sense. I'm 10 years-old and how does something like this happen? My mother was just in tears coming home. My father was pretty stoic about it, but you could tell he was shaken.

Jeff: I insisted that we still go see the movie and my father said, it's not going to play. They're not showing the movie. Everything's closed. I made him take me. I was 10 years-old. [00:25:00] You can do a lot when you're 10 years-old with just having a little tantrum or fit, I guess. I don't know. I don't remember that part of it. But I do remember my father getting me in the car, driving to the Parma Theater to see that it was closed and I couldn't go see PT 109 that night. It's such an impact about governance and who we were, what our nation was, and [00:25:30] that sort of this idyllic view of the world was shattered at that point for a 10-year-old boy. So that had a pretty dramatic impact on the way that I looked at politics and government from that point forward, I suppose.

Jeff: I certainly thought more about it than I ever had before. Beyond carrying the Kennedy sign around my living room at seven [00:26:00] years-old, I hadn't given it a second thought. It was just, okay, oh, and I got a big kick out of, there was a guy, Vaughn Meader, who did a great Kennedy impression, and there was a record of him, all these jokes, and my mother had it and would play it, and he would do these jokes about Caroline and John John. So it sort of humanized [00:26:30] this guy at a different level. And so then boom, this happens. At that point in my life,



nobody that I knew closely had died. All my grandparents were still alive. My parents had some friends who had a spouse die very suddenly and tragically, but I didn't know them. So no impact [00:27:00] on me. I mean, I remember my mother saying, but Aunt Eleanor died. She really isn't my aunt and never really saw her, so didn't give it a second thought. So there was that sort of traumatizing event that maybe, again, think more about politics and government. Then of course, you roll right into a few years later the Vietnam War and everything that came out with that.

Jeff: [00:27:30] By that time, I cared very deeply about politics and government and got engaged at a high school level with anti-war protests and as much as a high schooler without wheels can do. So moved again this time from [00:28:00] Parma to Lakewood, another suburb just west of Cleveland, an inner-ring suburb. My grandfather had died and Lakewood was close to where my grandmother was living. So it made it [00:28:30] more convenient to stay sort of, this is on my father's side, stay close to my grandmother and sort of help manage her life going forward. So right at the start of high school, we moved to Lakewood and it was sort of a jarring experience.

Jeff: Parma, which was sort of roughly [00:29:00] equivalent size to Lakewood, had five junior high schools and three high schools. Lakewood had one high school for the entire city. So it was like walking onto a college campus. I graduated in a class of almost 1400. The school itself probably had, I'm guessing, 5,000 students in it at the time, bigger than a lot of colleges. So that was sort of jarring. [00:29:30] And I at that point, really became much more of an introvert. So that sort of pushed me further into that shell because here I'm coming into, they had three junior high schools in Lakewood, so everybody had their own little clique starting high school together. And here's the new kid coming in that came from nowhere. I felt a little isolated by [00:30:00] it all, and I think that got me, drove me more into reading and books.

Jeff: I just constantly had another book with me, something to read. Then as things escalated with the Vietnam War, I became more and more engaged in protesting against that. [00:30:30] I think maybe there was some social aspect of that as well. So I made some friends through that, some other teenagers that were opposed to the war. And the Saturday and Sunday before the killings at Kent State, me and a group of my friends went to Kent. It was like the closest place where anything was happening. [00:31:00] One of them had a car, was able to get their parents' car, and we drove down to Kent and joined the protests there. I think it was that Saturday night that the ROTC building was burned down.

Jeff: We don't, to this day know, I choose to believe it wasn't anybody that was protesting. The building was decrepit, and I still believe that they torched it themselves to get [00:31:30] a new building. But at any rate, we headed back

down there the next day on Sunday, but were turned away. The Kent police turned us back, so we couldn't come in. And then, I don't know what day of the week the killings were at Kent, but three or four days later, the students there were open firearm by the Guardsmen. Again, thinking about, wow, it could have just [00:32:00] as easily been over the weekend. I don't want to overdramatize it. We didn't feel ever at danger. The Guard wasn't on premise. The Guard didn't come in until the ROTC building was burnt down. So we never felt in danger. It was our right to protest and we were protesting, and we'd certainly seen different instances where protests got out a little ugly and cops would come in and start beating people. We never felt [00:32:30] that. We never felt that there was any of this sort of tension there. I don't think the tension came until the armed guardsmen showed up on.

Jeff: So again, another sort of seminal moment of trying to figure out just exactly what this structure is here in this country. How does this all operate? Do we have the right to protest? [00:33:00] Is there that ability to go out and peacefully protest and wondering where this was ultimately going to go?

John: Can I just ask a follow up? Sure. I'm curious, what was driving that interest in anti-war politics? I mean, there's the early connection to Kennedy, the Democratic Party is of course very much still [00:33:30] in control while this is going on. Was this a rift with your parents? What was the backstory that was pushing you in that direction?

Jeff: My parents never really talked much about politics or governance at all with us. That was, other than the emotion demonstrated in the Kennedy assassination, I didn't get that sense from them at all. But I think it was reading [00:34:00] that sort of got me there. But one book in particular, *Johnny Got His Gun* and it just had this impact. I was able for that moment, sort of put myself in that place of somebody being sent to fight in a war that they didn't think was right or they didn't think war was right at all. And I'd also read, [00:34:30] there was some book about the Green Berets, and I read that and that sort of glorified war. Then to read this, *Johnny Got His Gun* just was boom. It was, wait a second. This isn't all just showing up and we're the good guys and everything's black and white. It isn't black and white out there. There's plenty [00:35:00] of gray. And the black comes from people pushing in another direction. I think that was really more of where my genesis of interest in the anti-war movement came from.

John: Well, you're 20 in [19]73, so were you thinking to yourself about what you were going to do?

Jeff: Yeah, so I mean, literally [00:35:30] I got my draft notice. You had to register for selective service. I filled out the form and said that I was a conscientious objector, and it asked, is it for religious purposes? No, I don't believe in it. I sent that in and

got called down and was treated pretty miserably. But at [00:36:00] the time, we had just gone to the lottery and my lottery number was high enough that I didn't get called. I think I was like 128 or something. I think it went to a hundred that first year. It was close.

Jeff: Through high school. I had two jobs. My mother worked at an Italian restaurant in Lakewood. I worked there on Friday and Saturday nights making pizzas. [00:36:30] Then during the week, I worked at a movie theater as an usher wearing a tuxedo jacket and a bow tie, which no theaters have ushers anymore. But my best friend at that time was a guy who also worked at the theater. He lived in a different city, so we didn't go to school together, but we became friends working at the movie theater and [00:37:00] all the romances with candystand girls. We were both in the same lottery together. He got number three, so he knew he was going, so he was going to enlist, and he tried to convince me to enlist. I said, no, I'm against this war. He says, well, if you enlist, you get a better chance of going somewhere safe. I said, no, I'm going to take my chances. I'm going to ride this one out. Ironically, [00:37:30] the government sent him ultimately to law school, and he worked in the JAG for a number of years, and now is some big lawyer out in San Francisco out of his decision to enlist. Obviously that is not the path of most young men in the early seventies going into the military. So no, I resisted [00:38:00] that and said, no, I'm going to take my chances. And that paid off.

Jeff: But I still remember going down there for some, it wasn't induction, but it was maybe because I put conscientious objector on there. They were questioning me about it, and they said, well, you're eligible. And I'm 17 at the time. You had to register before your 18th birthday. [00:38:30] And that turned out literally the luck of the draw. But also thinking about that system again, just sort of had this impact on me of the luck of the draw. I mean, seriously. And you begin to sort of put all this together as you're growing up. [00:39:00] By that point, I'm realizing I had this sort of privileged middle-class growing up.

Jeff: I never had to worry about getting a meal. I had good schools that I was able to go to good public schools. Busing was a big issue in the city of Cleveland at the time, and there were all kinds of fights about busing, [00:39:30] and it really sort of gave me this notion of how just by accident of birth, here I am in this position that so many others would give everything for. So it gave me a real appreciation of that and had an impact that I think has gone well beyond that. [00:40:00] But we had, as I mentioned, there were five kids in the family, and as I graduated or was coming up to graduate high school, my father had just lost his job at Cadillac. Chrysler had just taken over the plant, so he was unemployed. My dreams of going to college were sort of dashed at that point.

Jeff: And so my mother said, the guy across the street, he works at the phone company, that's a great job. [00:40:30] You should go to the phone company and apply at the

phone company. So I said alright. It will make my mother happy. I go apply at the phone company. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I knew I wanted to go to college, but that path seemed shut off at the moment. So I thought, all right, well, I'll go to the phone company and I'll get a job. I'll save up some money and then maybe I can figure out going to college. So I go down, apply at the phone company. [00:41:00] I'm still in high school. I mean literally, this is before I've graduated. I'm 17 years-old, applied to the phone company, passed the tests.

Jeff: They call me up, we'd like to offer you a job. Great. So I go down, this is literally on the Monday that we are graduating from high school. We're graduating at six o'clock that night. They tell me to come down to the employment office that Monday morning. I go [00:41:30] down to the employment office that Monday morning and they say, we're hiring you as a lineman. We're going to send you out to Lee Road Garage. We'd like you to go down there. I had taken my father to work that morning, or no, he wasn't working. So I was able to take the car. I had driven down there and said, we want you to go out to the Lee Road garage and meet your foreman, and then starting next week, you'll start climbing school [00:42:00] to learn to climb telephone poles. Wasn't thrilled. I can't stand heights, so I was not a happy guy about the job they offered me, but it's a job and maybe I'll get over it.

Jeff: So I go out to the garage to meet my new foreman, and he looks at what they've sent to him and looks at me. He says, "What the fuck am I supposed to do with you?" "I don't [00:42:30] know, sir. I have no idea what you're supposed to do with me. They sent me out here to meet you." He tells me: "I got no use for you. Go back downtown. Tell them I don't need you." Okay, great. So I'm thinking I had, don't want to say long hair, but it touched my collar at the time. And I had friends that had much longer hair ponytail, particularly running with a bunch of anti-war guys. I was probably the most conservative haircut of all of them still. But I had this sort of curly hair that was, it wasn't like a 'fro [Afro] kind of a thing, but just unruly.

Jeff: I'm thinking to myself, I'm going to go home tonight and I'm going to tell my parents I lost this job. My mother's going to say, I told you to get a haircut and my father's going to say, what did you smart-off to the guy or something? I don't know what to do. I go back downtown. [00:43:30] I said, I just came back. I'm here in the employment office talking to the woman in the employment office. He says, he's got no use for me. I didn't say she's, no, no, no, I'm sorry. My fault, my mistake. You're only 17 years-old. You can't drive a company vehicle yet. So that's why he said that. She says, I've got another job for you. It'll be just fine. And I wound up in the payphone [00:44:00] department. Every payphone in any city, as I say payphone, I realize somebody reading this right now may wonder what a payphone is, but every payphone in the city had two keys to it. One key was a

common key. They call it a church key, and that would just unlock one part of the phone. And the second one was a unique key for every single phone in the city. Each phone has its own [00:44:30] unique key.

Jeff: They put me in the key room, which was responsible for maintaining all of these keys. Every day they had about 15 guys that would go out and collect on these payphones. My job was based on the usage of those phones, was to put a route together of phones that they were going to collect. For example, the payphones at the airport [00:45:00] would fill up every day. So you always had what they would call an airport run, a guy that would just go through the airport and collect all of the payphones within the airport.

Jeff: There was that, but then there was all these others where it was sporadic. I mean, this bar might have a phone that needs to get collected once a week. This one over here might need every two weeks. There was a whole system to do this. They had key punch cards. They would give me a deck of key punch cards, [00:45:30] and I would have to then find the keys for these in the sequence that they gave them to me and put them on a long lock shackle, like a padlock, but with an extended arm up and just put those keys in the right sequence on that shackle and do that for 15 different guys every day. And there was one other guy in the room who kind of showed me the ropes and showed me how to do this and you get pretty good at it.

Jeff: After a while, there's these big [00:46:00] cabinets with all the keys in them, and there's a whole thing to make it work. So, okay, I'm going to be in this office and that'll be fine. I guess it seemed like an odd job, but unbeknownst to me, the reason that the job came open was just that Friday before I was supposed to start working in [00:46:30] this building, you had the key punch operation. You had a clerical operation. You had what they called the key room, but it's like this open office space, so there's no dividers between any of this. But then right next to the key room with a glass wall was the guy who was in charge of the whole operation. And then behind him was this glass wall. On the other side of that glass wall were three counting machines where the money from the payphones would get counted [00:47:00] and the money came in.

Jeff: There was a can, you would put in the bottom of the payphone, the money would drop into the can, and when you pulled it out, it would snap a lock so you couldn't get in to lock. And then there was a wax seal on it, and you had to break the wax seal, pop the can open and pour the can of money into these counting machines. Then they would get counted and the money would fall into these money bags, and Brinks would come [00:47:30] once a day and pick up the money bags and take them to, I don't know, the Federal Reserve or the bank. I'm not sure where they went. I probably knew at the time, don't know now.

Jeff: So what had happened, the three guys who ran what they called the counting room had developed this system where they would wear cowboy boots to work [00:48:00] and there was a supervisor sitting behind them. So we had the regional manager for this whole operation sitting in front of them in a glass wall and behind them you had their direct supervisor. but when somebody wasn't looking, they would just take a handful of coins, drop them in their boots. At break, they would go out to their cars, empty out their boots. At lunch, they'd go out to their cars, empty out their boots. Somehow they got caught, I don't know. I don't know what the story was there, but [00:48:30] they all three got fired. And so they took a couple of the guys, the outside collectors, moved them inside to do, we all had the same title. The guys that went out to collect the money, the guys that were in the key room, and it was all guys and the guys in the counting room all were at the same job title, same pay rate, everything. So they moved a couple of guys in. They took one of the guys out of the key room, put him back in there, and then [00:49:00] I was one of the people that came in and filled in the key room job.

Jeff: That was to just digress for a minute about that, because again, that reminded me of something, saying they were all males because it was all males. The collector job, that was the actual title, a collector, had exactly the same pay scale as a lineman [00:49:30] or installer or repairmen. It was a five-year progression schedule except for the collectors which for them it stopped after two years. So if we all started out, I think it started out at \$65 a week, and after two years I would be up to maybe \$75 a week. An installer or repairman would continue [00:50:00] on getting wage increases up until five years. I think when I started there, they topped out at about \$90 a week, but I would get topped at 75. The notion was they didn't want anybody getting too familiar with the operation with all this money. So they wanted you transferring out. They wanted you to go to another job, an installer, a repairman. So this became this feeding ground for those jobs. So I presume that was going to be my, well, I didn't presume [00:50:30] anything. I was living in the moment at the time, had no aspirations to be an installer repairman. I just had aspirations to get a paycheck and ultimately be able to go to college.

John: Well, it's interesting because my presumption immediately was that it had something to do with the skill levels, and instead it's this desire --

Jeff: They didn't want you to get familiar with the operation because there was just so many exposures to cash that they [00:51:00] just felt if you got too familiar [it] would be a problem. Well, at the same time, the federal government, the EEOC had levied these charges against the phone companies at AT&T, the mother company at the time, but each of the independent companies. So literally within, I want to say it seems like a very short period of time, but within six months of my coming on the job, [00:51:30] the EEOC said that -- Oh, I left out something. If

you were in a collector position and wanted to transfer to an installer repairman, you had a leg up that was considered like experience or something, whatever, as opposed to the traditional female jobs, they didn't get that same credit for having done that job. So the EEOC [00:52:00] steps in and says, look, these jobs that are traditionally male, you've got to open these up, and so you've got to correct things like this where you just give that automatic don't pass go, just go ahead of this new job. So that got taken away rightfully so. I mean, looking back in hindsight, again, it was wrong beyond words.

Jeff: And so as things developed, [00:52:30] you saw then more women coming to the jobs. Obviously payphones went by the boards a long, long time ago, but that was throughout the phone company, all of these little structures that gave the men's job, traditional men's job titles, this leg up in terms of transfers, in terms of mobility within the company versus an operator or a service representative or a clerical job, you [00:53:00] were in your classification and that was where you were going to live or die. I mean, there was no opportunity for moving up or out other than the occasional promotion to a supervisor position. But there was no opportunity to go to a higher skill, a higher, I shouldn't say skillset, because I think those are skilled jobs too, to a higher paying job at any one of those other titles.

Jeff: [00:53:30] I should go back and look. I think the consent decree was signed with the EEOC in 1972. So I hired in June of 1971 in the payphone department, and the president of the local union happened to be a guy that worked in this department as well [00:54:00] but he was in a different section. He came up to me, asked me to sign a union card. We didn't have an agency shop at the time, and he said, I'd like you to join the union. I knew a little about unions. I mean, I had read a number of books over the years, so something of an affinity to them. I got the notion of collective action. And so I said, sure, absolutely. And I signed [00:54:30] the card on the spot. It didn't take a lot of convincing, and I think the fact that it didn't take a lot of convincing, he said, well, that's great. Would you be interested in being a steward?

Jeff: I had no idea what a steward is. I get a general concept of what unions are but I had no clue what a steward is. But I remember my father telling me, he says, when you go down to work there, if they ask you to do something, just do it. Somebody asks [00:55:00] you to help pitch in here. Just do it. So that sort of resonated in my head. This guy was asking me to be a steward. Yeah, okay, I'll be a steward. Great. Now, he told me, here's what'll be involved. You help with grievances, this kind of thing. And he says, by the way, we're getting ready to go on strike. I say, really? Well, 17-year-old me thinks well strike. It's pretty cool anti-war stuff. I'm down with this. This is [00:55:30] going to be great.

Jeff: And so I'm now the steward for this group. I think the other steward must've been in the counting room that got fired. So that's my presumption. I might've known it back then, but I certainly can't recall it now. So I'm in this job, I'm the steward. We're going on strike. As it happened in high school, [00:56:00] the girl I was dating worked at the movie theater where I was working, and we went to prom together. Her father, six months earlier had gotten transferred from Cleveland to St. Louis, Missouri. [00:56:30] So her parents moved to St. Louis. She came and lived with an aunt until she finished high school and then moved to St. Louis. So my 17-year-old testosterone brain says, strike, maybe I'll get a chance to visit. Because the way the contract was at the phone company, you didn't get vacation until you'd been there a year. Okay, I'm not going to get vacation.

Jeff: [00:57:00] I went to the Local, they're putting together the picket duty schedules, I didn't know exactly when we were going to go on strike, but as it turns out, we went on strike in July. So I'd only been there literally less than a month. When we go on strike, he's putting together the picket assignments and he says, we've got this operation in downtown Cleveland, and the Local I was in was predominantly female, was 90% female. Really the only [00:57:30] men in the Local were in the payphone department, and that's just a little section. He says, we've got this 24 hour operation over on Prospect Avenue, right in downtown, Prospect's a little iffy area, he says, but we've got to have a picket out there 24 hours a day.

Jeff: I went to him, I said, look, if I do double picket duty the first week, can I take a few days off the next week? [00:58:00] And he says, yeah, if you'll do this, if you'll run the overnight shifts from literally four in the afternoon until eight the next morning, so what is that, 16 hours for a 17-year-old kid? That's fine. You can have a couple days off and take off for a couple days. Okay, great. So we go on strike on a Saturday night. I'm on the picket line at midnight. We go on strike at midnight. [00:58:30] I'm there midnight till eight the next day.

Jeff: So anyway, I'm there at four in the afternoon till eight the next morning. Same thing all week long till Friday. Of course, all these people coming [00:59:00] and going in this building think that I'm the most union guy in the world. I, and I consider myself pretty pro-union, but my motivations were not pure here. I mean, I wanted to go see my girlfriend who had back at the end of May moved to St. Louis, Missouri. So I booked myself an airplane ticket, first time I'd ever been on an airplane for Saturday morning to fly to St. Louis, Missouri. [00:59:30] I was going to spend the weekend there and be back on Tuesday morning, I think it was. I had two or three days that I was going to be able to be off picket duty. So literally Friday night, I'm on the four to 8:00 AM my flight leaves at 9:30, I get a ride out to the airport.

Jeff: I get on the plane. I had taken my bag with me to picket duty, put it inside the building. [01:00:00] It wasn't like any confrontational thing. Get on the airplane,



fly to St. Louis land, and my girlfriend is there way before any security at the airports. You're able to meet people at the gates with her father, and her father has the biggest grin I've ever seen on a man's face in my life. They had settled the strike while I was in the air. So literally I had to get [01:00:30] on a plane that afternoon and fly back home. He took me to lunch. We had lunch together, put me on a four o'clock flight, was back in Cleveland by six o'clock that evening, 6:30 that evening, got home. My mother said, I thought you were going to St. Louis. Oh, the strike got settled. I had to come back.

Jeff: Never saw or heard from that girl again. That was the end of that romance. Clearly, her father was not particularly keen [01:01:00] on me. I think it started when the first time I came to pick her up, I had my father's car, we had a Pontiac Tempest station wagon, and it had a shifter on the dash and it had just reverse, neutral, drive and low, but there's no park, so there's no parking gear per se. So you had to use [01:01:30] the parking brake. Well, the parking brake didn't work. So we used to carry a brick under the seat of the car and put the brick behind the front wheel depending what direction you were leaning. If it was a little downhill, you put it in front of the wheel, or put it behind the wheel, and just [01:02:00] to lock the car in place.

Jeff: I tried to do it surreptitiously, but he caught me, her father doing this, and pretty sure he didn't like me from that point on, and he wasn't crazy about his daughter seeing me. So anyway, that was the end of romance. But coming back from it, all these people think I'm Joe Union, because for the duration of the strike, I am the guy that they saw when they got there in the morning and [01:02:30] when they left at the end of the day, that was, I was the one constant on that picket line every single day. So they thought, wow, this is really, he really gets it. He's really all in on this stuff. So I mean, it was just, like I said, just a quirk. I hate to expose my roots that way, but that's literally how one my reputation got generated.

John: That's a great story. I do have [01:03:00] a couple of follow-up questions though, and maybe you don't remember because of the nature of the story, but what was the issues that had led to the strike in the first place?

Jeff: It was principally wages. It was a time when inflation was really going wild and literally what generated the settlement was that Saturday night President [01:03:30] [Richard] Nixon announced his wage and price controls. If you had signed a contract before that, you were okay, your contract was honored. So the powers that be in DC with AT&T and CWA had gotten a tip-off that he was going to make this announcement. So they settled the contract and we got for the first [01:04:00] time cost-of-living escalators built into our contract, which turned out to be incredibly valuable over the next 10 years as inflation just continued to run for probably almost a good 10 year period, maybe a little longer. Everything blurs after a while, but certainly all during the seventies, inflation was an issue.

Jeff: So that motivated the settlement, and that was [01:04:30] the end of the strike. I had no idea at the time, but later on talking to others, well, here's the backstory on all of that. They were ready to make this announcement. We had gotten tipped off. I can't imagine the company didn't get tipped-off about it as well, but whatever. It was a different business at the time as well. So if you look at [01:05:00] the telephone industry, it was a regulated business. For example, here in Ohio, we had a Public Utilities Commission that would set the rates for the phone company, and I talk about an easy business to run. It was just cost plus from the phone company's perspective. If we had this cost, if I'm allowed to make 9% over the cost of my business, if the cost of my business goes up, so [01:05:30] does my profit dollar wise, not percentage wise, but dollar wise does too. So I don't want to say it was easy to negotiate contracts in that kind of environment, but because the employer obviously still wants control, but it definitely made it less contentious than when things got all deregulated and divestiture. I'm sure we'll talk about that later.

Jeff: [01:06:00] So that was really the issue. And I remember, I think our campaign that year was Boycott Small Potatoes because somebody had made some comment about big potatoes or something. It didn't make sense to me, but it was like, okay, and we didn't want a small settlement, was the gist of it. We deserved something that was more substantial and that [01:06:30] took care of where inflation was going. That contract was considered to be a huge victory. I mean, it was just a big deal. And again, I was at some personal level, the beneficiary of that. I had nothing to do with the contract. I mean just in terms of negotiating or anything else, obviously as part of the strike. Everybody at some level has some ownership of the ultimate outcome.

Jeff: So the legend sort of grew out of that, I suppose.

John: Well, one more sort of little question, but you had just been there a little while. Was there no probationary period?

Jeff: Yeah, there was a probationary period. I think it was six months. I never even thought twice about it because in my brain I wasn't going to be here that long. I was going to be out of this job. I [would] save some money and move on from there. So I turned 18 that summer and started earning money, and [01:08:30] in what I can say is only a very short-sighted decision, I decided I needed to buy a car. So I bought a car, and of course that sort of waylaid the savings, pushed that back. I was riding my bike to work. It was about a 12 mile ride from Lakewood to my office. Then I would take the bus in the winter just because you couldn't ride a bike in Cleveland in the winter. I decided I needed a car. So I [01:09:00] bought a car and that sort of waylaid the savings and put that on hold. At any rate, I continued on my job at the phone company. I made some good friends there. And so started to get comfortable. I saw the people around me [01:09:30] were raising

families on the wages we were getting, and I thought, well, yeah, maybe this is okay, maybe I can get by with this. I was still living at home at the time, so I was really flush.

Jeff: Like I said, I think that probably went from 65 to \$72 I think with that contract. And a year out from [01:10:00] that I was over \$80 probably with inflation, everything else. And 85, which today sounds like nothing but was okay. I mean, I was paying 29 cents for gas and the first car I bought was \$500. So I was doing okay and I was enjoying the union work as well. [01:10:30] It was interesting work. Part of me at one point thought, well maybe if you do go to college, you can go to law school and be a lawyer. The union stuff was kind of like that. I thought you're representing workers when they've got an issue. I can remember one of the first grievances that I handled was for a guy who was accused of stealing money from the payphones, one [01:11:00] of the collectors who would go out and collect on the payphones.

Jeff: What the phone company would do is they would take, once the box was full that the money dropped into, it would just back up into the chute. So when you would pull the box out on a phone like that, the extra money would just drop down. You were supposed to put that in a little bag [01:11:30] and attach that to that box. A lot of guys would pocket some of it. So the phone company would mark some of that money. They would know which ones were full, which ones were going to be full. They would send a security detail out and they would put some marked money in there and see if that marked money would actually show up in those bags. And They'd be waiting when the trucks came in at the end of the day to see and then count [01:12:00] or look for the marked quarter that had not come down the chute.

Jeff: And this guy was apparently, on a couple of occasions, the marked money didn't show up on a route that he had. So he gets called in by a supervisor and they have security there. He asks for a steward. He comes out to get me and I tell him, look, [01:12:30] I haven't done a lot of this, but let's just listen to what they have to say. Don't agree to anything, don't admit to anything. We will sort it out after the fact and we'll go from there, but just play it cool at this point. Don't offer any information to them. Okay, alright, I'll do that. So we go in there and they must have grilled him for an hour and a half. And [01:13:00] finally I said, look, I don't think we're going anywhere. Andy clearly hasn't done what you're saying he's done. I don't know what happened to that money.

Jeff: Maybe it came into the chute that somebody got in their coin return. Who knows what happened to it? If you're going to charge, if you're going to do something with him, then let's do it. I said, all right, well, we're not done with this, but you can go ahead and go back to work. So we literally [01:13:30] we're walking out of the room and the security guy says to Andy, he says, are you telling me you've

never even taken a dime out of there for a cup of coffee? Andy turns to him, says, well, everybody does that. Well sit back down.

Jeff: As it turns out, what he was doing was not taking the marked money so much. He had this whole system that he finally confessed to. He [01:14:00] would take this little plastic clip that you would close the coin box with and he would break the seal, take out a handful of coins, leave plenty in there, but take out a nice handful of coins, close the lid back up, take the seal, and he would super glue it back together. It was imperceptible. He confesses to the whole thing. But [01:15:00] Andy gets fired and we take his grievance up and he's done. If you're stealing, that's it. I mean, that's like the cardinals rule in there. You can beat almost any other wrap, but if you've taken money from them, you're cooked. So that was one of my very first major experiences with the grievance procedure and representing a fellow worker.

Jeff: [01:15:30] It was a lesson to me as well, just thinking about how do you approach these things? What exactly is the right way to find that balance between right and wrong, between resentment of your coworkers and representation of the guy that's getting singled out? Some of Andy's coworkers were happy to see him go because they [01:16:00] had security following every one of them, trying to figure out what was going on, because the revenue had gone down. At any rate, I represented them up through the top-level of the procedure. And in Ohio, in Ohio Bell, because each phone company, even though they were owned by AT&T, a wholly-owned subsidiary as they used [01:16:30] to describe it, had its own contract. So there was a separate contract for CWA in Ohio for the Ohio Bell contract, and there was another one for Michigan Bell and so on. Southern Bell had multiple states, but in some states it was just one state. Some states it was multiple states. So in the Ohio, the contract was unique among all of the phone company contracts. We did not have arbitration. We also didn't have a no-strike clause so we [01:17:00] could go on strike to adjust our grievances. I can talk more about that as we go forward.

John: Just to interrupt, is this a situation of a national contract with these regional agreements?

Jeff: No. It was not a national contract. The structure for it was negotiated nationally, but then there'd be a separate bargaining table at all these other companies. You would have a separate contract that used that framework [01:17:30] for wages, healthcare, pensions, the financial issues. But all the other stuff was up to being determined here in this region or this state, depending on how that contract was constructed or how that company, not the contract, how the company was constructed. So we were the only ones, we were unique in that regard, sort of an old school traditional labor thing that we don't like it, [01:18:00] we're out and we're going to go. We had on regular basis little wildcat strikes that would pop up

to adjust grievances, you had to be judicious about it and you had to make sure you got the majority of the folks behind you.

Jeff: So clearly the workers here aren't going to go on strike for Andy stealing money, but Bill getting fired for his attendance, [01:18:30] that's a different issue. Baby was sick, whatever the reason was. So that created a different dynamic in Ohio than existed in other places. But it also I think made us better union members as well. It really did sort of have that kind of impact of pushing both the company and the union closer to agreement because you just didn't want to have to deal with that potential [01:19:00] confrontation. I think it was arbitration in many ways. Like agency shop sort of changed the labor dynamic in ways that aren't always positive. I mean there's obviously some positives about arbitration, there's some positives about agency shop, but there are the downsides of both of those as well. Arbitration is just, it's easy just to push it off to somebody else, let them decide, we don't have to compromise here, we don't have to come together. [01:19:30] It'll be a third party that'll decide. And with agency shop, you don't have to go out and convince workers to become union members. You just have to collect dues and somehow at some level, keep them happy.

John: Well, did you ever find out, was this wrinkle the consequence of say some other union tradition or influence, say that was picked up from some industrial contract [01:20:00] or something like that, or a building trades contract that got folded in because of the historical accident of who was creating that original structure in Ohio? Do you have any idea?

Jeff: CWA was formed out of an amalgamation of a bunch of independent telephone unions. There was the Ohio Federation of Telephone workers. I think because Ohio was such a hotbed for the labor movement, you've got the steel [01:20:30] mills, you've got the auto industry. It really is sort of a hub of industrial unionism. I think there was sort of a greater awareness of constructing things that way. I have to believe, I mean that was the condition well before I came on the scene. But when they merged in, when CWA merged these different companies or unions together, [01:21:00] they tried to continue to honor those dynamics. There was pressure on us every round of negotiation. There was some pressure from our members too to say, Hey, we want arbitration. I want an independent third party to decide my case. I want to have my day in court kind of a thing.

Jeff: So for the longest time we struggled to maintain that. It wasn't until the breakup of the Bell system [in 1984] that [01:21:30] it finally fell apart and we were thrown into one contract then with four other states that had arbitration as a result for their contracts we wound up [with arbitration in the merged contract]. Ironically, a lot of our members thought that was a great victory that we got arbitration in our contract. I never saw it as that. I saw it as just like I said, pushing the parties a little further apart, just giving them this buffer that prevented

them from, not prevented them, but dissuaded [01:22:00] them from coming together and agreeing on compromise versus confrontation.

John: How are you doing? Do you want to take a break? No, I'm good.

Jeff: Okay. Yeah,

John: I'm good. Well, I want to sort of loop back around before we get too deeply into this. I think this workspace is fascinating to me. It feels like there's a little bit of the post office, there's a little bit of a casino in this.

Jeff: I never thought of it like that, but that's a good analogy.

John: [01:22:30] But in particular, the key system and the structure of it, that's what really reminds me of having done interviews with postal workers because, and I'm thinking here again about the 1970 strike and one of the postal strike and the way that they were able to be successful in that was that these throwing schemes that they had, that you can't just bring in kids off the street, army kids off the street and just get them to do this. And I would presume that once you've learned this system, it's not something [01:23:00] that's easy to just throw somebody into that room and have it work.

Jeff: I don't want to overplay it. The real work was done by the people that were managing the data. So these clerical women were really the ones who were managing this whole process because they're the ones that came up with this box has to be collected [01:23:30] every three days. This one has to be collected every five days. They would key punch that information in based on whatever. There was a key punch card reader for every box that came in and that information would then get slotted off. So they would put it together and then they would actually assemble those key punch cards in a route. So my work, although I was paid more for it, [01:24:00] was just the manual part of pulling the keys out and making sure I got 'em in the right sequence. Well, no offense, a chimp could have done that, but because it was a job that men had, it got paid more.

Jeff: That was really more important in my estimation, to the overall running of this operation than the job that I had of simply pulling keys or for that matter, going out and collecting the money. Again, it was the same thing. You gave [01:24:30] them a route. They would have a card, the card that I would work from that said the address and it was sequenced. So you did this one and then four blocks down here was this one and six blocks over here was this one. They would complain about the route sometimes, but they were pretty good and they were able to collect usually 70 payphones a day. In an eight-hour day you're doing well, [01:25:00] probably a dozen an hour at least. When you think about the whole process driving the truck, getting out, taking the box out, you're working pretty

fast. That's a tribute to the background work that got done more than it was the work that those guys did. The work that I did, or for that matter, the guys in the counting room did. Ours was more manual rote type things. The brain work was with these clerical workers that figured all of this out. [01:25:30] To be fair, the computer did a lot of it too, the key punch cards and all that sort of thing. But they would help to figure out what these routes ought to be.

John: So that makes me wonder, where did this clerical work that was being done, where did it fit within the hierarchy of available women's jobs within the shop?

Jeff: Okay, so in the Local that I had, well [01:26:00] in the Cleveland area, there were sort of three echelons of predominantly female positions. The operator was probably the lowest-paid, then the clerical, and then service representatives. They were the people that dealt with customers on the telephone, I want a new phone, I need to move this, I need that. Those were sort of the three levels and they sort of came in the middle [01:26:30] and it was just sort of this ubiquitous, okay, these are clerical jobs, whether you worked in the data processing center, whether you worked on the Yellow Pages, whether you were in the payphone department, whether you were a secretary to one of the bosses. It was just a clerical job and paid at that sort of mid-range schedule, all three of which were paid lower than the male jobs, the male-dominated jobs installer, repairman, linemen, [01:27:00] all of those jobs.

Jeff: Now, there was a hierarchy between those jobs as well as two levels up there, but that was fairly meaningless. I mean, in terms of the overall maybe \$20 a week at some point dividing the two, obviously the gap got wider as you put in percentage wage increases over the years, a gap on all these got wider, which was an issue for us in negotiating [01:27:30] over the years as well, everybody wanted a percentage increase, but all the percentage wage increases did was exacerbate this gap in these jobs. So you would try and say, okay, everybody's going to get 3%, but we're going to give this title an extra \$50 or this title an extra \$20. And of course that would always raise the ire of others, I should think about this percentage is fair, blah, blah, that type of thing. So [01:28:00] we had to contend with that on a fairly regular basis.

Jeff: And again, I go back to this notion of what kind of union members we were creating because we had an agency shop and the churn in this industry was fairly constant, particularly in those clerical jobs. Even in the seventies, it was a time women were becoming a larger part of the labor [01:28:30] force. A woman would get engaged, get married first baby, they didn't come back and maybe they took a part-time job somewhere else, but they didn't come back to a full-time job. So we had a lot of that sort of thing happening. There's a lot of churn in all of those titles.

John: Well, and was that because shockingly late into the seventies when pregnancy gets [01:29:00] covered, was this policy that you get pregnant, then you're asked to leave?

Jeff: Yeah. It wasn't until, I want to say the mid- to late-seventies that the phone company had a policy on maternity leave and that you would be guaranteed a job coming back. You could get maternity leave, unpaid maternity leave. Wow, what a great, thank you very much for letting me go away and having this baby and not paying me. [01:29:30] But to make it worse, they weren't going to guarantee that your job would be there when you got back. In fact, in most instances it wasn't because they hired somebody else and they put that person in that job. It wasn't until, I've got to believe it was late-seventies, so we had a contract in [19]71, another one in [19]74, it may have been [19]77 before we got [01:30:00] a guarantee of a job upon return. Interestingly though, if you were drafted and went away for two years, you got your job back no matter what, which was by law.

Jeff: But it was again, just a different way of looking at this whole construct of men versus women in the workforce [01:30:30] and I think part of what molded me was obviously, again, by accident of not being old enough to drive a company truck winding up in a Local that was predominantly female, but also my mother worked part-time jobs almost the entire time we were growing up, and she had been a key punch operator at night, and she had worked at this Italian restaurant, which is how I got [01:31:00] the job making pizzas.

Jeff: So it was just sort of seeing that and seeing how hard that work was and not getting anywhere near the pay that a guy would get on any kind of job. So dropping into a Local like that I think really cast that in stone for me. And look, there really is this huge difference. [01:31:30] It wasn't lost on me that ultimately becoming elected president of that Local was in a Local that was predominantly female, but it had had male Local presidents for umpteen years. Now there would have women as the secretary or the treasurer even as the vice-president at some point. But it really [01:32:00] [was] so contradictory to the way that I thought things should be and gave me a certain level of guilt that here I was in this role that I should have no right to. I could talk a little bit about how that happened if we want to do that now or want to do that at another time.

John: Well, I want to stay here for a bit, but before, I want to do a little definitional thing just to make sure that again, readers [01:32:30] or listeners understand what we're talking about when we talk about agency shops. So let's put that definition here so they don't have to go find that.

Jeff: Yeah, I'm sorry. Agency shop just says that as a condition of employment, you have to tender union dues to the union. You don't have to join the union, but you do have to pay dues. I mean, after all, the union is going to negotiate on your



behalf for wages, for healthcare, benefits, for pensions. The union is obligated to represent those workers in a grievance or arbitration procedure, [01:33:00] even if they don't become members of the union, but just pay the dues. So I think people got lazy as a result and didn't sign people up to, you had to sign your deduction card for union dues, but the employment office gave you that, so you really had almost no contact when first hired in, somebody had to approach me. The Local president approached me [01:33:30] and asked me to join the union, and as a condition of that, I had to agree that I would pay dues to that union, whatever it was, it was probably a buck and a half, two bucks.

Jeff: I mean, if you're making \$65, I guess that's something, but fairly nominal still. So you agreed to do that, but going down the line, if you walk in the door and you've already signed your card [01:34:00] saying that dues are going to be deducted, people get lazy and you just don't work that and make sure that people understand what it means to be part of an organization that is trying to distribute the wealth within this corporation. I think that really has more than anything accelerated the decline of the labor movement. I shouldn't say more than anything. Obviously the [de-]industrialization [01:34:30] of the country has done that as well, but it has certainly changed the view of unions among the general public. It does feel good that now people are sort of, there's been a resurgence of value placed on being in a union, but we've got a long way to go with it still.

Jeff: I think when I first went to work at the phone company in 1971, [01:35:00] the percentage of the workforce nationally that was in a union was approaching 30%. I mean, it had already started a little bit of a decline, I think, but was pretty close to a third of the workforce. By the time I retired, it was down to 10%. So not much of a hallmark for my career in terms of doing the job of reversing that trend, but that's what agency shop is. It says that you're obligated to pay these dues [01:35:30] whether or not you sign a union card or not. Some Locals were better than others about getting people to sign union cards and become members, and particularly in the Locals where there was low churn. So the Local that I was a part of, it was a big churn. I mean, again, primarily it was female jobs.

Jeff: As I mentioned, there was no guarantee of a job when you came back from maternity leave, and so you had the workforce turning over on a regular basis and you had to [01:36:00] go out and talk to people in order to get them to join the union. I think at the time that I started working in the phone company, but in the Local that I was in, Local 4309, about 55% of the Local was paying dues and in the union, and in order to maintain that level, you had to be signing [01:36:30] cards on a regular basis.

Jeff: Again, I'm getting a little ahead of, but when I was Local president, we had to sign a hundred people a month just to stay static. That's how big the churn was within those titles at the phone company, and that was work, but it was good

work. I mean, it forced you to be out there and talking to people, and it sort of reinforced your values as you went out and talked to them [01:37:00] and they understood what it meant. You didn't always agree, you didn't get everybody, but you got a lot and I think it made a difference. Then in 1974, we got agency shop and now everybody's paying dues, and that whole dynamic just changed. A lot of them believed they were union members because they were paying dues. They didn't [01:37:30] know, they weren't a member of the union, they just knew they were paying dues. They saw it come out of their paycheck every two weeks. So yeah, that's a long answer to agency shop, but it gives you a perspective of what my view of it is.

John: Well, that's really helpful and I want to come back to both the sort of internal organizing piece and your own leadership journey piece, but I want to ask a structural one first too. So my [01:38:00] experience with this comes mostly out of what I know about the Packinghouse Workers, and in their case, they developed ultimately an a, b, c seniority system because of the demands of women workers. There was a male seniority system, a female seniority system, and then a kind of mixed seniority system. Did you have a similar kind of system during this early period?

Jeff: I wouldn't characterize [01:38:30] the A, B, C necessarily, but yes, there definitely was. I mean, there was this male-dominated job titles, seniority, and so I would get, as somebody in the payphone department, I would get credit as though I was working on one of these lineman jobs or installer repair jobs so that when I would transfer in there, I was two years ahead of everybody else. On the other hand, in the clerical jobs, in the operator jobs and the service rep[resentative] [01:39:00] jobs, there was none of that. They got no credit for that. They had to start from scratch. This is until the EEOC[Equal Employment Opportunity Commission] stepped in, made a Consent Decree with AT&T, applied across the board and changed that. But it didn't change overnight. I mean, it did change. The thing that changed more than anything was the hiring practices of the phone company.

Jeff: I mean, there was some transfer. You did have some women transferring [into] traditionally male jobs, but [01:39:30] they weren't hiring into those traditional female jobs for this kind of desire to work on outside jobs. So you didn't get a lot of that movement, but it did open that movement up. All of a sudden they had some dispatch jobs or repair clerk jobs where there was, again, particularly [01:40:00] women who would interact with repairmen and who knew way more about repairing telephones or installation than me coming from the payphone department would who had been blocked essentially by guys like me that just automatically progressed into these jobs and it opened up the door for them to make that leap. But the service reps and some of the other clerical jobs really

didn't have that interest in going out there. They were [01:40:30] interested in the money for sure, but you sort of went, oh, do I want to go out there?

Jeff: And there were some anecdotal stories about the first woman working in a garage and how they were treated. I think that that intimidation factor existed out there as well. What's it going to be like? How am I going to be treated out there? Do I want to put myself through that? That influenced some of their decision-making about whether to go. But [01:41:00] off the street, if you're hiring from off the street and here's the job we've got for you, okay, put me in it. And while again, I wasn't a president of a Local that represented those jobs, you could feel that tension that they had to work through when they came on the job. At some level, we did have some of it. [01:41:30] You had the guys that collected the [coins from the ]phones, but then there was another separate title that were the installers and repairmen of the payphones. They were co-located with us. They had a separate garage, but the same building, and I remember the first woman that got one of those jobs and some of the snide remarks, and she doesn't know what she's doing, that type of thing. Well, none of us knew [what] we were doing when we started, who's kidding who.

Jeff: She [01:42:00] suffered some verbal abuse, psychological abuse, I guess more than anything over being the first. You overcome that after a couple of years, but it takes time, and particularly when you're shaking up the whole system like that, I really admire those women who took that on and were the first in their titles in [01:42:30] any industry, but obviously the one that I'm most remember with the telecommunications industry, and just think about how challenging that had to be for them and what fortitude it must've taken for them to put up with that day in and day out for some extended period of time.

John: Well, and just to sort of peg us in time, do you have a clear memory of approximately what year that was happening, these women [01:43:00] moving into these?

Jeff: So again, I think the consent decree was signed in [19]72, and so probably within a few months after that, they sort of sorted things out, figured out what was going on. All through the seventies there would be the first female collector, there would be the first installer, there would be the first female lineman, sort of a history of firsts, and the phone company did an okay job [01:43:30] of celebrating that, but at some level, that also put a little more of a target on their back as well. I mean, oh, here's Susie, the first female installer at the Lee Road garage. And having her get that because they had a little phone company newsletter and having her get that attention sent a nice message to other women, but to the guys, it was like, wait a minute. I've been doing this job for [01:44:00] 20 years, and Susie doesn't know red from green in wiring, so it had to be really tough for them. And I find myself thinking, would I have put up with that with what a lot of them had to put

up with. I admire them so much for dealing with that. Again, I was in a different situation. I mean, easy for me to say I was in a Local that was 80% [01:44:30] female, and so I had to be hypersensitive to the needs of a female workforce. That certainly also heightened my sensitivity to those outside the Local, but I was in a different universe than they were.

John: Did that mean that you were, because sometimes in these cases you've got, what this means is that [01:45:00] people vote with their feet in a sense, and so you have the male workers who feel themselves aggrieved dropping out of the union. As a response to this, was that what was happening and you were needing to walk this line between being proactive and supportive of this process while at the same time trying to keep [01:45:30] these men who claim to be aggrieved within the union?

Jeff: Again, I was in a different position, so I was representing most of these women, and so I was in a position of trying to be their advocate and challenging at different times when, for example, a woman who was in my Local jurisdiction was trying to transfer out and they put on some unnecessary [01:46:00] job requirement. Oh, you have to be able to carry 50 pounds up a ladder in order to qualify for this job. Wait a minute, who's carrying 50 pounds up this ladder for this job? Is that a one-off situation? It may happen once in a great while. Yeah, maybe. But that isn't a disqualifier. It shouldn't be a disqualifier.

Jeff: From that perspective, some of my colleagues who would've been in these male-dominated Locals that were [01:46:30] all installers or repairman linemen, central office technicians, they may have had a different challenge of trying to work with a workforce that was now being integrated with women in a way that they hadn't had to deal with in the, and well, I shouldn't say in the past because I'm sure in the past there were also issues with integration as well. I mean, [01:47:00] in the workforce that I came into, it already seemed fairly integrated, but I can imagine there was also that timeframe, particularly coming through the sixties where that was an issue for them as well. And most of the local leadership that I dealt with when I became Local president had been Local officers for many years already. And so I'm sure they worked [01:47:30] through that as well.

John: Well, actually that's interesting. Let's talk about that for a second because was this a matter of then of say, black women having to travel from predominantly black neighborhoods to a work site that was in a predominantly white neighborhood, having to enter into this white space and all the things that would come with it?

Jeff: Yeah. Oh, there were definitely examples [01:48:00] of that I think. Well, the first installer repairman in the payphone department was a black woman in an all-white male garage. She had some unique challenge beyond just her sex. I don't think there were black collectors at the time, and there were blacks in the counting

room as well, or I [01:48:30] black in the counting room and there was a black supervisor also. But I think that garage, again, they weren't part of my Local, so I didn't represent them. I knew them because of the proximity, but I think she might've been in addition to the first woman in the garage, the first African-American in the garage. I could be wrong about that. I wouldn't want to hold [01:49:00] fast to that. It's funny, I sometimes talk to some of my old colleagues from the payphone department and they'll say, oh, you remember this guy or that woman, and it can jog my memory, but I collectively can't remember who was who in there.

John: [01:49:30] Like I say, my touchstone still continues to be in many ways the Letter Carriers and Postal Workers that I've worked with. And so I'm thinking here, did anyone to your memory ever run into problems of black workers working, trying to collect in spaces that were predominantly white or convert again, sort of like where [01:50:00] these payphones are in or in spaces that are going to be have particular kinds of valences, right? And so I'm really curious about if you put these things in space, what does it mean?

Jeff: Yeah, so we would put the routes together for these payphone collections, but then it was the supervisors of the payphone department that would actually assign who would go where. [01:50:30] Cleveland was a fairly segregated town, as many were. So the east side was integrated. The east side of Cleveland was predominantly African-American, the city of East Cleveland, almost exclusively African-American by the mid-seventies, late seventies. The African-American collectors would be assigned to east side routes [01:51:00] that seemed more tolerant at the time, more progressive than on the west side of town where you still had these hardcore white enclaves that yeah, I mean that would've been the supervisors that would've been sort of cognizant of that and not putting somebody in a spot where they would be in a tough way.

Jeff: I had another job later [01:51:30] on that required me to go out to different places where we either had a payphone or wanted to put a payphone and I was assigned to the east side, and I remember going into some in an exclusively black neighborhood into a bar and to talk to the owner of the bar about installing a payphone, not a hard sell, [01:52:00] but it was, and thinking to myself, wow, what's it feel like for a black guy to walk into a bar in the West Park area of Cleveland that's predominantly white and what that person's got to be feeling like? I don't want to equate it with where I was because it's a different feeling [01:52:30] but just how you might've felt out of place.

Jeff: The first time I really experienced sort of an awakening of not white privilege, but just my experience versus an African-American's experience. [01:53:00] When I was first elected Local president, my vice-president was an African-American female and a very vibrant person, just full of energy and just excitement. I mean

just a vivacious sort of personality. She invited me to a house party at her place, and it was this apartment [01:53:30] on the near east side of Cleveland, and I show up, and of course I'm the only white person in the place. And it was just like, wow, I sort of get it now. And what she must have faced as an African-American woman coming into a company that traditionally had been dominated by whites [01:54:00] or winding up in a setting where it's all whites. And I mean, I had to consciously try to make myself comfortable.

Jeff: I'm 6/6", so it's hard to hide and it's even harder to hide as a 6/6" white guy in [01:54:30] an apartment with about 25, 30 people an apartment, not an house, an apartment, and feel like every eye in the place was on you. So I said to mentally try and get myself to just go with the flow and just be as comfortable as I possibly could be. But coming off of that, it did give me a different sort of feeling about how to approach [01:55:00] this notion of how this industry had been constructed and the flaws that were in it and how do you account for that? And it was one of those moments where you just say, yeah, okay, I can still picture that apartment. There are a lot of things I can't remember. I mean a lot of things I can't remember, [01:55:30] but I can remember almost every moment of that evening from the music to the smells of it, the weed that was in the air.

Jeff: It was such an alien experience for me that it just sort of imprinted on me and got me to always try and think about. I think more than anything else what this [01:56:00] did was try to think about what the other person was experiencing and in many ways made me a better negotiator because I began to think about, all right, what are they thinking about? What is their motivation? What's making them think that they want this or need this? And is there another way to address that that both of us can come out on top? I really think that was sort of a seminal moment for me. I [01:56:30] didn't know it at the time. I mean, it's one of those things where you don't, but then going forward, I absolutely could look back and say that's where I began to think more about, not that I didn't think about other people before.

Jeff: I mean, I had been involved in the anti-war movement. I wasn't a soldier. Maybe you can make the argument that was selfish because I didn't want to go, [01:57:00] but it was at a different level. This took it from a global to a local perspective where I now was, okay, what makes that person tick? What makes them think what they're thinking and how can I try and make that work for both of us, make that work for all of us? So it was a big deal. It's funny, [01:57:30] that's like the first time I've actually thought about that moment in a long time. But I've been retired for 12 years, so I guess maybe you start to, that stuff starts to fall away a little bit. But it definitely made the difference, made a huge difference in my perspective of the world.

John: Okay. Well, I'm going to ask one more kind of structural question and then I want to turn to dig into this a little bit. [01:58:00] So I'm just curious, we haven't really nailed it down yet, I don't think, other than talking about of course, again, the sort structures of sexism that were involved, but what was driving were the mini drivers of this turnover that was shaping the workforce?

Jeff: I just think it was a different time. Women were just becoming part of the workforce. [01:58:30] I think the overall workforce, I don't know, the numbers was probably still 70/30 male-dominated. The notion was still at that point that a single income could sustain a family. I think inflation in the seventies changed that dynamic and pushed a lot more women into the workforce. Birth control had an impact on that as [01:59:00] well with women being able to control and abortion also. I just think that there was an overall sort of awareness for women to have this voice and this place within the workplace, and that doesn't mean it was flipping a switch and it wasn't. So you still had, [01:59:30] again, I think back to my own experience within this Local that was predominantly female, and there were still plenty of examples where you had the first kid and you didn't come back, even if you did have the right to come back the end of maternity leave.

Jeff: But that was changing. Divorce probably had a lot to do with the two. So there were a lot more single mothers out there that needed to have a job and to be in the workforce. I think of my [02:00:00] parents, to their generation divorce was sort of a scandal. I mean, it just didn't happen. That's not to say it didn't, but it just was scandalous almost, not so much going into the sixties and seventies. And so I think that when I think back to a lot of the women within my Local that rose up to leadership positions, [02:00:30] they were almost exclusively single moms who really understood the depth and the need to have a voice at work to protect their interests, to protect their wellbeing and their wages and the wellbeing of their children. I think they were really in a way that perhaps wasn't the case for the dual income households.

Jeff: [02:01:00] They really understood the value of being in a union and the protection that it gave them and the voice that it gave them at work. So it was a progression that when you're in the middle of it, you're in it. And it's one of those where as you step back from it later on in life, you sort of recognize more what was going on. [02:01:30] You can see that proverbial forest because you're no longer in the trees and appreciate it for what it was and recognize it for what it could have been and wasn't. Again, it's funny you say that because it does get me to think about all of the women in leadership positions that I worked with in the Local, and with very few exceptions, [02:02:00] they were single women, many of them single moms who were in a situation where this job was life and death for them. They needed this income, they needed this job, they needed security. They needed to know they weren't going to be fired on a whim.

John: And that's interesting too. I mean, I am just wondering where it stacks up in the sense of versus say, secretarial work or service work, [02:02:30] both of which would've been predominantly not unionized. It just seems that, again, especially in this unionized workplace, there would've been a degree of, it could have very likely have been towards the top of the tier of the jobs available to many of these women.

Jeff: Oh, I think so. I mean because exactly right. If you looked at the service economy, it was almost completely non-union. And going back to my own personal experience, [02:03:00] my mother saying, Hey, the guy across the street was the phone company. That's a good job. You can retire from that job. And that was the perception. You had those industries that were just like that. The telephone industry was certainly one of those. You've mentioned the post office, again, the perception was you got a job here, you had a job for life. If you didn't screw it up big time, you were going to be able to retire out of this job. I think that was the perception [02:03:30] in the telecommunications industry as well. Obviously things have changed radically with deregulation, but it was a regulated industry and people that went to work there had retirement parties and people that went to work at Maria's Roman room where my mother worked, didn't have retirement parties. You had that sense that these were good jobs, and while they may not have paid as much as their male counterparts [02:04:00] in the same industry, they were stable and they had good benefits. They had healthcare for them and their kids, and they had the prospect of a pension and the right to redress grievances should they have them. So that all added up as a good place to be.

John: So like I say, this is just an effort on my part to make sure I understand. So what's driving the turnover? [02:04:30] Is it that there are these really strict rules that are really hard to follow for a lot of people, and so people are getting fired or is it, and new people are constantly getting brought in.

Jeff: The jobs that they had were crappy jobs. I mean, they weren't great jobs. If you're a service representative, you are literally chained to your desk to a phone all day long. If you're an [02:05:00] operator, you're at that board all day long versus their counterparts who were out in the field going from place to place, stopping at the coffee shop to get a cup of coffee. Back in the seventies, we had something called Job Pressures Day [1979], and it was focused on those predominantly clerical, female-dominated jobs that the pressure was just [02:05:30] enormous on. They were closely supervised as opposed to, again, their male counterparts who were not as closely supervised. And so you just had that feeling it was a grind, and if at some point you just got burned out on it, you just walked away and you went to do something else.

Jeff: I remember when we started the Job Pressures Day [1979], some of [02:06:00] these guys would, from the other Locals would get all worked up about it. Well,



your job pressures you got, you're inside and air conditioning and heat and the summer, and oh man, it's great, and all this kind of stuff. But it was radically different. You were under close supervision. You had a boss who was there in many instances monitoring your calls, listening in on your calls to make sure you're not saying the wrong thing, just a completely different environment that they had, with completely different pressures. [02:06:30] I think that did affect the churn. You would get the job and you would do it for six months and listen, I can't do this the rest of my life. There's no way I'm going to be able to do this the rest of my life. I need to get out of here. So they would start looking and start doing something else. And you weren't being paid that great either. You saw these guys outside making 25, 30, 40% more than they're making, and you're thinking [to] yourself, this is insane. [02:07:00] I'm putting up with this nonsense in here. Like I said, outside of the building where they did the yellow pages, almost all exclusively female, largely African-American female for whatever reason, I'm not sure why that was in the Yellow Page operation.

Jeff: So on Job Pressures Day, I bought an old junk car [02:07:30] and drove it down and parked it right in front of the building. We had spray painted on the side, all kinds of job pressure slogans, and then got a sledgehammer. We let all the clerical workers come out at lunchtime and just take a swing at it just to let some of their frustration out on this car. And boy, they did a number on it. At the end of the day, I had to have it towed out of there. It wasn't going anywhere [02:08:00] right directly to the junk yard. I think I paid a hundred dollars for it. It barely ran as it was, but it was just emblematic of this frustration that existed. It wasn't a cure, obviously. It was an attempt to bring attention to it. So we got the newspapers down there and all the rest of it. So it did what it was intended to do. Did it change the trajectory? [02:08:30] I think over the course of time, we've changed the trajectory on that. Those jobs have changed. But again, then with deregulation, a lot of those jobs just went away.

Jeff: Not just deregulation, but automation as well. Computers playing a larger role in a lot of the processing that was manually done, whether it was key punch cards or just written records, [02:09:00] a service rep would have a file cabinet full of accounts that they were responsible for. Now it's all digitized. And frankly, who has wired phones anymore? I've worked at a phone company all my life and I no longer have a hardwired phone, so different world.

John: So on that note, let's take a little break and I'm going to change the battery [02:09:30] again and we will shift gears.

Jeff: Okay.

John: Okay. So we're back after a break. Well, so what I wanted to do now was to reframe a little bit of what we were talking about before. We've already had some

stories about your time as Local president, but we haven't actually gotten you there. And this question of how it is that you decided that that [02:10:00] was something that you wanted to pursue. And so I'm curious about how that happened. So if you could tell us that story of how you became Local president.

Jeff: The whole strike experience gave me sort of an appreciation of the union, but I really got a deeper appreciation in 1972 when CWA was one of the few unions [02:10:30] that endorsed George McGovern over Richard Nixon. As I mentioned earlier, I had been protesting against the war. And so the McGovern candidacy was something I liked. I went to a union meeting, and they had the staff rep for the Local, from the national union that had the Local as part of his assignment, [02:11:00] come to the meeting and talk about the election and why CWA was bucking basically the AFL-CIO's endorsement, I'm sorry, non-endorsement. They didn't endorse anybody in that race, which tacitly was an endorsement of Richard Nixon getting reelected. So again, it was like, wow, I am part of something that I really feel good about on a number of levels. And so [02:11:30] I talked with a staff rep after the membership meeting, and as an 18-year-old kid would, I was bragging about the fact that I'd been out working for McGovern and he said, oh, that's great. He made me feel like I was doing something great for the union.

Jeff: So like I said, for the rest of that summer, this was before the conventions, [02:12:00] McGovern become sort of the de facto nominee. By that point, whenever I had free time, I would be either going door-to-door or working in the McGovern office in Lakewood. I was living in Lakewood at the time and spending my time doing that in addition to still being steward in the Local. So come that fall, [02:12:30] so this is 1972, so I would've been 19 at that point. We have Local officer elections, and the guy that I worked with in the key room [said] oh, you should run for Local president. I said, Dave, we are in the smallest office. The Local was 2000 members or potential for 2000 members.

Jeff: Our office had about 35 people. It was the [02:13:00] smallest office in the Local. I said, Dave, I don't have a prayer of getting elected. No, no, no. You could. The Local president announced he wasn't going to run for reelection. The Local vice-president was going to run. And so my buddy Dave nominates me at the membership meeting to run for president. I get seconded by somebody who I think I probably knew from [02:13:30] my picket duty, and I could tell the Local vice-president was pretty angry that [he] was [not] going to be unopposed. So this was going to change the dynamic. I go up to him afterwards and I said, look, I really didn't -- So he just calls me every name in the book, mother fuck piece of shit. Oh. Oh, okay. I just back [02:14:00] off. I mean, if he'd have asked me the right way, I would've declined and said, look, take my name off the ballot. Oh, alright. So I didn't say anything. I just backed off and went back to work the next day. My buddy Dave, who I'm working with makes up a little Elect Jeff President

handwritten poster that he puts up on the bulletin board in our building. Nothing else, anywhere else.

Jeff: Two weeks before the election, [02:14:30] the person that was going to be running unopposed that I had derailed gets promoted to management. I'm now running unopposed as a 19-year-old for president of this potentially 2000 member Local. And of course I won. I was unopposed. [There was] immediate resentment from the other three officers, the vice-president, the secretary, the treasurer [02:15:00] that I'm this interloper. They obviously had this whole slate put together. And this was all three of females. I mentioned one of them earlier, June Haskins, the vice-president, and it took a while to sort of win them over. But I was excited about it because I felt good about the union movement. I was very worried about being over my head.

Jeff: [02:15:30] I had this naivete about the job that had, in hindsight, I'd been cognizant of, I wouldn't have agreed to it, but in some ways that actually helped me in the long run. Early on with the other three [02:16:00] officers, we would have our board meetings to talk about current issues. The local treasurer Lily Holt became one of my very best friends, we still go to lunch once a month. She came to me, African-American woman, and she came to the board and said she wanted to put together this bowling party for the Local. Yeah, okay, great. What do I know from anything? You will run that. Okay, great. We had contracted with the bowling [02:16:30] alley for a certain amount of money to rent out the alleys for that Friday night.

Jeff: And we put out a thing to get people to sign up. We didn't get many signups. We got like, I don't know, 20 people signed up. I am making up that number, but not enough to sustain whatever the nut was we had to make in order to make it at least break even. The two of us got in this huge argument [02:17:00] about it. Did we cancel it or did we go forward with it? I don't remember. I don't remember who won the argument. Who won the argument isn't important. The important thing was we sort of established ourselves as sort of dynamic forces within the Local. I was no longer just this kid. I was going to be somebody that had an opinion and had a view on [02:17:30] things and that they would have to work with. And so springing out of that, we developed this great bond and relationship that went on to sustain me. In fact, the local vice-president at some point then quit her job.

Jeff: She got involved with some drugs and just [got on a] downward spiral. [02:18:00] I asked the treasurer to become the Local vice-president, and she did. We became this pretty good team. And then again, going back to my naive perception of this job, I had some service representatives. These are the people that would answer the phones. I want a new phone. I want a phone moved. A business customer who would call in, I need a switchboard, [02:18:30] I need whatever. They would handle those calls. They had something called the in-depth program, which is

internal development. And what it meant was the phone company would hire these college graduates to management positions, but to give them a sense of what the phone company was, they would have them do these line jobs. So they had to work as a service rep for six months. [02:19:00] Our contract explicitly said, management can't do productive work. Well, that's clearly productive work, but it had been going on for 25 years. This program was well instituted and established within the union or within the company. A couple of these stewards come in, this is wrong. They're not supposed to do productive work. Just sitting and thinking about it. Yeah, that's a job. That's a job somebody else can have.

Jeff: [02:19:30] So I said, let's take that on. So we go through the grievance procedure. Of course, the grievance, oh, it's established past practice, but to my naive way of thinking, it says here, black and white, no productive work. Well, we have no arbitration. I like to think that the arbitrator would've fallen our side, but that wasn't an option. So at the end of the grievance process, we take it up to the top level. [02:20:00] The Local president didn't get to go to the top level that was handled by the national union. The national union rep, who was the person that talked about the McGovern campaign, comes back to me and says, they're not going to change. It's a lost cause. I said, it shouldn't be. It says right here, this is wrong. And I just couldn't shake that look. They agreed that they wouldn't do productive work.

Jeff: They're doing productive work. [02:20:30] Well, they were talking more about installation and repair and well, this is just [as] productive as those guys. It's the same thing. This is a job that somebody else would have if this supervisor manager wasn't doing the work. I got the concept. I mean, I understood it. You wanted to sort of round out these people. You wanted to give them experience before they moved on to wherever they were going to move. This is a big company, so they're hiring all the time, recruiting from college, all this. [02:21:00] So I said, well, I'm going to take the group out on strike. Well, he says, I would advise against that. That's not the right thing to do. And I said, well, I don't have a choice. So we took them out on strike and it was just the service rep groups. But over the course of the arc of this grievance, [I] had plenty of chances to talk to all of them [02:21:30] about it. And we got a great response. I mean, we shut down that operation. We shut down essentially the front door to the phone company at Ohio Bell, at least in northern Ohio. Now, some of the calls got redirected then down to southern Ohio, because in almost every city they had a service rep office. I mean, it was a different time, but the numbers were up in Cleveland. The big, big offices were up in Cleveland.

Jeff: So then the head of Labor [Relations] [02:22:00] for the company who I never met with, that was only the national union, and the head of the service rep department give me a call and said, look, we want to sit down and talk with you.

I'll talk. Yeah, let's talk about this. So I go to meet with them and they say, well, what's it going to do to stop this? I said, well, you got to stop the process. You got to stop. There's no way I can agree to have you doing productive work. [02:22:30] They said, well, there's no way to do it. I said, well, okay, if you want to have somebody sit next to them all day long while they do it, well you're talking about the conductor on the caboose. Well, you asked me how you want to do it.

Jeff: We can't agree to that. That's a fireman on a locomotive, a diesel locomotive. I said, well, you're the ones that want to get this done. You're the ones that want this training. [02:23:00] So we broke up and didn't get anywhere. Then I was thinking about it overnight, and I thought to myself, well, wait a minute. They listen in on our calls all day long. The supervisors are just monitoring. I said, look, why don't you just have these new managers sit and monitor our calls? But I've got one caveat. You've got to notify [02:23:30] them when they're being listened to. You've got to let the service rep know that they're being listened to. You can't do it surreptitiously. They caucused for a few hours and came back, and that's what we agreed to do. I ended the strike. We went back to work and, again, it was completely out of naivete. It was just one of those things where it just didn't seem right. But the fact that I didn't know any better that [02:24:00] this should have been an unwinnable fight, that we were able to get it done.

Jeff: So it gained me a lot of cache then with that service rep group and the rest of the locals. Well, they obviously talked about it then at union meetings [and it] became a big thing. That became my base within the union, the service rep group, although it was sort of an up and down [02:24:30] relationship over the years, but they really respected that and made a big difference. So again, it was because I was 19 and not 49 and didn't know better that we were able to get that done. We had another example of that a couple years later that actually expanded to other Locals joining [02:25:00] in the strike. Again, this is a contract with Ohio Bell. There's no arbitration. There's no other recourse for us, but if we don't agree with the policy, we can take them out on strike.

Jeff: They can get injunctions, which they regularly did and that sort of thing. So it wasn't without problems for sure. But in that same vein, it sort of got [02:25:30] the service reps thinking about, and some of the other clerical titles as well, but principally service representatives. The service rep offices were open every day from eight to five and Monday through Friday, no Saturdays and Sundays. That's it. So if you wanted to be a customer of the phone company, you called in on our time, not yours. [02:26:00] Unlike today, you call and you get somebody that'll answer from the Philippines at two in the morning.

Jeff: So it was strictly a nine to five operation. As you might imagine on Monday mornings, you were flooded with calls. Nine o'clock on Monday mornings. When you opened up those lines, it was boom, boom, boom, boom. You just were going

nonstop all morning long. Over the weekend, people would [02:26:30] make moving plans. They want extensions. They had this issue or that issue. They wanted to get resolved, so they would call in. The phone company had this practice of your morning breaks on Monday mornings where you started at eight o'clock. Your break began at 10 minutes after eight.

Jeff: I go, what's that a break from? The very notion of a break is that it gives you a break from something. Yo, we just did [02:27:00] this now two hours, and we took a break. We didn't take a break 10 minutes after we started. You need a break from the tedium. But because the call volumes were so high, they wanted everybody on the phone, they couldn't afford to have anybody. So every service rep had to take a break at 10 minutes after eight. So I go through the process again. We take the grievance procedure, we created this whole campaign around it, 8:10, never again. It was just [02:27:30] anything to sort of beat the war drums about it and get people locked in about it. As it happened, well, we go through that process and then we go out on strike.

Jeff: To be fair, I got pushed to have them go on strike. I was still trying to negotiate, trying to get something done, but the boiling point had hit. One of the things as leader, you got a sense when that pot's ready to boil over, [02:28:00] you better step in front and take leadership. So pushed by the rank-and-file. Pushed by the rank-and-file. I would've continued to try and work this out with the company, but they weren't having it. They were, let's go. We've had it with this. I mean, we'd been beating the war drums to be fair. So I had culpability in that as well. So we got on strike. As it happens, a couple of the offices were co-located with [02:28:30] some garages where installers and repairmen worked out of, or linemen worked out of, or were co-located with a central office.

Jeff: And so we set up picket lines outside of them. Well, of course they honored the picket lines, and if they honored the picket lines, then the other guys are going to honor the picket lines. We really had a strike all over northeast Ohio and we had a big rally down at Edgewater Park, which is a park right on Lake Erie, big open [02:29:00] space. We must have had, oh gosh, 2000 people at least down there, because that was the only space you could hold. Everyone's on strikes. They're all going to this meeting to find out what's going on. We really got people worked up and the national union intervenes, and they're trying to help get it resolved. Ultimately we wound up getting it resolved. I mean, they said, okay, no more 8:10 breaks, we'll span the breaks out through the morning. I mean, it was clear. It was just one of those things that just logically [02:29:30] didn't make sense. In the afternoon, you could have your break scheduled, whatever, because you got two breaks. You got one in the morning, one in the afternoon, 20 minute break. That was it. It was again, just tilting against this windmill that had been there forever and wound up coming out on top with it.

Jeff: But the job as Local president was challenging in other ways because [02:30:00] for as much as I enjoyed the work, I really didn't have the background and experience to put into play with a lot of things. So I mean, there was again, this notion of learning on the job that I was doing. I came to rely on a lot of other Local officers for advice and for some guidance on things. I got very good at networking with other folks to try and [02:30:30] bounce ideas off of them. They would tell me that I was way out in left field or here, you might want to do this instead or steer it that way. That networking was a big part of it. And we had a council of Locals in Cleveland. There were a number of Locals, so there was, well, I don't want to try and count them all right now, but [02:31:00] one, let's see, 4301, 4304, 4305, 4307, 4308, 4309, which is my Local. Then 4390, 4395, and then it was 4485d. So anyway, there's about eight or nine Locals within Greater Cleveland, most of them phone company locals. I forgot [02:31:30] three of them were sort of AT&T-related locals. So there was the AT&T Long Lines group, there was the Western Electric group, so Western Electric installers. So you had those groups as well. Then there were a couple of other smaller groups that were also non-telecom groups that were in there.

Jeff: [02:32:00] The local leadership in Local 4305 and Local 4301 were also younger guys as well. Not as young as me, but younger. So the president of 4305 was probably maybe early thirties and 4301, probably late twenties, I would guess something like that. Maybe might've been early thirties as well. [02:32:30] The guy who was president of the Council of Locals was a guy who I went to on a regular basis for advice. Jim Irvine, you're going to talk to him later on this week. He had told me that he was getting a staff job, that he was going to be on the [AT&T] Long Lines national union staff and was going to be leaving Cleveland. I shared that wasn't a secret. [02:33:00] I shared that with some of the [others], and they said, well, you should run for president of the Council of Locals. Oh, okay, I'll do that. Yeah. Well, Jim didn't want to give the job up yet. He wasn't leaving town yet. But at any rate, I had the numbers and we had an election and I won. Unbeknownst to me, one of the Locals that was supporting me was actually just putting their finger up in the wind to see who had the most votes [02:33:30] and voted with me. But I found out later from Jim had pledged to vote for him too.

Jeff: But that's politics. So I became president of the Council of Locals in town, and that's actually when we did the Job Pressures Day. We did a few other things that were sort of more ubiquitous for activities for the Locals.

John: Well, can I stop you there? That feels like another, [02:34:00] I don't want to take you there yet. Yeah. So I'm curious where to start. I want to ask another structural question here, because we've talked about how, you mentioned how your Local was made up of covered multiple offices, right? And I'm curious about one, could you just describe as you just did for the Council as a whole, [02:34:30] could you

describe that the Local, and you've kind of done it a little bit with the strike story, where you get closer to this group of service reps, but I'm curious about how you learned, because again, it's like, it's how you go from your own particular workplace to all the people in your office, and then how you become familiar with the world of the whole local. That's [02:35:00] the next piece I'm really curious about.

Jeff: The Local itself consisted of the service rep group that I've mentioned at length there already the Yellow Pages, Yellow Pages and White Pages, but Yellow Pages was the moneymaker, and that was a bigger part of the operation. It also had all of the data processing in the phone company. This was at a time when data processing was just burgeoning. I mean, it was becoming huge. [02:35:30] And the company built a data center out in Brecksville, Ohio, which is the southernmost city in Cuyahoga County, which is the county that Cleveland is in. The jurisdiction for Local 4309 was Cuyahoga County. And what this data center in Brecksville did was consolidated the data center in Akron and the [02:36:00] data center in Cleveland and moved them all into this Brecksville data center, which literally was right at the county line. You looked out the window of the data center and the next community over was a community in Summit County.

Jeff: So the Akron Local challenged the jurisdiction. They said, look, half these people are our people. They should be in our Local, [02:36:30] we've serviced them better, whatever. But again, it was pretty clear their charter said Summit County, my charter said Cuyahoga County. The national union came down on our side that it was going to be ours. Well, when I first became Local president, we had to sign, as I mentioned earlier, a hundred members every month in order [02:37:00] just to stay even. If I wanted to grow the Local, I had to sign 125, 150, just on average. I mean months up and down. But that was sort of my benchmark. So that meant I spent a lot of time in this huge data center out in Brecksville just talking to people because there happened to be quite a bit of churn out there. When they moved the center out of downtown to Brecksville, a lot of people left.

Jeff: So a lot of new people out there. I'd spend a lot of [02:37:30] time going to that data center, which was tough at times because they'd have a computer room. You couldn't go in the computer room. I had to wait in a break room or just work my way around the building. I developed a pretty good rapport with the folks out there. A couple of leaders out of the Akron local became key leaders then for our Local. I was able to connect with them, make them feel a part of the new Local that they were now part of, [02:38:00] and actually sort of advance the leadership position for them that they may not have had the opportunity to if they'd stayed in the Akron Local. So that was a big part of reaching out to those folks. The other woman I mentioned, Lily Holt, who was my treasurer, became vice-president. She worked in the Yellow Pages operation. She was sort of my conduit in there. She



would take me around, introduce me to people. We would talk, you just had to make [02:38:30] a point of getting around on a regular basis to these different offices and to have membership cards in hand so you could talk to people about joining the union. So the next time the election came up, no problem. I mean, I was elected without breaking a sweat basically.

Jeff: I forget who even ran against me. But anyway, I mean it wasn't close [02:39:00] because you had to work on that. I mean, again, you were out convincing people of the value of a union instead of just collecting their dues and being happy that they were part of it. Then in the contract in 1974, we actually got agency shop. So that changed that. I still tried to be in the routine of being in these locations. So if there was a grievance in the [02:39:30] Brecksville location, even though I wasn't part of that level of the grievance procedure, I would make a point of going out there and just being sort of in the break room or somewhere out there to talk with them about what was going on and strategy and so forth. Let them fill me in on what was happening. Give me the scoop here and maybe give my 2 cents, but be more sort of in a listening mode in that regard.

John: Well, did you really feel that? We talked about a little [02:40:00] bit before, but that tension between, well, I could put this time that I have been putting into organizing after the agency shop, I could put this time that I had been putting into organizing into this other thing, but I need to continue to, but making the decision that there were certain advantages to continuing to do the organizing to make sure that even though you might have a certain kind of financial cushion now, that there were other benefits in terms of, again, [02:40:30] actions in the future that you would need to prepare for. Was that like a

Jeff: I think it definitely was a conscious decision because right after we got agency shop, you sort of relaxed for a few minutes and then you got to thinking about it, and I wanted to get elected again. I liked this job and going around and convincing people that needed to be a part of the union was [02:41:00] a big part of convincing people that I'm the guy they should elect. So also, as I mentioned early on, I really am a very introverted person. I've done the Myers-Briggs [personality test] and I just buried the needle on the introvert side.

Jeff: I found that just going out and listening to people talk about their issues and what was going on made me a better leader [02:41:30] and gave me a better understanding of what was going on with the Local. But also, they appreciated being heard by somebody that in the past, they traditionally might not have heard from. So I have to say, I think I was pretty popular in that regard. It was also culturally at a time that things were changing and to be in that spot and have an African-American woman as my vice [02:42:00] president, and that's not why I picked her. I mean, she was literally, we were just this great partnership I think helped with that as well with that political cachet. She was much more outspoken.

So if we would go together somewhere, I knew it was going to dominate the conversation.

Jeff: Lily was dominating the conversation, I'd be able to put my 2 cents in. But that gave me, this young [02:42:30] guy at this point, barely 20, sort of the stage that at the end of hearing this person out, Lily [would] go, well, maybe we ought to try this. I don't want to say it was good cop, bad cop, but it was that sort of dynamic that gave me sort of a little more authoritarian position as a result [02:43:00] of the way that played out. I don't think I was consciously aware of that at the time, but that's just the way things played out. That's just the way things worked. I think it was to both of our advantages. I mean, she was popular as well, and we continued on that partnership until a few years later, [02:43:30] after about two-thirds of the way through my second term, I decided I really did want to get a [college] degree. And so I can't manage this running the Local [and] working, because we weren't full-time Local officers. I still worked at the phone company. So I would be at the phone company two, three [02:44:00] days a week doing my job there and the other two, three days a week out in the rest of the Local or in the Local office or doing something related to the union.

Jeff: That's just the way that CWA had been set up for years, although some of the Locals in New York City and some of these other places, they had a more traditional business agent, full-time, Local officers, that sort of thing. We never had that. [02:44:30] I think that was a good thing. I mean, I think you just didn't lose touch then with doing that rank-and-file job day in and day out. [It] made it hard for the phone company [to] manage workloads with the guy that couldn't predict whether he was going to be there three days a week, two days a week, no days a week.

Jeff: So that played out as part of this. We didn't have full-time jobs [02:45:00] and I wanted to go to college. I knew I couldn't manage all of that and the phone company would pay for me to go to night school. I knew I had to keep the phone company job because I wanted them to pay for my night school, and I knew I couldn't go to school and then still keep the Local stuff. So I talked to my vice-president, Lily, and I said, look, I'm going to step [02:45:30] aside before the election here. You'll become the incumbent that way, give you the leg up to get elected. I think maybe six months or a year before the second term was up, I stepped aside. It might've been less than that. Now that I think about it, I probably started the fall term and the election was in November, so probably three months before I stepped aside and enrolled at Cleveland [02:46:00] State in the evening school, and I wanted to take as many courses as I could, so it was a goal that I had to try and make it through that.

Jeff: So we did that. She became Local president. I went back to my job five days a week and going to night school, and about a year, not even a year into her first

term, [02:46:30] she calls me up. So I've just completed my first two quarters, maybe three quarters of credits, and she says, the local treasurer has taken management. Would you come back and be the local treasurer? I get to appoint so we don't have to stand election within two months, three months, but I can appoint you in the meantime. I said, I missed the union stuff. [02:47:00] So I said, yeah, I'll do it. So she appointed me treasurer. This other guy ran against me, a white male who was new to the service rep job now, just like they were integrating the craft jobs, the outside jobs, they were integrating the service rep jobs, the clerical jobs. In fact, the offbeat for a second, the secretary, clerical secretary in the office that I was [02:47:30] working in was for his weight class, a world champion powerlifter. So a little squat guy that just was nothing but muscle. It was kind of funny that, oh, this is our office secretary.

Jeff: So at any rate, she asked me to come back. I agreed to come back. A guy ran against me, I beat him. I was still well-known locally. I hadn't been gone nine months maybe. And [02:48:00] so I served in the treasurer's role and enjoyed that. But I found again, I couldn't do both things. I cut back on my class load. I was only taking two classes. I had been taking four evening classes and just, it took a toll because like it or not, even though I was the treasurer, we sort of fell into our old roles where [02:48:30] she and I would work together on issues.

Jeff: It was from there that I ultimately was asked to come onto the national union staff, and I think I was probably 27 or 28 when that happened. But again, I mean I glossed over a lot of things that happened when I was Local president. [02:49:00] I was on the bargaining committee with Ohio Bell. I think I celebrated my 20th birthday in bargaining with Ohio Bell. We had five people on the bargaining committee. So you had two from craft locals, two from operator [02:49:30] locals, and one from what they called clerical locals. Our local in Cleveland was the only pure clerical local. The other big clerical hub was Columbus and in Columbus the clerical local was also part of the operator's local.

Jeff: The woman that ran for that would've been running for the operator's spot. So [02:50:00] I was elected as the representative for the clerical on bargaining, and I'm on this bargaining committee, not only I'm the youngest, I mean every one of the committee could at least have been my parent and a couple could have been my grandparents. But it was such a dynamic experience just seeing the sort of give-and-take. As I described the bargaining earlier, [02:50:30] AT&T would bargain with the national committee, with CWA, I'm sorry, let me take that back. We didn't have national bargaining yet, but we had what they called pattern bargaining. So we would pick out one company that would be sort of the target and the national negotiators would go to that table similar to the UAW [United Auto Workers], but with one employer, although albeit separate companies that were owned by that one employer.

Jeff: [02:51:00] So you would get the pattern in terms of wages, healthcare, pensions would come out of, say, New York Telephone. I don't remember what it was that year. It might've been New York Telephone, which would make sense. They're probably the biggest company. So they would negotiate the pattern, but all the rest of the stuff in the contract, we would negotiate at a local table and also out of the pattern, they would say, alright, here's the wages, [02:51:30] here's the pensions, here's the healthcare, and here's your local money. And so your local money was some percentage of the overall package that you could spend locally, however you wanted. My goal was to try and mollify some of the disparity that came about as a result of percentage wage increases, try and get some of that money, some of the clerical titles, and try to narrow that gap. At the time, as I mentioned, I wasn't making a hundred [02:52:00] dollars a week in the job I had, and neither were any of the clericals. I mean, they were all in 60, 70, \$80 range.

Jeff: You had a craft title in that [19]74 contract, which was also the contract we got agency shop. Little did I know that would sort of be a bad thing at the end of the day, but [02:52:30] the [19]74 contract, the wages had gotten much higher as a result of three years of inflation and cost-of-living increases coming out of the [19]71 contract. So we had this wage gap that just got exacerbated now. So we probably were over a hundred dollars, but the craft titles were probably 150, 160, and we were just bumping a hundred dollars. But after three years of inflation increases, we [02:53:00] found ourselves even further behind. So my role in my estimation was to try and do what I could just to nudge that gap a little bit. I understood that I wasn't going to fix it, but I could keep it from getting as wide as it would've otherwise.

Jeff: So that's where I put all my energy to try and work on that. Now, some of the others worked on other things. They had issues about, I don't know, workloads and things like that, but everybody wanted to spend the local money. Everybody had an idea [02:53:30] how the local money was. So I spent a good part of those negotiations building relationships with the other five, one of whom was the president of the Akron Local who I had just beat out of the Brecksville data center, and he had lost some 400 members as a result. Still members are still in the union, but not in his Local any longer. So I [02:54:00] generally worked hard on building up those relationships, and at the end of the day, I was able to get some tweaks here and there because I got the value of the relationship. And the staff reps who staffed that from the national union were helpful in that as well.

Jeff: I think I got along pretty well with all of them. I think to their credit, they saw this younger person who was interested in the movement, [02:54:30] and so maybe they were grooming me. I mean, I wasn't conscious of it, but I got to believe there was some level of that, that this young person is early twenties and taking on a role like this.

John: Well, I mean you, you've put little, I think hints out there about how, I'm just really interested in how you learned how to do this. I mean, the two bits that you've sort of put out there seemed to be both. You developed this close partnership and it seems like you clearly were learning from the other officers and then you were experimenting and just [02:56:00] sort of seeing what would happen. But it's remarkable to me, quite frankly, that someone of your young age was able to get so good at this so fast, and it just seems like it bears at some further excavation just to sort of see how you were learning it and how you were developing the kinds [02:56:30] of practices that would allow you to be successful over time.

Jeff: Yeah, I mean, if you ask me if I have a particular skill on a personal level, it's that I've always been pretty cognizant of what I don't know and comfortable with that and comfortable enough to ask other people to engage other people about it and [02:57:00] to do it in a way that was really a learning experience for me. But in some ways it would become a learning experience for them too, because then they would examine by having questions. I mentioned early on this 8:10 or the in-depth program or interdepartmental program that just, well, why is it like that?

Jeff: I don't think of myself as this charismatic [02:57:30] leader that got to where he was because of some great attributes of speaking or anything else, but of questioning and being comfortable not knowing. I think at some level, when you sort of expose your vulnerability like that, it helps other people feel more comfortable with you. They don't feel threatened by [02:58:00] you. So while I could have easily been perceived as a threat, this young guy coming in from nowhere, the fact that I didn't come on as this know-it-all I think helped me generate the kind of support and help that I knew I needed. I knew I wasn't ready for this job. [02:58:30] I mean, I wish somebody could have had a camera to take a picture of me when I got the phone call to tell me that I was going to run unopposed for president of this 2000 member Local. I had never been to the union office.

Jeff: We held our meetings in a hotel ballroom downtown. I'd been to plenty of meetings, but I'd never been to the union office. [02:59:00] And so again, this is off track again, and I hate to keep going off track, but so the president of the Local who was not running for reelection after I was the de facto elected president was very, and he's the guy who would ask me to join the union right from the start, seemed a little put out by it that [here] was this young kid [02:59:30] taking this job that he had sort of held as his elevated position. Now this kid is going to do this job. This 19-year-old is going to do this job.

Jeff: I said, Pete, I'd really like to come by and have you fill me in on what's going on. What do I need to know? Oh yeah, [03:00:00] yeah, will do. Oh yeah, yeah. Will do. Literally the day before I'm being sworn in, he finally has me to the Local

office. And our Local office at the time was in the old Statler Hilton Hotel in Cleveland. Literally, they had converted some of the hotel rooms into offices. So there was a little bathroom in our hotel suite. There was a desk and there was [03:00:30] none of the other hotel furnishings. It was like two suites that brought together. So he brings me in and he's clearly old enough to be my father, probably a little older than that even. And he says the two most important things, whenever you're meeting with somebody with the company and they want to come by here to the office, you can always offer them a drink. And he opens up his bottom drawer and there's a couple bottles of whiskey in the bottom drawer.

Jeff: [03:01:00] I drink a six pack of beer every summer. That's the limit of my drinking. I am not a drinker at all.

John: Well, you were 19 too, right?

Jeff: Yeah, I was 19 too. Right, exactly. I couldn't even refill the stash. There's another story, but I won't go to that. And he says, if you talk to the hotel manager who we have our lease with, if you [03:01:30] ever need it, he'll give you the room across the hall. And I've entertained people in there before. I said, what are you talking about? You negotiated there. Well, not negotiations. This is 19-year-old me. What the -- and then it clicks. Oh, I get it. Alright, Pete. So one of the first things I did is I moved us out of the Staler Hilton office tower, our lease having to be up later on the early part of the next year and [03:02:00] went into a more traditional office building a little bit on the periphery of downtown, but cheaper rent and all that.

Jeff: I do think that sort of this awareness of not having the answers and being willing to listen to other people about the answers and then help implement them, then just roll up your sleeves and actually no pride of authorship [03:02:30] in terms of what the solution's going to be has served me very well, not only as a Local officer, but then throughout my career with CWA. I mean, I would tell you some of these stories, but in every one of them, there're a collection of people that actually made these things happen.

Jeff: I'm the person you're interviewing, but you could easily be interviewing 10 different [03:03:00] stewards from the 8:10 situation and how that thing developed and how it unfolded. As I mentioned, I was pushed by them into taking a strike action about that. They pushed me on this in-depth program about getting management to stop doing productive work because I didn't know any better. I was listening to them and saying, oh yeah, that's right. That does make sense. Let's go after that. There's a couple of examples over the years where [03:03:30] something that I've come up with is something that I think has helped move the union, but for the most part it's been sort of listening to other people, gathering their ideas and solutions, and just being a much better listener. I found that being a

better listener made me more consequential when I spoke, I wasn't the person dominating the conversation.

Jeff: I would listen to [03:04:00] when I was on the national Executive Board banter things around. And at times people that always have their 2 cents to say, you could see other people talking to the people next to them, whatever they're talking about, they could be talking about that person, could be talking about something totally [different]. When I talked, everybody listened because I had been listening and could try and coalesce what had been going on and try and bring [03:04:30] it to some conclusion. So I think that's probably the thing that got me through particularly those first 10 years when I was active in the Local and then served me well going forward as well. But we're sort of focusing on that timeframe. It's being aware of what I didn't know and being comfortable with it and trying [03:05:00] to figure out where we went from there, using other people to engage in that. And I've at times in my career felt kind of bad because I know there are people that were smarter, that probably had better ideas about addressing things and better ways of working, things that I sort of leap-frogged over.

Jeff: [03:05:30] But it also, at other levels within the union, I've been willing to step aside for people recognizing they were bringing a better skillset that was needed and being a part of something that they were leading and being okay with that. I've never openly desired any kind [03:06:00] of spotlight. Does anybody enjoy attention? Yeah, of course we do. I mean, I like to think when I was speaking to our convention and people have told me that I was always a very entertaining speaker and could help motivate people, but it was really all about if they would uncover what I was talking about. [03:06:30] It's just sort of taking what other people had developed and presenting to them and using whatever skills I had to try and move the ball forward.

Jeff: I mean, almost every time. And to be fair, because of the position I was in, I was able to have input in really momentous decisions. I think in many ways change for the better and make things work better. There are a number of programs over the years [03:07:00] that I see my piece of it in there where, okay, this went this way because I interjected here. I got this through because I was able to move these individuals to come on board with us. So being comfortable with that I think has been very helpful and it made a difference in terms of my ability to continue to progress [03:07:30] up within the union.

John: Well, that's perfect and we're leading us to the kind of end of this chapter, and I feel like this is pointing us in exactly that direction. I want to ask one more question sort of along these lines that also pulls from some of the threads that you've been weaving, which is this kind of generational question. You are a kind of extreme example of it, but I am struck also by [03:08:00] the conversation you had with the previous local president from this other generation. There is this, of

course, not just in CWA, but in a lot of these locals. At the same time, a lot of this is happening where you've got people who may come out of the anti-war movement or maybe had experience in the McGovern campaign and who are getting into these organizations that had been, I mean there's lots of different ways to interpret this, but [03:08:30] had developed a certain way of doing things. Let's maybe just put it that way. And there's this newer generation sometimes, which is met with resistance and sometimes which is met with, oh, I've been waiting for you to kind of take over. And I just wonder if you have any reflections on that at this point in the story of what it meant to be part of that newer generation and if there was really a kind of cognizance when you were doing it [03:09:00] of that feeling.

Jeff: For the first 20 years of my career, I always felt a little bit out of place because I was the youngest person in the room. And also knowing how I got to the room. To be fair, it is just [03:09:30] a complete accident of timing that I was even involved at any major level. I like to think I would've been involved and engaged. I felt good about being part of the labor movement when I first signed a membership card. I liked the notion of that collective action and being able to make a difference.

Jeff: But in terms of acceptance, [03:10:00] and maybe it was the fact that I was so young that I didn't offer opinions right away, that I listened better because walking into a room where you're 20 years younger than the next youngest person in the room made me feel a little intimidated. Maybe it's not quite the right word, but that captures [03:10:30] close enough and it caused me to listen to them better than they were listening to the rest of the room. They were all there. They all had their opinions, they all knew what they thought. And so as a result, they weren't as good a listener as I was. They missed a lot of things as a result of that. So then when it did come time for me [03:11:00] to offer an opinion, I could offer an opinion that sort of collected what I'd been hearing from everybody else. And so it gave me this sort of cachet of, at some point you become cognizant of people sort of looking to you for the last word on things.

Jeff: Pretty early on, way earlier than it should have been, like in that first bargaining committee in 1974 [03:11:30] where, literally these people are more years of experience than I'm alive and they're looking to me at these caucuses about without even saying, what do you think? Knowing that they're waiting for you to sort of weigh in on something because you've heard all of them and been able to engage all of them in what [03:12:00] was going on. I think on that level, so that's from my perception and then from the union's perspective on it, I think my youth was obviously an advantage in terms of getting selected for a staff position. I think they saw the ability to have somebody who, [03:12:30] traditionally those



jobs are going to people that are in their fifties that have spent 20, 30 years in the movement and sort of moved up the ladder slowly and steadily.

Jeff: I sort of skipped a bunch of rungs to get to where I was, but they saw that as an opportunity to cement in a longer-term sustainability to whatever they, and I think when I was asked to come on the staff, that there [03:13:00] were certainly people that had way more experience and had worked harder at this for a longer time. So in that way, I did feel a little bit like if I was measuring the amount of work that somebody put into it to something, I'm down here and they're way up here in terms of 20 years of doing this, 10 years of doing this, 30 years of doing this and 10 years of doing this.

John: [03:13:30] Okay, so we're back on after another power break, and I unfortunately sort of cut you off, but we were talking about this generational issue and one of the things we talked about when we had the recorder off was a very specific example, factual example that I think again is really helpful to illustrate. Will you tell me what you told me before about changing the pay structure?

Jeff: Sure. When I was elected [03:14:00] local president or de facto elected unopposed, I guess that's elected as long as somebody voted for me, I was elected and came into Local office with three other local officers who had all been doing this for a while longer than I had. So I think the, let's see, the secretary and the treasurer had both been there before, but the vice-president had [03:14:30] been a chief steward before, but was running for vice-president. So all had experience beyond mine in terms of working with the Local and certainly put in more hours than I had. So I did have sort of this feeling of being a bit of an interloper here and not being up to what snuff at the time. And so I see these other three, they're major contributors to what we're doing, try and move this going [03:15:00] forward and trying to work as much as possible like a team.

Jeff: And then looking at the salary structure for the Local, which at the time we got, as I mentioned earlier, we got reimbursed for our wages when we were off the job, but we also got a salary for doing the job as well because the job didn't end at the hours of the day. You still were getting calls at home and so forth. So you got a salary over [03:15:30] and above, and the salary for the local president was \$75 a month and the salary for all the other officers actually was \$50 a month for the secretary and the treasurer, and I think it was \$60 a month for the vice-president. So this sort of hierarchical salary structure, but it didn't make sense to me because they were as big a contributor to what we were doing as I was. And while the salary was nominal, it still was, [03:16:00] it was sort of some recognition of some hierarchy within the local.

Jeff: I proposed and [it] was agreed that we would all get a salary of \$65 a month. It had been a raise for all three of them, and I got \$10 less a month than I was

getting before, which again, this is at a time when we're earning a \$80 a week. So it is something, but it's not [big] in [03:16:30] the scheme of things, it was still \$65 a month more than I was getting before I took on the job. I think that helped solidify us as a team. As I mentioned before, coming into it, they're all more experienced and perceived me as this guy that came from nowhere. And essentially I did. It made them feel more like we were going to work on this collectively, this [03:17:00] task of trying to build this local. And they did that. And as I said earlier, then the woman who was a treasurer and I built this bond that really carried through in my entire time in the Local as sort of sounding boards for each other on ideas and where things were going to go as a result of a conflict the two of us had early on.

John: How old was this woman when you started to develop this?

Jeff: [03:17:30] She's 10 years older than me. I think maybe, no, I take that back. I think Lily might be 12 years older than me. So if I was 19 at the time, she would've been 31, which when you're 19 is ancient and way, way more experienced than I was in terms of Local operations and what was going on. She was, [03:18:00] if nothing, candid with me to a fault, which I needed I somebody to sort of just be there and keep me from going too far off the reservation, but at the same time willing to work collectively on figuring out different solutions to problems. We did a lot of that over the years in terms of handling different issues that came up with the Local.

John: [03:18:30] Well, and again, this is sort of moving us towards what'll be the next time, but as you moved up, as you got more drawn into the city, were you finding other examples of that in the sense of these kinds of alliances between younger people and people of color, black people, people of color, these kinds of this newer generation, again, [03:19:00] whether it means in the case of black people and people of color, maybe people who were older but had been shut out of leadership for other reasons. Were you finding other cadres of this and working together, or was this a matter of you being kind of an oddball in your particular local and then sort of having to navigate within this larger structure that was [03:19:30] of this earlier generation?

Jeff: I would say it was definitely an oddball. I mean, that was not a common thing. Again, it was just an accident of circumstance that I was in the position I was in. The Local structures in general were the amalgamated Locals. The Locals that had in cities [03:20:00] where it was one Local and it had operators and service reps and technicians were all white male presidents and vice-presidents. If there was a woman involved, it was as the secretary of the local, not even the treasurer. The treasurer would be a male as well. The operator services Locals on the other hand were entirely female Locals and were run entirely by females. The Cleveland local had an African-American female running the Local, [03:20:30] but part of

the operators in Cleveland were also in one of the male-dominated Locals. In that Local, they had an operator as the secretary of the Local.

Jeff: But in those Locals that were pure operator Locals, purely women were in the leadership roles. And uniquely the president of the Cleveland local was African-American, which I am racking my brain [03:21:00] right now. I'm fairly certain she was the only African-American Local president at the time I became Local president. I did see that change over time and with a lot of these amalgamated locals, you did wind up with women eventually falling into leadership positions. It still was fairly unique for somebody as young as me to be in that spot. And although it seems [03:21:30] of late, and I'm not the person to go to about this, I think you'll talk to people later on that have been in office over the past decade.

Jeff: It does seem that there are more circumstances of people with less experience running for office with deregulation of the industry, with offshoring, with the [03:22:00] changes in telecom in general. The discontent out there is tremendous. It's higher than I think it's ever been. We've lost thousands of jobs in the industry, and that discontent tends to bubble up at times within the Locals of somebody just saying, Hey, I'm fed up with it and to use the network expression I'm Mad as Hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore. [03:22:30] And so I've seen, and I still stay in touch with a lot of folks, a lot of folks who have zero background but are bomb throwers that have essentially gotten elected to leadership positions within Locals. Some of them pan out, some of them get sort of how this all works and you have to work hard at and making a difference out there that you can't just throw a bomb [03:23:00] and think that that's going to fix the problem. Some others burn out quickly because they recognize they're beating their head against the wall, and this is going to take way more work than they anticipated. So it is sort of a mixed bag in that regard. But back in my decade in the Local, I was for the most part an interloper. Like I said, generally by 10 years, I mean everybody else was, at least in their thirties.

Jeff: [03:23:30] I remember two Locals in town where young leaders took on the established long-term leadership and got elected. But both of them, in both instances, they were still at least 10 years in the Local and in their thirties before they won, but took on leaders that had been, at least in their fifties and one instance in their sixties, [03:24:00] and were able to win by representing a new generation. And in an industry, you think about it as I described with the churn, there was, although the churn wasn't as large in the outside positions, in the male-dominated roles, that churn wasn't as great. It's kind of remarkable that there wasn't more [03:24:30] of youth movement within CWA in the Cleveland area.

Jeff: This is the first time I've spent any amount of time thinking about the seventies at all. But it definitely was a time that had so many different outside influences that came into the industry, whether it was the [03:25:00] Consent Decree with the

EEOC, inflation contracts that included cost-of-living increases based on percentages that just increased the wage gap, just a whole litany of [things.], and then obviously ultimately being on the cusp of deregulation as well. Then everything that happened with deregulation that changed the telecom industry in [03:25:30] ways that I couldn't anticipate. Maybe some could. If you talk to Larry Cohen later on, one of the smartest people I've ever known, I think he could tell you that he could see a lot of the change coming the way it was. So that'll be an interesting day, pack of lunch for that one. That'll be a good one.

John: Well, one more question just to put [03:26:00] an exclamation point maybe on this, which is, it's the story that I want to, I think open the next session with, which is the story of how you go on staff. And so let's end this one with that transition point, and we'll pick it up the next time. But I think we need that story here.

Jeff: The regional leader for District 4, which is the Midwest district, which at the time was just Ohio and Michigan, it later expanded [03:26:30] a little further west, but Ohio and Michigan at the time was a guy named Marty Hughes and a very interesting character. He had a great influence on me over the years, but became sort of a sordid character over history of the union, and we can talk more about that tomorrow. But he had this Johnson-esque quality to him, Lyndon Johnson. [03:27:00] He called me up on Thanksgiving morning and asked me to come to his house, and we happened to live in the same community. I said, okay, I had no idea what it was about, and he invited me in. We talked about things that had been going on in the union for a while, and then he said, would you be interested in joining the staff? [03:27:30] I said, well, I have to think about it, but I am sort of inclined. I'd have to talk to my wife. Part of what was tugging at me a little bit was I was the treasurer of the Local at that time, and I had an African-American president, female president. I'm thinking, why me?

Jeff: [03:28:00] Why am I being asked if I'll take this job? So I said, can I get back to you? He says, well, I need to know by the end of the day. So I went home, I talked to my wife a little bit, and I mulled over it, and maybe it's rationalization on my part, but I thought, well, if I turn it down, it doesn't mean he is going to offer the job to Lily. [03:28:30] So here's the conundrum. What do I do in this situation? It's an opportunity that probably comes around once, because if you say no once, then that's it. But if this is something I really like doing, then this is an opportunity to do it in a more meaningful way. So I call him back that afternoon. Again, this is Thanksgiving day [03:29:00] and said, I've thought about it. He says, well come back over here.

Jeff: Well, I could have told him on the phone, but [he said] come back over here. And he says, well, so tell me what you think. I said, well, I do feel that there are probably better qualified people than me to do this job. Well, who? I said, well, I

think Lily Holt, the president of my Local and [03:29:30] probably a number of others. Well, I want somebody young. I want somebody that can do this job for a long time and you impressed me with in bargaining. I had been on two bargaining committees at that point, I think just because I was the youngest person, I knew how to operate a calculator, which was not a thing back then. They had me do all the numbers. [03:30:00] I would run all the numbers. So I think that skillset impressed him, and I need somebody to really work numbers for me on these contracts.

Jeff: It's a big deal. So I said, well, I came over to tell you that yes, I would take the job. And he said, okay, I have to get approval from DC, but very soon, and November to December, [03:30:30] drag to January, and he calls me on a Sunday, the first Sunday of January and says, can you come over. I said, yeah, okay. I want you to start Monday. Well, I have to get a leave of absence from the phone company. I'll take care of that. You just reported on Monday. So I reported into Monday and [03:31:00] I realized after the fact, I read the Caro books on Johnson, and this is Pure Johnson-esque. The message is, I own you. You're coming in on Thanksgiving. This is expected. You're going to do this for the rest of your career as long as I'm your boss. Like I said, I didn't realize it at the time, but that's the deal I'd made. That was the bargain [03:31:30] that I had made was that I would be at his beck and call. And I was. I don't say that in a derisive way because I learned incredible amounts of union history and knowledge and tactics. It was a great learning experience for me. But it was just looking back on it, it's almost comical to me [03:32:00] how manipulative it was.

Jeff: It was an example after example of that over my time working with him, whether it's coming in on Saturdays or vacations. He was an interesting character and for as many detractors as he has, I don't count myself as one of them. I learned a lot from [03:32:30] somebody who is a master of negotiation.

John: Okay. Well that's a wonderful note to end on because we'll explore that in great detail next time.

Jeff: Okay. Okay, sounds

John: Good. So with your permission, I'm going to turn this off.

Jeff: Great.

*[INTERRUPTION]*

John: Okay, this is John McKerley, the CWA Oral History Project interviewer. And who am I here with?

Jeff: This is Jeff Rechenbach. We are here in the District 4 office in Cleveland, Ohio, and it is August the 16th, 2023.

John: Okay, thanks Jeff. And so as we talked about off the recorder, this is our second session together and we ended last time with you going on staff. I wanted [00:00:30] to pick the story back up there, not necessarily a need to tell the specific story about how you ended up there, but really sort of getting us into some of the first assignments that you had.

Jeff: Sure. So I came on staff, I don't remember the exact year, to be honest, early [19]80s in January. Well, in fact I can timeline it. It was January of 1981 [00:01:00] because I remember as I first came on staff, my first week here, Ronald Reagan was inaugurated. So the winds had changed in terms of the view towards labor at that moment, unbeknownst to us that it would be as dramatic as it was. At any rate, that was when I started my first assignment. We used to have a policy [00:01:30] at CWA that when you came on staff, you didn't come on staff in the region that you were originally from. So me being from Cleveland, I wouldn't have been assigned to District 4, which was Ohio and Michigan. I would've been assigned to another state. Likewise, somebody that was put on staff in another area would fill the vacancy that I filled here in Ohio.

Jeff: But they changed that just before I came on staff. And so I was able to come on staff [00:02:00] here in Cleveland, which was my home, and didn't necessitate a move, which was wonderful. But I think some of the thought process behind that remained. So I was assigned to work with Locals in the southern part of the state. I had what they called the 456 area, which was an acronym for the area codes of the area that I covered 419 area, which was Toledo area [00:02:30] 513, which was Dayton, Cincinnati, and 614, which was central Ohio, Columbus and environs south from there. That was my first assignment. I knew some of those people through my work as a local officer over the years prior to my coming on staff, but most of it was new territory for me and it took a while to get to know people, build relationships up [00:03:00] and go from there.

John: Can I just stop you just for a second? Sure. I mean, just to dig in a little bit to the policy and the policy change, what was the rationale for the policy of not assigning staff to the areas they had come out of? And then why did it change?

Jeff: I wasn't any part of the policy discussion [00:03:30] or creation, but part of it seemed to be that, number one, you already had existing relationships and how would those relationships influence the work that you were doing? So they wanted to sort of break that apart. And then there was also the notion of coming

into an area as an unknown, you have slightly more gravitas as being this outsider. Nobody really knows what your background is, what your skillset is. They presume that you've got some [00:04:00] skills because you've been promoted to this job and given this assignment. So you at least walk in the door with a little mystery that generally tilts towards thinking you've got a level of expertise that can be useful. I think that was the philosophy behind that program. And it seemed to fritter away, I think largely because of the expense.

Jeff: So you would put somebody on staff part of the [00:04:30] expense then of moving somebody from their hometown to another area completely. The union was obligated to pay the moving expenses for that individual. Then ultimately as time went by, they would put in a transfer to come back to the area that they were from. Under the union contract with the staff union, the union would pay for that move to come back to the area that they were originally out of. And [00:05:00] so you had that double expense of people bouncing around from one place to another. I believe it was a financial decision ultimately that made them get rid of that philosophy. But as I mentioned, it did sort of still extend where you would assign somebody outside of their home turf, so to speak. And it made some sense. It was good for me to actually go out and approach [00:05:30] some tasks and problems without a preconceived notion of how things ought to be done or should be done. So it was a great learning experience for me and hopefully for them as well as they got exposed to different ideas from somebody that was coming from a different perspective and point of view.

John: So what were some of those tasks, those problems, those ideas, and how did you reinvent yourself as you came into this new

Jeff: Journey? Yeah, I'm not sure [00:06:00] reinvent is quite the right word. We all grow over time and learn, and so we do change and evolve. I certainly evolved as a result of moving down there, moving into that responsibility. It was clearly a different part of the country. In Ohio, we sort of joke that it's Cuyahoga County, [00:06:30] which is Cleveland, and then everything south of that is considered the south. It's not more rural necessarily, although there are huge rural tracks all through Ohio. We do have other major cities, Columbus, Cincinnati, and then the whole tier of sort of second cities, Dayton, Akron, Canton, Toledo, Youngstown, all of which were at that point really beginning to feel the impact [00:07:00] of deindustrialization, particularly places like Youngstown and Dayton were hit especially hard by jobs moving south or offshore. So anyway, I was put into this environment, if you will, with new folks.

Jeff: And I had to establish myself in whatever way I could. I felt like the best way was, it was always tough as a local president [00:07:30] running a meeting, getting people energized and interested in coming to a meeting. So right from the very start, I told all the Locals that I had responsibility for that I would come to

any meeting that they had at any time. So I spent a lot of time on the road just becoming familiar with them, but also recognizing that there was some value I was providing to them by just being there. They were able to say, well, here's somebody that can explain why this contract article is what it is or [00:08:00] whatever the particular issue that day happened to be. So I did a lot of that and it was a learning experience for me. I can remember, I forget where exactly it was, it was the Zanesville Local I believe, and I got invited down to their membership meeting and they held it in what had been an old barn that was converted and there were probably 20, 25 people there. It wasn't a big Local, but a decent turnout [00:08:30] for a Local that was maybe 150 members, something like that. So when you do the percentages, it was probably better than a lot of the urban Locals in terms of turnout.

Jeff: I went down there and I'm trying to fit in, but I mean clearly I don't, I mean this is a pretty rural area. I don't want to characterize them as just a bunch of good old boys, but they definitely were from a different background than me growing up in Cleveland [00:09:00] versus their background that had them growing up with probably acres of farmland. And many of their parents were probably in the farm industry as well. And literally I hadn't been on staff for a month or so, and I didn't have a staff car that the union provides. I still was driving my Chevy Vega. [00:09:30] So I arrived, I do my spiel at the meeting and a couple of guys come up to me afterwards says, Hey, we have a little get-together afterwards where we just kind of hang out together. I thought, well, it probably makes sense for me to do that even though it is completely adverse to my personality.

Jeff: It's just not something I would never voluntarily do. But it seemed like the right thing to do in terms of the job I had. So some of the people leave about [00:10:00] 10 or so or left afterwards and hanging out with them and they say, well, we have a poker game that goes on. So I said, well, alright, deal me in, I'll play. Well, they cleaned me out and I get out to my car and it's practically on empty and I have no cash to buy gas at this point. I'm not even sure at that point in my life I had a credit card. So the whole way home [00:10:30] I am thinking I'm not going to make it. I finally wound up, I forget exactly where it was, but I decided I would take more of the back roads thinking that that would be more efficient, that I wouldn't burn up the gas as quickly.

Jeff: But I forget where I stopped and there was a 24 hour gas station and I went in and told the person my situation, they were very considerate. They gave me \$5 worth of gas, [00:11:00] which I was able to get home on, and I sent them a \$5 bill. Actually, I sent them a \$10 bill the next day to thank them for getting me home at probably midnight or one in the morning, whatever time it was. Didn't take me long to lose all my money. So it wasn't that late, but it was for my part, it was part of trying to get myself feeling comfortable or have them feeling comfortable



[00:11:30] with me more than me feeling comfortable with them that okay, they took this city slicker great, no problem. I was happy to be the foil. And many times in the future they would bring that up. As I went down there and I said, I've learned not to play cards with you people anymore, I'm done with that game.

Jeff: But the experiences were different some other ways as well because it was more of a [00:12:00] lot of smaller locals. They tended to be more white-male, all sort of what we would call plant problems. In the phone company vernacular, plant refers to the technicians that install, repair linemen, and people that serve the plant infrastructure of the telephone industry. Those locals tended to be completely dominated by those folks. Then you would go to [00:12:30] Columbus and you would find it was a much broader mix, although there were two Locals in Columbus, there was what we called the plant Local and then the clerical Local, which was operators, clerical as I think I talked about in my earlier session. Then there was Cincinnati. Cincinnati was a separate company [Cincinnati Bell]. It was partially owned by AT&T but not wholly-owned. And so it had [00:13:00] a streak of independence that some of the other companies didn't have or couldn't have.

Jeff: So that was part of my responsibility as well. That also meant that they didn't fall into pattern bargaining. You had to bargain a contract with Cincinnati Bell. So I had to bargain essentially my first contract where I was completely responsible from top to bottom and I had some really good local officers down there [00:13:30] that helped me out. And also there was a fellow that came on staff just right after me, and he had been the president of the Cincinnati Bell local. So I was able to rely on him for some advice, Adrian. He told me where some of the pitfalls were, what some of the issues were, and that was very useful. But it was a little nerve wracking because now you feel this weight. [00:14:00] It was different than being on bargaining committees.

Jeff: I'd been on bargaining committees in the past, but I wasn't chairing the committee. I was one of the chorus that was chirping in and saying, Hey, we need this or we need that, or let's do one thing or another. Now I was the person that had to sort through all of that, get a contract that ultimately would get ratified by the rank-and-file membership, which we did. But it was largely because I was working with some [00:14:30] very experienced local officers who were able to guide me through that process. There was an operator services local and clerical local down there. Mary Klosterman was the president of that local, and then Jerry Craver who had taken over for Adrian Seifert when he came on staff, but had been a long-time officer prior to that, were both a huge help in helping me navigate that.

Jeff: But [00:15:00] I came away from that with sort of a renewed feeling of confidence. It was probably exactly the right kind of situation where it was a substantial unit. I don't want to minimize it. They were probably at the time maybe close to 4,000 employees working at Cincinnati Bell. So fairly good-sized

unit. It wasn't Ohio Bell that had at that moment probably 30,000, 40,000 people working [00:15:30] for them. But it was significant enough that there were all of the issues that you would similarly have at any of the Bell units. So for me personally, that gave me a confidence that I hadn't had prior to that. I do at times suffer from this imposter syndrome where you don't feel like, boy, I don't know why they've got me doing this [00:16:00] because I am not up to snuff on this. But that helped me jump that shark and be able to feel comfortable with my abilities to do that.

John: No, I think everyone understands what you mean. Well, just to dig in a little, I'm curious, [00:16:30] since this is the first one, the first, I don't know if you would describe the experience as a contract campaign, but could you sort of work us through in terms of what that would look like in the CWA context during this era? Yeah,

Jeff: Again, this is still in the era of very strict regulation in the telecom industry. So the contract negotiations, while contentious didn't have the same kind of drama maybe [00:17:00] that they did post deregulation, where at that point Cincinnati Bell would go to the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio, say, here's how much it costs us to run our business. And the Public Utilities Commission would say, very good year entitled to earn eight and a half or 9% over the top of that and base their rate structure on earning a decent profit, not obscene, but a decent profit over the expense that it cost [00:17:30] them to put that business on. We were negotiating in that kind of environment, and I think that helped ease some of the pressure, although you still felt it. I mean, you still wanted to get this done. You wanted to do it right. And it by no means was a walk in the park to get a deal done because there were all kinds of pitfalls. I mean, employers obviously hate giving up control of anything.

Jeff: And that was certainly the case [00:18:00] down there. In fact, in some ways it was worse than it was at the Ohio Bells, the Michigan Bells of the world because again, they were more independent than the other Bell system companies. I think AT&T owned 25% of them at the time and at divestiture, they actually had to sell off their stake in Cincinnati Bell. It went completely independent at that point. So you still had a contract [00:18:30] campaign, you ramped things up, you still had a deadline that you worked towards. You worked within the offices, the garages to get people aware of the contract. We did some early on contract meetings where the membership would show up and talk about the issues that were important to them. And those were always well attended. It was always the excitement coming up to a contract negotiation, what was going to happen, what we're [00:19:00] going to get. We had a bargaining committee that then helped assemble all the demands that we had and then to go out and work around those demands with the

membership to get them engaged, give them some ownership of these bargaining demands.

Jeff: That involved often more than just membership meetings, but going to some of these locations as well, going out to the garages, going out to the operator services [00:19:30] offices, the service rep offices, even just doing a quick walk-through to talk about it and just the presence there would hype the attention, hype the interest for the campaign. We got better at that as years went by, again, I think out of necessity because we're now dealing in a principally deregulated industry. And so we picked up better tools in the future of mobilizing the membership [00:20:00] and engaging them in contracts. But there's still rudimentary efforts at that point in time.

Jeff: And to a large extent, they worked. I mean, the other advantage you had in these negotiations was that the industry was popular. I mean, this was your means of communication and everybody wanted to make sure their phone service worked on a regular basis. [00:20:30] And so in general, the public supported the goals of workers to achieve a decent contract. As time went on in the Reagan era, that began to flip over where public affection for organized labor seemed to fall away to some degree. But I still think people respected those industries that they interacted with on a regular basis [00:21:00] and the workers in those industries. So you had the feeling that the public was going to be on your side as well.

John: Can I just ask follow up? I think it's interesting since you have some recall of the specifics here, just to see if we can't get some change over time during this era, were you already doing or still doing, already doing, that's the phrase I'm looking for. Things like button days or T-shirt days or [00:21:30] informational pickets or what were the tools and techniques of that era?

Jeff: So it was more about wearing the buttons, you'd have some bumper stickers, you'd put the flyers up. We hadn't started really the T-shirt days yet, although I think the next cycle around by then we were putting out the T-shirts, but you had the slogans, I don't remember what the slogans were down there, but it was of the ilk [00:22:00] of "Ma Bell's a cheap mother". That kind of a thing was always the tried and true one. If you couldn't come up with something original that became your default, "Ma Bell's a cheap mother." So there was definitely that, and it was more engagement in person as well at that point. Today [00:22:30] you've got the ability to reach a lot of people instantaneously through text messaging, email. We didn't have that then. So there was more engagement person to person, and for better, for worse, I mean, you can make arguments why it was better then or it's better now.

Jeff: There are definitely portions of each that worked better. And as we grow, I think we're learning [00:23:00] to use the new technology. I think we're slow to adapt

some things when it came to technology. But I think the union, from what I can see right now, obviously not having a direct role, has really caught up to speed and is using some of those tools more effectively than when we first had the opportunity. But there was more of that person-to-person engagement where you had to go [00:23:30] and talk about what the issues were, where you had to share with the membership, well, here's what they're trying to do. As I say that, I think back, and it wasn't as much about here's what they're trying to do in that era, in this regulated industry, it was more about what we wanted. It was not as much about givebacks in terms of the company. They would try and take back some control issues that the contract [00:24:00] had constricted them with, but for the most part it was, we want more of this or that thing. And the minor pushbacks would be about how much more it was going to be.

Jeff: Then on their part, we want to change the structure of this title so that we've got more flexibility to do whatever it happened to be [00:24:30] or even potentially downgrade a particular title, but not like the things we dealt with later on in the late [19]80s and then through today where we still had confrontations over just hanging onto what we have, much less enhancing it or improving it. So you would build your contract around what's in it for us? [00:25:00] What are our goals? Do we want more comprehensive healthcare or a better pension? It seems to me that through the late [19]70s and into the early [19]8-s, pensions were a big deal. 30 and out became sort of a rallying cry. In other words, if you've worked here 30 years, you should be eligible to take your pension and walk away.

Jeff: That was likely part of the negotiations down there. [00:25:30] Everybody kind of was pushing towards that goal of getting some fixed amount of time where you could actually say, yeah, okay, I've done it. I don't have to go all the way to [age] 65. I started working here when I was 18. I put 30 years in. I can in theory go out when I'm 48. To have that security is, even if you didn't advantage yourself of it, was a great security blanket. So that, as I'm thinking [00:26:00] back, was one of the big issues that we would push on back in that era

John: Were work rules a big issue?

Jeff: Again, that's where the company would sort of push back. They would want that additional flexibility. They wanted the ability to have repair clerks do more of the repair job, more diagnostic work. They wanted to downgrade some titles, oh, we're putting this new technology [00:26:30] in that'll make it easier so we shouldn't have to pay as much for this work to get done. That sort of thing was going on. But again, until deregulation, we would win most of those fights. I mean, those were just on the fringes in terms of the contract battles that we were in.

Jeff: I'm trying to think of a good example of one of the work rules that they would try and change [00:27:00] on us. Oh one, we represent, this is sort of a bit of a fringe group, but we would represent the people that sell Yellow Page ads. And they would go out to a plumber or any kind of little industry and sell ads. And part of our contract included what their compensation [00:27:30] was going to be, and they were commission-based. We would set the rate of commission in our contract negotiations and the company would ultimately always try to change it. Say, well, renewals are more important to us, so we are going to downgrade the new and bump up the renewal, and then three years later, no new sales are more important. We can retain the renewal. And there was this yin and yang all the time about trying to figure [00:28:00] out where that was. The reality was whatever you set it at, the salespeople would make it work for them. If you were going to put a higher priority on renewals, they were going to do more renewals because it meant more money for them. And then likewise, on the other side, if you went for new sales, it was the same thing.

Jeff: But those kinds of things where the company would push back [00:28:30] and want a little more control and tweak things in their interest, not the best example in the telephone industry. It is such a minor part of it. And in fact, now a non-existent part of it. I mean, the internet has wiped out, which I could get on a whole rant, how the phone company let all that slip away. I mean talk about database. They had the database to end all databases and frittered that advantage away by not wanting to share it.

John: Well, we'll maybe come [00:29:00] to that theme later, but well, I'm curious, one more question about this, and I promise we're going to move to divestiture, but we talked a lot about last time about the context of the Ohio Bell system where you have the strike as this endpoint of the grievance system. Presumably you are now in the land of arbitration when you moved down here. Yes. And so how did you adjust to that? What did you sort of learn from now being in this new context where you [00:29:30] weren't prepping for a strike at the end of a grievance, but for arbitration?

Jeff: Yeah, that's interesting. I think that my background in coming from a contract without arbitration really sort of forced me to work harder to compromise on things and get things done. I can think of the time that I was with the Cincinnati Bell contract. We may [00:30:00] have had one arbitration during that entire time. I always tried to work to get things done because I hated to hand something off to somebody else and then just say, okay, it's in their hands and whatever comes of it comes of it. That just felt -- my wife says I'm a control freak, that I have to be the one driving. [00:30:30] And there's certainly elements of that in me. I get that. I plead guilty and part of that comes through here as well. I hated the thought of just handing something else off to some basically disinterested party to flip a coin

and decide what the future of something that I cared passionately about was going to be. So I'm sure we had an, I cannot remember a single arbitration case [00:31:00] specifically that we had back in the time that I had the Cincinnati Bell assignment. I'm sure it happened, but it was my last resort. I spent a lot of time developing a relationship with the local officers, but also a lot of time developing a relationship with the labor relations folks down in Cincinnati.

Jeff: And I think, again, maybe it was just sort of the perfect situation for me without [00:31:30] me knowing it. But I think the fact that they were independent from the Bell system in most ways, I think they wanted to keep control as well. I don't think they wanted to hand things off to somebody else to make a decision. So it probably was on reflection good for both of us in that time frame. I always felt uncomfortable about arbitration. It certainly has its place. I don't want to minimize that, and [00:32:00] certainly used it in the past many times, but it just seemed like punting the ball when you handed it off that way. But there are times I think you get a case where it's not going to be a popular cause or case, even among the rank-and-file. And you really do want to give somebody their day in court, if you will, if you want to call an arbitration [00:32:30] court. And so you do that. But I cannot remember ever arguing an arbitration case at Cincinnati Bell, and that would've been my job. That would've been part of my responsibility to present an arbitration case. I don't think I did that the whole time.

Jeff: It was first time I've ever [00:33:00] really thought about that and put it in some kind of context. I am guessing that part of my motivation behind it was I didn't want to hand off that control. We certainly had, I mean, people were getting fired and people were having issues on the job. There was always overtime issues, how overtime's getting distributed, mandatory overtime in some of the contracts and how that worked. So you always had pushback on that. But I found [00:33:30] the tough ones were the dismissals, and those would be the ones that in going forward, would be the ones that we wound up having to arbitrate. But when you're dealing with an overtime issue, when you're dealing with a scheduling issue, I always felt like you could work your way through it if you could listen to what the other side was saying. If you could listen to what the management was saying, you didn't have to agree with it, but you had to sort of get behind [00:34:00] what their motivation was. And if you could do that, you could generally figure out a way that would work for both sides and get something done.

Jeff: And that was always my goal.

John: Well, just on the other side, again, I'm just super curious because this is before divestiture. Were there ever moments also where there were still these kinds of what we might call today, walks on the bus or efforts to try resolve something in the [00:34:30] moment that was going on? I won't say like Wildcat. Well, I will say wildcat.

Jeff: Yeah, there definitely were. I mean, there would be even in Cincinnati Bell with a no strike clause and arbitration as a result, there were simply wildcats, somebody in a particular location, a garage or more often a garage than the larger workplaces. It's just easier to coordinate when [00:35:00] it's 25 individuals versus 150 individuals in one place where they would get upset about a particular issue. And this is it. We're taking off. I don't remember specifically any of those, but I know they happened because I just have a regular memory of being called by the labor relations guy. Hey, the garage on such and such avenue is out, what's going on? And calling down to the local, finding out what the situation was. We were generally the last [00:35:30] to know at the national union that this was going on. And so the call would come from the company. First I would call down to the local and the local would fill me in.

Jeff: Oh, so-and-so messed up the overtime list, or they've suspended this guy. He was at the coffee shop for too long. Those kinds of things. And you could generally work your way through those by just talking it through [00:36:00] with what the leadership was. And a lot of times it was, I think the local deliberately knew it was sort of their way of kicking the ball upstairs and also knowing that if they did that a compromise could be reached that they didn't have to take the responsibility for compromising on something. So the guy got a five-day suspension, we made it a one-day suspension, and he is back to work and everybody's happy. They feel like [00:36:30] they won, but they didn't win everything. So it moves along like that. So yeah, even without the presence of arbitration or even with the presence of a no-strike clause, they still would go out on wildcat.

Jeff: I suppose part of it also is a recognition that something like that wasn't likely to reach arbitration anyway, that wouldn't likely [00:37:00] meet the threshold for taking it to an arbitration hearing. So there was perhaps that level of frustration as well. And well, you don't have to show up, and you didn't have as militant employer then either. So you didn't feel the threat of being locked out or that the guys were all going to be fired that walked out of the garage, or that somebody was going to be disciplined as a leader [00:37:30] of the 50 operators that walked out because of a suspension of another one. So there was sort of that feeling as well and more present in clearly the contract where we didn't have arbitration, but it still existed in all our other contracts as well, where people would take things into their own hands.

Jeff: And frankly, it was [00:38:00] a good union-building tactic. I mean, people, again, I think the thing that we to this day don't do a great job is giving the members the ownership of their contracts of the issues in the workplace, particularly from that period from [19]80s through the[19]90s. There was sort of this vending machine view of a labor contract. [00:38:30] I put my money and I pay my dues. I expect a result. I expect my bottle of pop to come down the chute

or my candy bar, and excuse me, that doesn't work. I mean, that model of unionism just, it doesn't pan out. I can't even count the number of times, hear the phrase, I pay my dues. That's not everything that being a union is about.

Jeff: [00:39:00] I pay my dues too. I still pay dues. I pay dues to this day to my local union as it's about being a part of something. It's about being part of a collective that could make a difference in the way that you live your life. You have to give more into that than just a financial contribution. The financial contribution keeps the lights on, pays the bills, but the real work of the union is actually participating, being [00:39:30] a part of this and not just counting on, well, I pay 1.5% of my salary towards the union that should take care of all my problems. Particularly in that timeframe under regulation, there was some of that sense that I paid, therefore I want my service, and I was entitled to that by the money that I was putting out.

John: [00:40:00] Yeah, thanks. And the reason I ask is there's oftentimes this sense that you have Taft Hartley or what have you, and that suddenly all these doors are closed, whereas in fact, a lot of these tools and techniques change, but stay within the ecosystem of workers' ability to build power in the workplace. And so just being able to chart how long those things continue to be viable [00:40:30] is really valuable from a historical point of view without saying one is better than the other necessarily. Yeah, right. So I feel like we've done enough of this kind of, unless you feel like there's another example here.

Jeff: No, no. I'm ready to go wherever you want to go.

John: The idea here, we'll be able to sort of see, check back in on the other side of divestiture to see how things have changed. So you come in right before this process of this [00:41:00] legal process of deregulation slash divestiture starts there in 1982, 1983, 1984. So could you sort of walk us through how that monumental process impacted this day-to-day work that you'd been working for a decade and then suddenly everything's, well, I'm trying not to characterize it, then suddenly there's this change.

Jeff: [00:41:30] The change at the moment felt very radical, but that was just in the moment. Then after the announcement, it felt like, okay, well, we're going to go on and life will go on in terms of deregulation, because you didn't feel the impact right away. [00:42:00] You heard. And so you knew it was significant, but it didn't impact it immediately. But as it started to, as the companies recognize that, whoa, we're in a whole new world here. I'm not going to get my guaranteed rates anymore. I don't have sole hold on the industry, you really began to get a sense that, okay, this is a whole new world. [00:42:30] And it most immediately came in the long-distance business.



Jeff: So all of a sudden you had, well, first off, I mean with AT&T and the telephone industry in general, very tight parochial view of the telephone network and tight controls on it. You can't put anything on our network. Our network is too valuable for anybody to tinker around with and [00:43:00] we can't afford to allow that to happen. We will control what you have and what you don't have in terms of telecommunications infrastructure, and then the MCI's of the world appear and say, Hey, you can call grandma on Mother's Day for a fraction of what you're paying AT&T. The big joke of the time frame was all the calls you were getting from long-distance carriers trying to get you to switch [00:43:30] your carrier. That was really the first place that we felt that immediate impact of deregulation that, wow, this is really changing here.

Jeff: There was a sense, even sort of a debate internally about, well, how do we deal with this? Part of the notion was, look, we've got to protect the infrastructure we have in place [00:44:00] with the telecom industry that's already there because we represent those workers. We don't represent the workers at MCI. On the other hand, when we got in a battle with AT&T, is it to our interest to use MCI as leverage or the others? I mean, I use MCI as an example because that was really the big one that more than any other seemed to make the dent in the industry ultimately just blew the long-distance industry completely up and pulling [00:44:30] the curtain on the wizard that you didn't need this one pipeline to make these things happen. So as you thought about mobilizing against an employer like that, you were really on the edge of the sword trying to figure out, well, we don't want to lose customers because that means we lose jobs.

Jeff: But at the same time, if we can make them feel the pressure here. So [00:45:00] I could remember one campaign where the notion was to collect cards from our friends and neighbors saying that they would switch their long-distance carrier if they didn't come to a contract agreement with us, and that we would hold those cards and use those as leverage and turn them in if in fact we couldn't get a contract. It was mildly successful, [00:45:30] but again, it was a little dangerous in terms of job loss and the impact it would have on jobs going forward. But it was really, to my estimation, the first time we actually began to think outside the box in terms of mobilizing beyond just the routine that we'd had in a very regulated industry. It got us thinking about, well, how do we leverage whatever we can out there to help us [00:46:00] achieve contracts that we think are fair for our members by using other resources, by bringing other groups into play?

Jeff: In this instance, customers, we'd had some of that in the past, but it wasn't really engaging the customer. It was just trying to make us sympathetic to the customers. And they generally were, there were enough telephone company employees in every jurisdiction that you were bound [00:46:30] to have a neighbor that worked at the phone company. And so, oh yeah, Susie works at the phone company and

she's a great gal, and I hope she gets what she's striving for in her contract. So this was the first time I feel like we actually tried to do something innovative and reach out. And I think in many ways my labor history is not as good as it could be, [00:47:00] but it seemed like, no, I take that back. I guess the Farm Workers really were the innovators in that regard. I can remember in high school, boycott lettuce, boycott grapes, boycott wine that Gallo makes, even though I couldn't buy wine at that point, but standing in front of the grocery store with a group of others. So it was the first [00:47:30] venture that we made into that sort of realm of the world where we would more intentionally engage consumers in our struggle.

John: Well, because this is also the era of the corporate campaign. I mean, I think this is maybe what we're sort of pointing towards, but things like, again, I come out of Iowa, so the sort of cram your spam, these kinds of things, was that, [00:48:00] what's the question here? I mean, was CWA way intentionally pivoting in that direction?

Jeff: I suppose you could say it was intentionally pivoting. I mean, it was a conscious decision to get these cards signed that people would pledge to switch their long-distance carrier if we didn't get a good deal. It was interesting. It wasn't like a cram your spam saying, don't buy spam at all. [00:48:30] It was saying, don't make me use this. And I can still remember the cartoon of the guy pointing the gun at his own head and saying, don't laugh, you're next. It wasn't at that level. We were a little timid about that. We didn't really want to say, well, we're going to, and soliciting [00:49:00] for MCI, part of it was there was a little difference boycotting lettuce. Once the boycott is over, you're going to buy lettuce, and if you like spam after the cram spam, that's what I'm going to go buy. In this instance, once you made the switch, you've probably lost that customer forever.

Jeff: There wasn't something to replace spam on the shelf. That was a pretty unique product. And likewise, [00:49:30] lettuce or grapes, I mean, I can remember going into grocery stores trying to find out where the lettuce or the grapes came from. And just clearly people, most people weren't at that level trying to figure out exactly what the origin of the product was. So there was that fear that you were actually changing the baseline permanently versus just that threat. So we were trying to figure [00:50:00] that out and trying to, and again, I say we, but I wasn't one of those we's, I was the soldier at that point and just following what the direction was, I certainly, I recognized the dilemma and empathized with the challenge of it for the leadership at the time, trying to work their way through it. I liked the notion of the campaign.

Jeff: It seemed to be just the right sort of way to nuance this, [00:50:30] because I certainly didn't want to see the base of jobs at the telephone company get eroded. I wanted to protect. And during that time, we actually worked very often collaboratively with the phone company when it came to legislative initiatives.

When it came to regulation, I spent many hours [00:51:00] in Columbus with the state legislature advocating for common interests that we had with the phone company and with some great success, they recognized the value we brought to that equation because while they could round up most of the Republican votes in Ohio at the time, it was a Democratic state, and the legislature, both houses of legislature, were usually run by Democrats. [00:51:30] And so to have the union guy show up and say, yeah, this is a good thing for jobs, made a big difference for where they were at.

Jeff: We used that leverage as well. I mean, we would say, look, we're going to do this. Here's what I need. You didn't make, it wasn't exactly quid pro quo, but there was certain elements of that in it as well. And the most famous example of that wasn't out of this District. [00:52:00] I think you'll be talking to folks in District 6, although, well, the architect of it is a long since passed away, but Vic Crawley, who was the vice-president in District 6 at the same time, we overlapped somewhat on the board. But anyway, Vic Crawley famously with Southwestern Bell said at a time when they were branching out into wireless technology [00:52:30] for the first time in a major way. I mean, you had car phones for years, but where it was becoming more of a ubiquitous technology.

Jeff: He told the company when they wanted him to do something with the Texas legislature, yeah, I'll help you out, but I want card check for that wireless industry [1992-1997, Five Years to Card Check]. I want you to recognize the union. If we show you that we've got a majority of the members in there that are interested [00:53:00] in having a union, and they agreed, talk about somebody leaving a legacy. That's a legacy that has impacted this union probably larger than almost any other, you can make the argument. We've done public sector organizing that's brought lots of members in mergers, those sorts of things. But in terms of really changing a dynamic with the union, that piece right there, and then the rest of us were able to ride those coattails and parlay [00:53:30] that. So when I was the vice-president up here, I used that same leverage in dealing with Ameritech, say, hey, I got to have this, they've done this down in Southwestern Bell. You're Cingular wireless company up here. I got to have recognition at it.

Jeff: And then that, of course, later on actually became a fait accompli because SBC took over Ameritech. And so [00:54:00] that cleared the path. I mean, clearly they were already down that road and this was going to be the way that they were going to continue to operate. And to their credit, they were true to their word. I mean, they recognized the union and to this day still have been the only unionized wireless carrier in the country. There are a couple of phone stores, cellular stores [00:54:30] in the Verizon footprint that have been organized more recently, but not at the wall-to-wall level that AT&T Wireless is,

John: Well, what do you think about this analogy? Because what strikes me is that this is actually a lot like the building trades in the sense that it's a highly competitive industry. People are, the barriers to entry into it don't seem to be, they're falling at the least. And so [00:55:00] there's this big distinction between union contractors, if you will, and non-union contractors, which is creating this incentive figure out ways, the incentive on certain companies in order to find ways that they can work with and leverage unionization in certain ways. And of course, there's an obvious incentive from the point of view of CWA. Does that feel like a reasonable analogy here?

Jeff: Yeah, I think it is. [00:55:30] It's to Vic's [Crawley] credit and the union's credit that they recognize this leverage point and used it to build the union. One of the things when I came on staff, my first boss was Marty Hughes, who I mentioned in our first session, a controversial figure within CWA, but [00:56:00] just absolutely fixated on building the union. Anytime I negotiated a contract while working for Marty, whether it was preform line products with 50 people on the east side of Cleveland or telco with 100,000 employees, the first question he had was, what did you get for the union? What was in this for the union? What did you do to build the [00:56:30] union in this contract? You knew what the question was. And so you walked into those negotiations with that mindset, yeah, I'm going to do things that are going to improve the lives of the members here, but what am I going to do that's going to build the union coming out of this contract?

Jeff: And so that really became sort of the philosophy around here is that you could not come back with a contract that didn't have something in it to help build this union, whether it was getting increased time off the job for local officers [00:57:00] or recognition of a unit that hadn't been recognized in the union before. You had to have something. And if you didn't, you were going to go back and that was not going to be a deal before you signed off on any contract, you had to check in with the district vice-president. So even before the bargaining committee said Yes, I had to come back and give an outline, here's what we've got on the table, here's what I think we're going to get, and are you going to be okay on signing off on that? So you'd run all that by the regional vice-president. [00:57:30] And knowing that was going to be the question from day one, I would pull my counterparts off to the side and say, look, I got to have something here. I got to have something that's going to build the union. Sometimes it was, I want a checkoff for political action, whatever it was, it was going to be something that was in there that made the union more efficient [00:58:00] and gave us the opportunity to build in the future off of it.

John: Well, so that's really interesting too because we're in this era here in the late eighties where there's definitely, the flip side of that is the philosophy, the concessionary philosophy of how can we shrink and survive and not necessarily

always worrying [00:58:30] about, or at least this is the critic of some of this concessionary orientation during this era, not necessarily thinking about what you were just saying. How can we always, even as we're trying to survive, find ways to build the union? And so that seems like a real important philosophical distinction that's happening here in the CWA during this era.

Jeff: Yeah, it certainly was happening here in this region. I mean, that was the notion you had to somehow build the union [00:59:00] out. Clearly it was happening with Vic Crawley down in District 6. I mean, he saw this and used that leverage to build the union down there in very meaningful ways in a nascent industry that just exploded and now has [tens of] thousands of employees across the country that are in the union, because in Texas, they wanted something in that Texas legislature that we helped them get. [00:59:30] So yeah, it's a philosophy. I wouldn't say it was universal across CWA, because as I talked with colleagues over the years, I never got that sense that some of them had that same mindset, and they always, it's all about the members, and I get it. It is all about the members, but the members are better off if the union is stronger too.

Jeff: So it was a growing [01:00:00] theme. But to Marty Hughes's credit, and again, a guy that has been bashed by others over the years for other issues, this was always what he was about. He would, for example, when we were negotiating with the phone company and I'd be in with the bargaining committee, [01:00:30] he'd then, as we got close to the end, he'd check into the hotel that we were at, and I would have to go to his room and tell him, here's where we're at. Here's what we got, answer the door in his pajamas and Okay, I need this. We got to have whatever it happened to be for helping to build the union. And you knew, you just absolutely knew that you weren't going to get a contract without [01:01:00] something in it for us going forward. And when I say for us, it wasn't in the form of any kind of monetary relief necessarily.

Jeff: There may have been some element of that, for example, getting extended leaves of absence for staff representatives, which at the end of the day, if I continued, for example, I was on a leave of absence with a phone company, so I continued to accrue time for my pension [01:01:30] and then my CWA pension would be lessened. By that, I mean they would deduct that piece out of my overall pension, which helped build the union. Frankly, it helped keep us on a more firm financial foundation, but it had to be something, and it seemed to grow as the notion of mobilization efforts came about because you really were trying [01:02:00] to get recognition for other groups. We would have contract fights over getting recognition over groups. And that did get blunted somewhat obviously in the era of concessions where you really were at the table just trying to survive, just to keep your head above water. And I think it continues largely today where you're still in this concessionary environment, principally it seems [01:02:30] around

healthcare, but pensions as well. I mean, the whole pension system is being eroded as more and more employers go to 401K's and other ways of avoiding what I think is their responsibility to workers to provide them with healthy retirement.

John: Well, and I think maybe I should just put a point on this. So how much do you feel like that bargaining to organize approach [01:03:00] originates with the CWA out of this kind of unique set of characteristics? Was this something that you feel like really came from the CWA or something that CWA borrowed from somewhere else?

Jeff: It does in my view, but again, I won't pretend to know all of the origins of it, but it does seem to have come out of CWA largely, and I would credit some of the leadership that we've had over this past decade. Morty Bahr, a very [01:03:30] innovative leader, and then Larry Cohen, who was just a brilliant strategist around these kinds of issues. His whole mindset was how do we build this union? How do we organize out of the work that we're doing at the bargaining table in the workplace? That was always the mindset that he brought to the job, and that rubs off. I mean, people get that. You'll have [01:04:00] some people, some locals that resent that and think that all their job is to handle grievances and handle problems in the workplace, and that's certainly part of their job. But they can improve that part of the job by doing these other things as well. There is the opportunity to strengthen the union to give them more power than when they get to the bargaining table by engaging [01:04:30] in more of these other activities that helped to build the union out. But I would say those two leaders were exactly the right leaders at the right time in an industry that has largely been decimated by deregulation[and] competition, seeing what's happened in the telecom industry has just been a real tragedy.

Jeff: [01:05:00] I wish we were more successful, I guess, at trying to protect those jobs and save those jobs. I get very frustrated knowing that if I call AT&T with a service problem, I'll likely reach somebody overseas and that we didn't have the strength or the power to keep those jobs here. I can't imagine that happening [01:05:30] at a time in this nation where a third of the workforce was part of the labor movement. It happens now because 10% of the workforce is in a union, and it seems like it's easier to take jobs and ship them to a low-wage area. So while I like to give us credit for [01:06:00] being successful and helping to keep things going, the level of success isn't what we ever hoped for, but I guess that's true in almost any negotiation at any time. I've never walked away from a bargaining table satisfied that I got everything I could get. Did I think I got everything I could get at the moment? Yes, but did I get everything I think I wanted or was entitled to? No, no. You wind up at the [01:06:30] end of the day getting the best deal you can at that moment and taking it and live to fight another day and that

live to fight another day piece. I think it's overlooked too many times. What am I doing to help live, to fight that other day?

Jeff: Living in the moment is fine, but thinking about where I'm going to be in the future and how I get to that future, it ought to be every bit as important in these negotiations as anything else that we deal with. [01:07:00] So that philosophy was ingrained in us here, and we knew that we had to build this union and do whatever it took to build it, and did that to a large extent, but again, with not the level of success that any of us would've hoped for. When I look at today's telecommunications industry, and part of it was, I still [01:07:30] think there was sort of the mindset that I came at the MCI struggle with where I was really more focused on protecting the jobs within AT&T than thinking about the competition when I really should have been more focused on organizing the MCIs of the world, organizing these competitors.

Jeff: That realization came to me a little after that, but not long after that, that [01:08:00] you began to think about, well, how do we level off this playing field? When AT&T introduced their U-verse product, which was their cable TV product, and the technicians installing U-verse didn't make as much as the telephone company technicians. I said, there's one way to solve this. We have got to go out and organize these other cable technician workers. I mean, this is the pool they're drawing from. And if the Spectrums [a cable company] or the whatever [01:08:30] Spectrum used to be [Time Warner Cable], I forget now if they're paying \$15 an hour for a technician to install cable, makes it harder for us to negotiate to give a guy \$40 an hour to install that same cable. And so that dynamic was still out there because a lot of locals just were concerned about the ones that were here versus the ones that weren't. And not thinking about how bringing the ones [01:09:00] that weren't into the fold would actually improve the lot for the ones that were here as well. They just saw them as competitors taking our jobs away versus they're in the same industry and it's an industry that we ought to be focused on and trying to address rather than just our parochial view of, give me mine and don't worry about the other guy.

John: I have a couple of questions about that. Do you mind if I sort of drill into that a little bit? Yeah. And my goal here is to try to do maybe [01:09:30] 20 more minutes and then sort of get you to the point where become you start to move out of this role and move up. But I want to dig into this bit. One question before I ask about the sort of new organizing piece. I want ask about seniority because one of the things that I should have asked Jim Irvine in our interview the other day, but now it was really interesting to me, is this question of seniority and how that affects this process. So here's my hypothetical. [01:10:00] Let's say that you are a longstanding AT&T Long Lines employee, and then all of a sudden all of that work starts to go away. Do you have any kind of transfer rights into a local Bell?

And are you trying to use those transfer rights to bump people out so that you can stay employed? Was that going on?

Jeff: So post-divestiture, that couldn't go to a Regional Bell Operating Company. There was an [01:10:30] imaginary wall that was placed even in some buildings, they would put a piece of tape down the floor. This part is AT&T Long Lines. This part is the operating company that was split off from AT&T. And so you didn't have that ability to go from one place to the other. There was some mobility that you had internally. If AT&T was shutting down an operation in Cleveland, they may say, well, we've got opportunities in Columbus or [01:11:00] even at Atlanta, Georgia, that kind of a thing. Now, it depends where you were at your lot in life, whether or not a move of your family and your roots was going to be worth taking that risk. Often people would opt not to and some would, and I think you're going to interview Ralph Maly, a good friend of mine, and he was in Buffalo, New York, and [01:11:30] they said, well, we're closing this factory here, this Western Electric factory, and if you want, you can go to Atlanta, Georgia.

Jeff: He went to Atlanta and then part of Atlanta gets closed. So people wind up bouncing around and that experience then chills anybody else willing to take that risk and make that move. Wait a minute, they're moving from Buffalo to Atlanta and then Atlanta closes. Now I got to go to Oklahoma City or wherever else it happens to be. It doesn't feel as secure. [01:12:00] So the notion is, all right, I'm just going to go start somewhere else. Now, if you are with 28 years of service and waiting and get that magic 30 number, you'll probably go to the ends of the earth to grab that even if it means temporarily relocating from your home for a couple of years and living in an apartment or something. But there were those kinds of opportunities. Now, they weren't universal. [01:12:30] That didn't always happen. They didn't always say, here's what's going to happen.

Jeff: What largely happened was that we would negotiate with the employers about was to create an incentive for those high-seniority people to leave a little earlier to say, okay, you've got 28 years. We'll give you these last two years and this little bonus to go ahead and take an early retirement. And people, the downside of that [01:13:00] was once you made one of those offers, then nobody would leave until another offer was made. So you would sit around and even though you had enough seniority to go and leave, you'd say, well, I'm going to wait until they make another offer. I want to get the offer. And so you wind up with these spikes, people leaving when there's an offer, and then you'd get a big valley afterwards because people would be just sitting back. There would be, some people would leave in a family circumstance, whatever it happened to be, but [01:13:30] you would be waiting for that big offer. You'd wait for that bonus. They're going to make a year's pay to go early. Oh, okay, I'll take that. I'll go now.



Jeff: But in many ways it was actually a more humane way to deal with it, and it made sense from the employer's perspective because it hopefully enabled them to keep some of the younger people who were probably more attuned to the new technology than the older hands who were used to [01:14:00] the old telco way of doing business. And so we had a lot of those peaks and valleys over the next, well, even today, you still have people that are going to wait until they make an offer. Everybody's waiting for that bonus to go ahead and retire. Now, some of that also changed. One of the other things [01:14:30] that the company did that I personally opposed at the time, but was overruled on, was beginning to offer lump sum pensions. So you would calculate the value of your pension and use an annuity table to figure out your life expectancy and how much it would be over a period of time. And so you could, for just to throw a number out there, you could walk [01:15:00] away from the phone company for \$275,000. Here's your \$275,000. This is your pension. You do [with] it what you want. Now if you just put it away and draw an annuity off of that, in theory, this shouldn't last for as long as we think you're going to live what the actuarial tables tell us that you'll live.

Jeff: I was just opposed to that in principle because, [01:15:30] and maybe it's not fair. I think it's just too risky. I think too many people make bad decisions about it. I know that sounds very paternalistic, and I'm sorry that it does, but it just, I saw too many people early on, they first offered it to management, they said, and of course they offered to management, and then it becomes a buzz among non-management. Oh, [01:16:00] he walked away with a quarter of a million dollars, and you're thinking, wow, this is huge. A quarter of a million dollars. Oh my gosh, I'd be set forever. What a great deal. And so there was already sort of a drumbeat within the phone company that we should go to this. This is something we want. And I just pushed back on it. I said, look, the employer should be obligated to, well, what if I die tomorrow?

Jeff: [01:16:30] Then my kids could have this money. Okay, yeah, but what if you live until you're 105, you're going to have to live off of this for the next 40 years instead of the next five years. And having this big pool sort of ensures you that you're going to be taken care of over that period of time. I lost that fight. I mean, it was just too popular among people. They all wanted it. And today that still is very popular. And so what you find happening [01:17:00] now is the actuarial tables use interest rates to calculate what that amount of money should be. And so just here recently, interest rates went way up, which meant you could get a bigger return, which meant you got a lower lump sum projecting that, okay, I can now earn 8% on this money when I was only earning two in the past.

Jeff: Well, if you went and took the lump sum when you were earning two, you got way more money because [01:17:30] the projection was you were going to only

earn 2% for the next umpteen years. So you wind up getting spikes like that now. And it affects the union too, because then the union did to go to a lump sum pension, which I tried to steer us back from when I became secretary-treasurer. In fact, that put in just again, this paternalistic notion, and I know that's not right, it shouldn't be that way, but I even offered half and half. You could take half a lump sum, but take half as a regular annuity from the employer. [01:18:00] And it didn't go over. I mean, it didn't take the way I'd hoped it would because that way you'd have some security, you had something going forward, and even if you frittered away, you're lump sum, you still had something.

Jeff: But to get back to where we were with this, , so that was the other way of trying to work through these surpluses as you went forward. And once you've done that a couple of times, then you've [01:18:30] basically pulled out everybody you're going to pull out. So that's when the layoffs actually really start to hit. That's when you try and scramble to find people jobs, wherever it happens to be. And at least initially, there was some ability to do that because you could say, alright, this location is going to need people. And because we got a higher take on the early pension offer out of Columbus. And so if you're in Cleveland instead of being laid-off, [01:19:00] you can go down to Columbus and work there. Of course, then that changes again as the industry reemerge together. And now instead of saying from Cleveland to Columbus, now you're going to go from Cleveland to Houston or Cleveland to San Antonio or Cleveland to St. Louis, and it makes it a little more daunting to make that move.

Jeff: But there was always the notion, whatever we could [01:19:30] do to minimize the layoffs was going to be a critical part of any negotiation. But at the end of the day, there were still going to be people after you've pulled all the possible strings that you can, people wind up having to see people laid off the job. It's been a difficult time in this industry. It's been a real challenge watching it just be completely transformed [01:20:00] in my lifetime. I mentioned in our first session, I worked at the payphone department. They're not there anymore, nobody has a payphone. Very few people have landlines. I don't know what the number is. I bet it's less than half of Americans. have landlines. And I would venture that most of those were over the age of 65.

Jeff: We've got connections to our homes so that we've got the internet, so we've got our television, so we've got [01:20:30] our music, whatever else is coming through that pipe, whether it's copper or fiber. And again, we haven't done a good enough job of organizing the rest of the industry. There's still plenty of jobs out there, and we just haven't been able to crack that nut. And so when you look at a leader like [Larry] Cohen, who I talked about before, [01:21:00] recognizing that and recognizing that the solution to that probably isn't internal, that it really is about labor law reform and making it easier for workers to organize that. That's

where the emphasis ought to be. Larry was brilliant in that regard, but he didn't have sort of a lobbyist personality to kind of make [01:21:30] the argument, just one of the smartest guys I've ever known, probably the smartest guy I've ever known and able to think strategically, but just tough to get all of our colleagues in the movement to come along to that point of view. When you've got so many of them that are just sitting on what they've got. And I'll hold at this point. I'll play this out because [01:22:00] I'm at this point in my career and I don't have the energy or the forethought to go out there and reach a little bit. But we need to, I mean, we can't fix this problem internally in CWA. The Steel Workers can't fix it internally in the steel industry, and then all the industries there in or the UAW.

Jeff: I think about the UAW [01:22:30] and all of these factories that these foreign competitors have built in the United States. They recognize the value of having the factory her, there's supply chain, there's all kinds of issues, and they've made a conscious decision. Yeah, okay, that makes sense. I'm going to put my plant in South Carolina, or I'm going to put my plant in Tennessee or wherever it happens to be. And just thinking about what labor law reform would do to the United Auto Workers, it's probably a clearer example than the telecom industry. But [01:23:00] the telecom industry is the same way. I mean, people's homes are still getting wired, people are still getting, they're using wireless phones. There's still an industry that requires people power to make it work. And we ought to be representing all those people that are making that happen.

Jeff: And we don't. It's largely because of the way labor laws are structured today where the employer can [01:23:30] play it however they want. They can make the unit as small as they want or as large as they want, depending on what their perception is of how things are going to go. So I don't have the answer. I don't know how we make that change. We had a couple of windows where we failed to make it happen. We had a filibuster [01:24:00] majority in the Senate, and we had the House in the first couple of years of the Obama administration.

Jeff: He [Obama] put his emphasis on healthcare. I get it. I mean, I completely understand that. But I think we could have done a few things in the meantime. I think we could have walked and chewed gum at the same time. Obama was a wonderful president, but he is not a Joe Biden. He doesn't know how to get things done in the legislature. [01:24:30] Biden, he was not my first, second, third, fourth choice for the nomination this last go round. But he has accomplished things that are just remarkable. And to his credit, and he gets pilloried for a lot of it, but I can only imagine if we'd had a Biden presidency, we would have card check now, we would have labor law reform. He's [01:25:00] done amazing things with scant majorities. And anyway, that's going down a completely different path.

John: Well, it's okay. So I'm going to ask one more sort of specific question that's going to take us back to the eighties and nineties in order to sort of wrap this piece up, if

that's all right. Sure. And it's just to put, again, to put some bones on the big ideas we've been talking about. So I think I'm right. Tell [01:25:30] me if I'm right about this, that here in this moment when the big changes, of course happen most quickly and dramatically in long-distance, and then you've got, they're slower to happen in the Baby Bells. And I want to use MCI again as the example. So is it a matter of MCI plants [01:26:00] being operated, or at least initially in the same territory, MCI would open up whatever kind of facility they needed to operate in New York or in Cleveland or in LA. And so there really were these new facilities operated by non-union employers that could have been targets for new organizing, but [01:26:30] campaigns were failing. That's what we've got before we get the offshoring right. Before those call centers go overseas, what's happening?

Jeff: Yeah. To be fair, MCI and a lot of those long-distance companies that popped up back at the first point of deregulation didn't have a lot of infrastructure. They were able to use existing networks, and so their employee base was much smaller. [01:27:00] Their employee base was basically a sales operation. It was really hard to crack that. That was part of the resentment in the industry was, look, these guys are riding on the network that we built, and they're getting essentially a free ride on. They're buying bundled service and then reselling it to consumers at a rate much lower than what the phone company was offering.

Jeff: There was that resentment. But [01:27:30] to be fair, we didn't target the pieces that we could have targeted at MCI. They still had call centers. Somebody was, when you saw the commercial for MCI to call MCI or MCI was calling your phone on a daily basis to ask you to switch. People were doing that. Those were human beings, and it was just such a jolt to us. I think we just went into the hunker down mode right away [01:28:00] instead of punching out. Our best attempt at punching out was saying, oh, we'll ask people to switch. If you don't behave well, that wasn't really going to fix the problem in the long term. That industry was going to continue to erode. I certainly didn't foresee it eroding to the level that it did with long-distance. It's completely free. Now. I have a sister in Germany I can call for free, which would've been a fortune back in the day.

Jeff: [01:28:30] So our initial reaction was just a defense posture. And not to use a sports analogy, but in this instance, the best defense would've been a good offense. And just going on the offense against MCI and trying to organize it, and we did some efforts on it, but they were just on the surface. We really never said, it is worth [01:29:00] our while to invest big sums of money in organizing this industry. Part of that does come from, it's a tough lift with existing locals and members to say, we ought to be spending some of your resources on giving these people over here who are eating your lunch right now, a union. So you've got that resentment factor. I think [01:29:30] we've overcome that largely at this point. People recognize now, for the most part, again, I'm 12 years, 11 years removed

from this, but it does feel like we've gotten ourselves through that and are at a better place when it comes to regards to that.

Jeff: But we weren't at the outset. And that window that might've been open, I don't know how wide it was open, might've just been cracked open, I don't know. But we didn't [01:30:00] try and jimmy it all the way open and go through it at the moment, myself included. I mean, again, I was a staff at that point, and I was just fixated on, I got plenty of problems here. I got 99 problems and MCI isn't one in my world. So I was working on servicing, and that's part of what we missed at that point, [01:30:30] that you could service better if you would actually organize more. And that's what Morty [Bahr] brought. He brought Cohen on as an executive vice president, recognizing his organizing skills, and then Cohen, obviously just over a period of time just changed us to a more organizing focused culture. You'll talk with others that have been around over the past [01:31:00] decade or so to see how that culture has sustained in a post-Cohen world. Whether that continues to go on, I think it does. I mean, it seems like it does. It seems like there's a much more robust organizing structure within the union than there certainly was. When I was around in my time on staff, Marty Hughes, the vice president then, and [01:31:30] was focused on organizing public workers, and we had a big public workers campaign.

Jeff: He helped get a governor elected [Richard Celeste, 1983-1991]. We passed the collective bargaining law here in the state of Ohio [1983] And then we went about very aggressively trying to organize those workers. And we had a number of folks come in from around the country to help us do that. Hindsight is 2020. They had a philosophy of we're organize [01:32:00] these small units all over the state and we'll build up this momentum and perception that we now are the public employee union. And so we did that, and we had, I forget what it was, 20 some victories in a row, 20 organizing victories in a row. But there were largely 20 people here, 15 here, 40 here. And in the meantime, you had an existing organization [01:32:30] of, it was called the Ohio Civil Service Employees Association that represented employees but hadn't had contract bargaining rights up until then, and asked me who had organized some smaller jurisdictions around the state who were still much better positioned than we were to ultimately win. So when they had the big statewide elections for the large units, we lost every one of the to AFSCME/OSCEA. [01:33:00] But we had spent literally thousands and thousands of dollars and hours trying to win those elections.

Jeff: And with some very smart people, I mean, he brought in some real talent. One of the organizers wound up being a Supreme Court justice here in Ohio [William O'Neill] Another one of the organizers brought in ultimately became president of the largest [01:33:30] CWA public sector local and public sector local period in the state of New Jersey. Some really talented people, so it wasn't for lack of effort.

I mean, we certainly made an effort in that regard. But again, that was sort of this marriage of political action and organizing that Marty was shepherding through this period of time, very effective. And unfortunately, the outcome [01:34:00] wasn't what we'd hoped for, but thousands of public workers in the state of Ohio now have a union because of the work he did. And anybody who was around at the time will tell you that if there was one person that was responsible for the collective bargaining law in the state of Ohio, aside from the governor saying it's something he wanted to do, it was Marty. And the governor said he wanted to do it because Marty told him he wanted to do it and made it happen. And we got [01:34:30] a really good law out of that period of time.

John: And that was the late seventies though, right?

Jeff: Yeah, that was again, trying to do the math on it. I'm guessing [19]78, [19]79, somewhere in that timeframe. There are others that could tell you the specific date, but I think Celeste was elected in [19]78 and then so [19]79, he would've taken office, and it was within the first year that he was there. So I'm guessing [19]79 is probably [01:35:00] the best guess on that. [Correction: Richard Celeste took office in 1983. Public sector collective bargaining law passed in 1983.]

John: Well, so just one more question before we close this session, which is, so we know that you go on to have a career as well at the national level with CWA. So how do you go from here in the trenches of the staff in southern Ohio to that position? Can you tackle that for us?

Jeff: Yeah, so as I think I mentioned yesterday, Marty, [01:35:30] was attracted to me because I could do math. I wasn't an accountant or anything, but I could do math. And so he would rely on me for just doing a lot of calculations on things. Funny story, again, this goes back to the way that Marty operated asked me to interview for a job on Thanksgiving Day. [01:36:00] Every year, because our contracts had a cost of living clause that I mentioned earlier, had a cost of living clause in them. You would calculate it based on the formula, the Consumer Price Index that came out in April of a particular month, and that would be released in late May. And so then you would do the calculation to figure out, and for every job title, it was a different number. So he would have me every [01:36:30] year do this calculation so that we could beat the phone company to the punch. So the moment that Consumer Price Index was released, I would set about to do the calculation and figure out exactly what a service rep was going to be making, what a lineman was going to make, what a top craft was going to make, what a clerical was going to make. The five or six most populous job titles I would figure out for each one of them. So you were going to get a raise of \$25 or whatever it happened [01:37:00] to be. So

John: You knew that the boss's costs before they did.

Jeff: Well, they probably knew what the same time, but we had an infrastructure to get that message out to the local unions, and so beat them to the punch so the boss couldn't claim credit for, oh, I'm giving you this raise. We wanted people to know this was because we negotiated it and we had, there's the letter that we'd, oh, as a result of our negotiations, blah, blah, blah, here's what people are going to be earning. And it was an effective tool. I mean, people had, again, some ownership [01:37:30] of this raise came from the fact that they were part of a union. So that was one of my jobs. And the one year, a very good friend of mine, I didn't have a lot of money, and she said, well, my parents passed away and my brother and I inherited this cottage on Cape Cod, and we rent it out most of the summer. We take it for a couple of weeks ourselves, but usually I go up [01:38:00] there to open it up and get it ready for the season. But if you want, you can go up and open it up and get it ready for the season, and you could stay there for a week. Well, my daughter at the time was three or four, so not in school. And so you opened it up in May, which was also the same time that these Consumer Price Index came about.

Jeff: I said, well, I'd love that. That'd be great. Right on the ocean. It was wonderful. Free place, great. Load up the car. I'm going to go. [01:38:30] So I picked that week for vacation, and it was also the week that the Consumer Price at Index was going to be released. So what I did leading up to that week, you had a sense of where it was going to be within a couple of percentage points. And so I did 10 different calculations based on what it could have been for all five of these job titles. I would just do each one and just trying to figure out if [01:39:00] the consumer price goes to here, then this will mean this, this, this, this. And so I did 10 different ones and I gave them to my secretary and I told her, I said, look, I will call you and let you know which one this actually came out to be, and then go ahead and put the letter together based on that.

Jeff: Okay, great. So I drive up to Cape [01:39:30] Cod. We left at midnight or something. So you're driving at night, easy drive, get there, get to the house, go down to this little grocery store, not even a grocery store, like a little [01:40:00] convenient mart. All along the Cape was just these little mom and pop shops to buy some groceries. And so I go down there, my wife and daughter are back at the house. I'm picking up a bunch of groceries. I go up to the counter, the old guy at the counter to check out, and he says, is your name Jeff? Yes. You know that I look at my jacket. Do I have it on my jacket or something? [01:40:30] You're supposed to call Marty Hughes.

Jeff: I said, what do you mean? I was supposed to call Marty Hughes. He called here earlier and he said, if you came in, I was to tell you to call him as soon as possible. He had had a secretary call every single little market. I told him where I was going to be. I was going to be in Eastham. And he called every single grocery

store a little convenient mart in that whole strip [01:41:00]. If they hadn't released it yet. That's right. The secretary had the numbers, but they hadn't released yet. That's right. They're going to release it on Monday morning. This is Saturday. So there's no phone at the place. There's no cell phones, obviously. So there's a payphone outside. So I call into the office, this is on a Saturday. We always worked on Saturday. You worked at least a half a day on a Saturday.

Jeff: So I called back to the office and I explained to him, I said, look, I've done the [01:41:30] calculations. As soon as they release the number, it'll be one of those 10. I want you back here, but I'm telling you, it'll be one of these numbers. I mean, I've done the math. I know exactly what it's going to be. I need you here. Alright. So I go back to the house, drop the groceries off, tell my wife, drive out to Provincetown where I can catch a plane, catch a [01:42:00] plane to Boston. Boston to Cleveland. Arrive in Cleveland Saturday evening, maybe they released it on Sunday. I think they did. I think they actually released it on Sunday. They didn't want to release it when markets were open. So they released it on Sunday. And I said, well, here it is. It was number three on the calculations that I made.

Jeff: We prepared the letter, signed it. He faxed it out. I think we had machines back then, or put it in the mail. I think we mailed it, actually. I don't think we even had fax machines. So we mailed [01:42:30] it out to everybody At that point. I went to the airport, got a plane, flew back to Boston, back to Provincetown. My car was sitting out there, drove back to the cottage, spent the week at the cottage. He owned you and you knew it. I mean, it was, like I said, when I read the [Robert] Caro books [about Lyndon Johnson], they just sounded so familiar. It's exactly that way of operating. You were obligated, and he would play that obligation your entire career. [01:43:00] And he did mean. But again, like Lyndon Johnson, he accomplished some incredible things, some things that didn't work out so great for him either. And so the similarities between the two of them are different on scale, but not in the way they played out.

Jeff: So two very powerful individuals who were able to manipulate [01:43:30] people in a way that I hadn't been familiar with. And just over time got this increasing awareness of how that he would call you Sunday mornings, there was no restriction. There was no, oh, this is off limits vacation. Nothing. You were going to be at beck and call. And the guy that took his place, Bob Johnson, I'll never forget, his daughter was getting married down in Portsmouth, Ohio. Bob [01:44:00] and Sharon had moved up here from Portsmouth, and their daughter had moved up here with him, but her boyfriend was still down in Portsmouth. So they get married and family and friends were all down in Portsmouth, and the wedding was going to be in Portsmouth.

Jeff: So Bob was taking the week off before the wedding and a couple days after, and Marty called him up here on Friday before the wedding. The day before the



wedding. He needed him up here. Some [01:44:30] bullshit thing. I don't remember what it was. Bob came up here. Sharon was madder than a wet hen. I mean, she was pissed. But Bob came up here and did whatever Marty needed to do and raced back down to Portsmouth to get down there in time for that wedding on Saturday morning. But it was this, I would call it an exercise of power, but it was really more an exercise of manipulation. [01:45:00] It was just letting you know, here's what the hierarchy is, here's what the structure is. You've agreed to come on here and you've made the deal here with the devil, and so you're going to continue to pay the price throughout the time that you're working for me.

John: Were there rewards for loyalty?

Jeff: I guess the reward for loyalty was you got increased responsibility, I suppose. [01:45:30] I never got promoted by Marty. I was always a staff rep. As soon as Bob became vice president, he promoted me to an assistant role. I literally functioned as Marty's assistant for the last three or four years that he was vice-president. His office [01:46:00] had two doors, one door that went out to his secretary and the second door went to a connecting office, and I was in that connecting office. So I mean, I literally was functioning in that role. So I guess the reward was the attaboys more than anything else. But I don't want to be that cold about it because I felt good about what I was doing. You like the work, you enjoy the work [01:46:30] at each step.

Jeff: If I pleased the boss, I was able to do more meaningful pieces of the work, given more trust to do more of the work. And so you train a pet dog. I was being trained to be the pet dog here, and the reward was, I got a pat on the head and okay, now you can have the run of the backyard. And again, [01:47:00] that piece of my career led to bigger pieces later on. So my reward, as they say, came in heaven as I moved on later on in my career. And as I indicated, so Bob Johnson, when he became vice president, we had two states, and Marty had [01:47:30] two people in sort of assistant positions, one in Michigan, Mike Handley, and one down here in Ohio, Bob Johnson. And both were perceived as sort of contenders to take over when Marty left.

Jeff: He made Mike his number two person and promoted him to the assistant job. There's like a hierarchy. So you've got the vice president, the assistant, and then a couple of administrative assistants. And he promoted me to administrative assistant, but I functioned as the assistant because I was here, co-located with him. But Mike got the assistant [01:48:30] title just out of here's the perception that the two of them were the leaders. And Mike really led the entire operation force up in Michigan. And so he had a different kind of role than I had where I was more of the support role. Mike was actually in a leadership role up in Michigan. So I was the administrative assistant and [01:49:00] stayed in that same office adjacent to the vice president's office. Jeff:

John:           So with your permission, I'm going to turn this off. All right? Sure.