

Communications Workers of America Oral History Project

Interviewee: Rocha, Louie

Interviewer: Jeff Rechenbach

Date of Interview: May 6, 2024

Place of Interview: San Jose, California (interview conducted over zoom)

Page Total: 20

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

**Jeff** [00:00:00] We're here today. It's May 6th, 2024. I'm joined today by Louis Rocha in San Jose, California and Debbie Goldman in Washington DC and Hannah Goldman in Brooklyn, New York. So we're covering the coasts, the Midwest, and we've got them all on board.

**Debbie** [00:00:25] Jeff, why don't you mention your name.

**Jeff** [00:00:33] I'm Jeff Reichenbach, retired secretary-treasurer of the Communications Workers [of America]. [Jeff is in Cleveland, Ohio. The interview was conducted over zoom.] Louie, this project, as Debbie explained to you, is just trying to collect oral histories from some key leaders and it wouldn't be complete without talking to the legend that you are, particularly your experiences on the West Coast are just too many to mention so we're hoping we can get to as many as possible over the next couple of hours here. Before we get into your career, though, let's just take a couple of minutes and talk a little bit about your upbringing. When were you born? Where? Siblings, that sort of thing just for a little background.

**Louie** [00:01:24] Thank you. Yes. Well, I was born November 8th, 1957. My mother always called me an election day baby because my birthday came around election day, maybe a few days off several years. I was born in San Jose, California. It's been my hometown pretty much since I was born and I actually live a few miles from the old neighborhood where I grew up and where my grandparents had a little ranch. So I'm one of the last remaining family members in the area, but still here.

**Jeff** [00:02:04] Okay. Any siblings?

**Louie** [00:02:06] Yeah, I had two sisters and one brother.

**Jeff** [00:02:12] And where are you in the pecking order?

**Louie** [00:02:14] I'm the third from the oldest. We actually had two older sisters and one younger brother.

**Jeff** [00:02:22] Okay, cool. What did your parents do for a living?

**Louie** [00:02:27] My father was Louie Rocha Senior and he was born in Fresno, California. He got into trouble after getting back from Korea and he ended up in San Quentin prison. But fortunately, when he came out of prison he was able to find work. In fact, he got his act together by becoming, first, a Teamster and later a union carpenter. It later impacted my life a lot knowing that for many of the challenges in our community, having a good union job is the solution for many of our social ills. I can talk later about his challenges within his union and their strategy, the carpenters and so on. My mother was actually a Teamster as well. I'm actually a third-generation union member. My grandparents were also union. Most of them. My grandfathers were railroad workers and my grandmother, one of my maternal grandmothers, was also a Teamster. My aunts, my mother, grandmother, they all worked in canneries. After they moved from the fields, they moved into cannery work as they settled in more urban areas in California.

**Jeff** [00:04:04] So the trade union movement is in your genes, apparently.

**Louie** [00:04:08] It is actually. I want to say we were pretty well versed in how unions operate, but also, more importantly, what their purpose was, because my, aunts, uncles, cousins, growing up, my mother's siblings, they were in the UAW. [United Auto Workers] They worked at the Ford plant. They were at General Motors. Uncles were Letter Carriers. They worked at Lockheed. The goal in our family growing up, the people that had a decent living, had purchased homes, had new cars, had lived the American Dream were those that were fortunate to have a union job, which back in the late [19]50s and [19]60s was largely the majority, at least in my family. It was a very union extended family and all that went with it because there was a lot of discussion, especially with the UAW, because my uncles were committeemen, I think that was the word that they used. And with all that was going on in the [19]60s with the Farm Workers' movement, we were active. They were active. We were supportive and supporting the Farm Workers. It wasn't just their union focus.

**Louie** [00:05:44] That's the other lesson that I learned, the trade or whatever industry they were part of, it was for the community. And that's something, [I] learned early on, lobbying and agitating for street improvements and putting gutters and sidewalks in many of the impoverished areas that our families lived in. Even though they were middle-class or considered middle-class at that time, the infrastructure in the city, there was poor lighting in the neighborhood, there was lack of safety, with road improvement, sidewalks, gutters. When it rained, many of the streets, the sidewalks, it was a mess. That's more I think [a] broader view of the family role. The one thing I need to mention, though, my parents also suffered. My father was an alcoholic and my mother had suffered from mental illness as well as alcoholism. And so even though they were union, and that's what I often raise and it was really good to find out through CWA, our focus on serving the community and community services. Because I gravitated toward that, United Way and other work in the union to support that because what I experienced and knew through no fault of my parents, but they won that lottery that you don't want family members to win. That basically leads to a lot of let's just say stress and trauma.

**Debbie** [00:07:38] Can I ask a couple questions? What union were the cannery workers?

**Louie** [00:07:49] So they were the Cannery Workers, that's their name but they were affiliated with the Teamsters. So we call them Teamsters but the Cannery Workers Union was an offshoot of the Teamsters.

**Debbie** [00:08:03] This was your grandparents. So this was back in the [19]30s and [19]40s.

**Louie** [00:08:08] Actually, my mother's family moved during the Depression from Arizona to California and they settled in San Jose in 1940, I believe it was. They found employment. They had been working in the fields from Arizona through California. But they settled in San Jose because one of my uncles had a connection with the ranch that was fairly large. It was called the McCarthy ranch in San Jose, actually Milpitas. So they had a connection, a family friend that was there. So the family came in and they were working in the fields until they got the work in the canneries. The cannery work didn't begin until the early [19]40s. My mother was in grade school then but my grandmother and my mother's older sisters found work in the canneries. It was during World War II especially because there was a labor shortage, more or less, in certain industries. That was one where they were able to find work. So it wasn't until the [19]40s, although, you're right, the cannery workers, they had been trying to organize them since the 1920s, what I understand in the Santa Clara Valley. It had been a long fight to get them organized. I guess after [19]35 was when they were successful.

**Debbie** [00:09:57] The reason I was so interested was my mother-in-law was an organizer with a union she called UCAPAWA, United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America. A very left union. There are some very interesting books, including an oral history of her, about her organizing with UCAPAWA, a lot of women cannery workers.

**Louie** [00:10:36] So the joke in our family. My family weren't leaders, per se other than the UAW, other unions, postal. But in the cannery workers, they were not in leadership roles. But a joke was in our family, they would forgive you if you cheated on your spouse. But if you crossed the picket line, you were done in our family, a scab, you're not forgiven. In fact, that was the worst shame you could get rendered, someone scab. It just didn't happen in our family.

**Debbie** [00:11:20] And it sounds like from Arizona and then California you've got some deep roots. What's your grandparents' and your parents' ethnic background?

**Louie** [00:11:30] My grandparents, both sides are Mexican and Indigenous heritage. My grandfathers both came during World War I. My great-grandfather on my father's side found employment with the railroad as well as his son, my grandfather. My father's family came north from El Paso, Texas (said in a Mexican pronunciation) and then worked their way toward California and eventually settled in Fresno. That is where my father's family has been since, I believe it was 1916, 1918, somewhere around there because one of the first births of my father's oldest sibling was in Fresno, and I believe that was in 1919. So they had been there already. Then my mother's family came through Arizona. My grandfather was born in 1890 and actually I was blessed to know him. He was a man of all trades, a cowboy vaquero. He found employment in the railroad industry. And actually, both of my grandfathers, their pension that they earned from the railroad, actually tided the families over during the Great Depression and helped them get through some tough years. My grandfather on my mother's side had been working in the U.S. since I believe 1905, brought my grandmother across in I believe it was 1920 when they came up through Sonora, and settled in Arizona. They had lived in the Gila River Indian Reservation because at that time they weren't accepted. Mexicans were the bottom of the ladder and so they survived on Indian reservations where they were accepted and labored alongside the native tribes. But they left Arizona in 1940. My aunt, my oldest aunt, my tia had married a Filipino-American. They had met in the field. This is part of the complex diaspora of American immigration. The Filipinos could not bring women with them when they immigrated. So, and this is true throughout 1915 through the 1940, [19]50 time period, many Filipino-Americans married Hispanic, Native American, white, black women because they couldn't bring their [Filipino women] because of immigration laws. So my aunt married a Filipino man who had served in the U.S. Calvary. That's how he got from the Philippines here. They met up and long story short, he's the one that brought our family, because Filipino and Mexican immigrants have a long history working in the fields, as other people do. The legacy of the agribusiness industry in this country is pretty storied. But my uncle's the one that brought the family. I might add that my mother always told us in the labor camps her best friends were from Oklahoma or Arkansas. In fact, one of my sister's name is Deborah Jean. My real name is Luis Hernandez Rocha and my brother's Francisco, but my sister's Deborah Jean. That was my mother's best friend in the camp. She was what they call an Okie or, I apologize if that's derogatory. But that was part of her upbringing, but she loved the names of her friends who happened to be white, that she played with and were her best friends. I may be rambling a little so reign me in if you guys need to.

**Jeff** [00:16:18] That's what this is all about. Please.

**Debbie** [00:16:20] I have just a one word question. A yes or no. Did you speak Spanish in the home and do you speak Spanish?

**Louie** [00:16:30] So that's a complex question of my parents. I was blessed to know my great-grand maternal grandmother, which only spoke Spanish. My grandfather only spoke Spanish, mostly. But we could not speak Spanish. We were disciplined or instructed, we were told, because my parents were disciplined when they were growing up. My father in Fresno, my mother in San Jose. They were punished if they spoke Spanish. So they didn't want us to experience that. They're of that generation that were traumatized by their experience with that. So we had to understand it, but we couldn't speak it. That actually led to many of my generation -- and my kids were very bothered by that because I couldn't teach them. That really stuck in my head because my parents wanted us to succeed. And their parents, my grandparents, and that was just taboo because of really the trauma that they faced in school when they spoke it. That really did hurt my father because he loved his family, his parents, obviously. But when he went to school, he was quickly taught, no, you don't speak that here.

**Jeff** [00:18:06] Where did you wind up going to school?

**Louie** [00:18:10] I went to school in East San Jose pretty much.

**Jeff** [00:18:14] Public school?

**Louie** [00:18:15] My father and mother of course were living the American Dream. They bought a house in East San Jose for I believe it was 12,000. But with these working-class mass neighborhoods when San Jose was booming in the in the [19] 50s and [19]60s, they bought two new homes, had new cars. I remember us going to Disneyland. Just incredible. It was a good time with all the social ills and everything going on. I don't want to romanticize what was the period like. But for the family, it was a good, good time. I went to school in East San Jose. The elementary school, I believe, it's Alum Rock School District. I actually spoke there a few months ago at some event, the community rally, and I actually shared that [is] where I learned my Si Se Puede attitude in the [19]60s. No, it was 1970. We actually had a school walkout in middle school. We were protesting the lack of Chicano and Mexican teachers, the lack of our history being shared with the other students being taught and other things. That was my exposure first, probably, time getting active with community groups and fighting. Because I remember picketing when I was in middle-school, we were picketing Kmart, for example, because they would only hire Hispanic janitors, for example. Bank of America didn't have any Chicano tellers and so on. And so it was in the school as well with my family and other influences that that got me active. And there's been no turning back since. I graduated from Overfelt High School in 1975 in East San Jose.

**Jeff** [00:20:30] That's remarkable. I mean, in junior high school to be an activist like that.

**Louie** [00:20:35] Well, in high school, I was named, I forget, troublemaker, I forget the word they called it, most liberal, because we actually went on a field trip when [Ronald] Reagan was governor, and we actually got in trouble because we were spitting loogies at the window and [unintelligible]. I actually remember, they called us in, brought us in, and he gave us jelly beans or something.

Louie Rocha Interview – May 6, 2024

**Debbie** [00:21:32] Jeff, do you know what it means? Spitting loogies?

**Jeff** [00:21:35] Yes.

**Debbie** [00:21:36] I don't. Is it clean? Can you tell us?

**Jeff** [00:21:40] Oh, sure. Yes. Go ahead, Louis, go ahead.

**Louie** [00:21:42] So it's spitting up the phlegm in your throat and throwing it.

**Debbie** [00:21:46] Oh, spitting.

**Jeff** [00:21:48] Yes, but it's the stuff that's deep in there. The colored stuff, not just clear.

**Louie** [00:21:58] The high school years though were very turbulent, and this is all what led to my macro vision of the world, because I was on the edge. I was part of that lost souls -- could go end up like my father. I was always struggling with that, whether I would take the wrong path in life. But I was fortunate to have one teacher that was incredibly committed to the field and the community. She actually, her name was Janet Espinosa. She was a white lady married to a Hispanic male. She actually saved my education. She was a math teacher and she always had a bright mind. I had potential I guess. My mother said when I was a little baby, that I would read the phone book. And mind you that was the only -- it was either the Bible or the phone book. There weren't too many books in our house that I recall. But Janet, the reason why I point her out and will always be remembered as one of my favorite influential teachers was because she taught calculus and trigonometry and she actually lived in our neighborhood a few blocks from me. So when I was in high school she had a pool table in her garage so we wanted to always go over there play pool. But the thing was, we had to do our homework. She taught and I excelled, was one of the few Chicano kids. In fact, growing up, half of my friends didn't graduate. The dropout rate was probably 50%. Most of my friends, in fact, I was one of the few that graduated from high school, but my mother was stick with education was critical or was always stressed. But, Janet, in fact, she got me through some rough times when I was having with my family, but, the great thing, though, is later she ran a math institute. So all of my sons and daughters went through this math institute with her and they all excelled and got through math in their high school. She was just such a special person. I give credit to her wherever I can for her passion and just going above and beyond with the students at the school she taught at in our neighborhood. Because most of the teachers didn't live in the neighborhood. Like everyone else, they moved on to where they would rather be raising their families.

**Jeff** [00:25:04] Have you been able to share these thoughts with her as well?

**Louie** [00:25:08] I did the last time. We've lost contact. She came to my graduation when I graduated from college. I saw her when I would take my kids. In fact, there was another teacher that was pretty cool. Tim McDonough. McDonough. M-C-D-O-N-O-U-G-H. But he became the principal of the high school in the good neighborhood where I eventually moved my family to. So I've gone full circle, at least with the teachers that I had really good connection or they were influential in my formation. I could go on.

**Jeff** [00:25:58] You mentioned two books in your house, the phone book and the Bible. What was your religious upbringing like?

**Louie** [00:26:06] My father was Catholic. My mother was Protestant. So we did double duty, which was, at times, just, probably why, I'm more secular now. I believe strongly in the division of church and state. I look back, it was their view, although we didn't really like it, Sundays sometimes we went to both churches, but my grandparents were very religious, my father's Catholic and my mother's Protestant.

**Jeff** [00:26:43] And so, after high school, what's your next move?

**Louie** [00:26:49] So part of the tragedy of my life, the conflict. It was my senior year in high school. I believe it was either 1974, [19]75. I got into trouble with a gang and they attacked my house. My mother was there, and we, a friend were able to survive. Pretty serious, actually dodged several serious encounters with people that, let's just say they didn't have good intentions. My mother and my father had divorced in the late [19]60s. My mother was there trying to keep it together for all of us. She had to move because I was going to, I had just been -- the contradictions. I had been accepted to the University of Santa Clara and the University of California at Santa Cruz. I had two school options. So I was leaving to go to UC Santa Cruz and I wouldn't be there to take care of my mother. She just lost it and left and moved in with her parents because it wasn't safe. That's part of, like I said, the duality just surviving, the people that I had issues with, that had issues with me. Of course, they didn't have good union jobs. They were running in the streets and looking for trouble. I just happened to cross their paths. It's one of the bittersweet moments. My mother loved that little house that her and my father had gotten. That's not a proud moment in my past because I'm a flawed person and that's part of my legacy. I did work my best to make it up to my mother. She actually, before she passed, she lived with us. I took care of her and did the best I could to make amends. But it was pretty traumatizing for her that whole experience.

**Jeff** [00:29:10] She had to be pretty proud of you going on to college, though. I would think that would have been a big deal.

**Louie** [00:29:16] It was. I was the first in my family to go to college. I'll get to that because that's an interesting story. It's been a unique, pretty wild at time journey.

**Jeff** [00:29:31] So get to it. Go for it.

**Louie** [00:29:33] I had been accepted to a couple schools. Like I said, Santa Clara, the Jesuit school, and I believe I was number five in my class. So I had several options. Science always fascinated me. I was able to master math. I believe I was 16 when the United States Geological Survey [USGS], I was a junior, they hired me as an intern and I remember my friends telling me, Louie, you go to work and you don't come back dirty. They couldn't believe it that I was actually going to Menlo Park, because I would take the bus from East San Jose to Menlo Park, where the USGS campus was. That got me to a place that I had never even in my wildest dreams thought I could be or experience because I was working in the Redwood National Forests up [in] Eureka, up that way, it was, I forgot, Crescent City. We were measuring clear-cutting runoff. We were measuring the water runoff. I got to make topographic maps. I was the geologic assistant. I was a grunt. That's a fancy name for a grunt. So making topographic maps in Mammoth in the high Sierra of the eastern Sierra, also installing tilt meters. I got to work on earthquake research, installing tilt

meters along the San Andreas Fault. So that opened the door for me. I worked at the USGS through college until it ran its course. I believe it was 19 -- Because of the Geological Survey that's why I went to UC Santa Cruz. They had a very good environment, I forgot the term [of] the school, Earth Sciences, and so that was my initial field that [I] was gung ho, really committed to becoming a geologist.

**Louie** [00:32:16] Then what happened, though, was, South Africa happened and I got active in the anti-apartheid movement and actually started, I believe it was 19, it might have been [19]76. There was a massive protest on at UCSC, and we shut down the campus. Over 500 students were arrested. I was the minister of defense or whatever. I led the march and was overseeing security and also the occupation of the administration building. That was a big, big fight. It might have been [19]77, I have to check on the dates, because I actually left Santa Cruz, the campus, I dropped out in [19]78 after I returned from Mexico. I was an exchange student. That's really when I started questioning things more just in depth. Because when I went to Mexico, I was in Oaxaca of all places, which was at the University of Benito Juarez in Oaxaca, which is the school that we were affiliated with while we were there. It was under military occupation and there was a whole -- In fact, we had went to Guatemala and Guerrero state. There was a lot of students that were disappearing. There was literally the Mexican army with their automatic rifles occupying the campuses. That just blew me away. Then in Guatemala finding the massacre of indigenous people had just occurred in Chiquimula before we had arrived. My whole worldview just was turned upside down. I mean, I knew about the Mexican Revolution, knew about the social problems, the poverty and stuff, but the corruption and the political oppression, the oppression, the class warfare just set me off. So I dropped out and decided I wanted to help agitate the working class. I tried to get a job at the oil refinery in southern California because I had moved to L.A. to join the working class as an idealistic college person that [was] just sick and tired of how things really were in this country. I ended up getting hired [by] Pacific Telephone and Telegraph as [a] splicer in 1979. And then I had broken up with a girlfriend that I had there in East L.A. and I moved back north. I quit the phone company, came up north, and walked into the hiring office in the phone company and they hired me on the spot there as a lineman. This was all in 1979. I was a lineman at what became Pacific Bell from 1979 -- I retired after 43 years, but it was from AT&T I retired, end of 2022. [SBC bought Pacific Bell in 1997. SBC bought AT&T in 2005 and renamed the company AT&T.]

**Jeff** [00:36:18] So yes. Go ahead. Debbie.

**Debbie** [00:36:21] I had to unmute. Louie, I'm going to ask a question. If you don't want to answer it, it's fine. During this period, as you're radicalized in Mexico, Guatemala, you lead this big demonstration, there's a lot of activism. Were you part of any organized left group?

**Louie** [00:36:41] No, but good question. That's a fair question. I read Mao, I read Lenin, Stalin, and I ran with leftists in school. In fact, I forgot to mention. One of my profound experiences when I worked for the U.S. Geological Survey, I was 18 years old. I remember being in West Virginia. I had never seen poor white people in my life. But I got to work and live with them for months at a time. In fact, I went back to West Virginia in [19]75 the first time and later in [19]76, and I was reading Karl Marx, an 18 years-old in West Virginia with the most impoverished people I had seen in the U.S. Mind you, I had worked in the fields, had been in labor camps, but that just blew me away and actually shifted from a Chicano nationalist to a working-class view person. I never affiliated. I read, because of my problem with gangs, I never wanted to join political party. I never joined, I've never been a Democrat and I sure as hell never been a Republican. I've always been

independent. And the same with the political stuff. I read them but I never joined any of -- I have family members. My brother-in-law was a Maoist. I have friends that were Communist Party, friends that were socialist. Because of that experience with gangs, I just never wanted to pledge my allegiance to any group. I'm more working-class. That's my perspective. But that's a good, fair question. I usually get it, but never been a card-carrying member of a party.

**Jeff** [00:38:49] So you're back up north. You're working at the phone company. Talk a little bit about your union roots there. What were the seeds of your union activism at the beginning?

**Louie** [00:39:07] It really was the family. I mean, no one had asked me to sign a card. First day, I came up to the hall when I was hired, signed the card. I was a union member from day one. Lineman was a great job. I really enjoyed it because you got to use big trucks a lot. Every day was a different office view because we worked in the mountains, we weren't in the city area. And more importantly, there were some old linemen that were strong union supporters. So that was a good landing spot for me. But I knew the drill so I didn't take much prodding. I got active. There was strikes every contract pretty much. I remember 1980, there was one in [19]83, and I believe [19]86 might have been the AT&T, the nationwide or the legacy part. And then [19]89, we had a huge fight out here. So it was just strike after strike after strike. But I also knew I had to do stuff. So I signed on early as a mobilizer.

**Louie** [00:40:27] One of the things that got me active eventually, I had been moved from one yard to another and the steward there was such an arrogant, plus a racist. He wore a confederate cap. He was an officer in the local. He actually, I give credit to him for getting me to to step up and become a steward because he would tell us stuff like, "I can't tell you." It was bargaining, I believe in [19]86, and he just said, "I can't tell you." We would ask about bargaining, what's the status? He would come to the yard in a suit because he liked to impress. He thought he was a business agent, like construction building trades type. But what really pissed me off was he would use the N-word and to me that was just wrong as a union rep. The guys on the crew were saying Louie, you got a big mouth. Why don't you put in for being a steward or you know what you need to do. And so I got active through that experience with that person. Long story short, I actually ended up helping the guy years later when I was president, got a grievance settled so he was able to retire. It was funny, and even one of my kids, he was a baseball umpire. I saw him years later and he called some good [calls] for one of my kids playing baseball. So I never hold grudges. To me, life's too short. My mother had a saying, "no te apures pá que dures," don't trip over the stuff you have no control over. I learned that early on to in life. I don't waste time fighting with peers or holding grudges or stuff. My focus is on the class enemy, the employer, the corporations, the true oppressors. So even though I knew this guy was not really what a true unionist, didn't reflect that, but still I helped him out when he needed it and moved on after.

**Jeff** [00:43:01] So you didn't consider him unredeemable.

**Louie** [00:43:06] No. You know everybody's got their own walk in life or whatever. But no, he got defeated in the next election because him and his slate, I recall this was so bizarre. They were filming people working, because that's after divestiture [AT&T divestiture took place in 1984], so a lot of people were side hustling, doing inside wire and stuff, because that was all deregulated. Their goal was to help the company Pacific Bell. So they were filming people working moonlighting. It was like, okay, that's your campaign slogan ratting out people? Which although I get it, but that's his mentality, you fly the confederate flag plus rat out people.

**Jeff** [00:44:02] Talk a little bit about the makeup of the local. Was this purely a plant craft local? Were there service reps, operators?

**Louie** [00:44:12] Man. So back then, the local was a lot more diverse. In fact, we had I believe at least four operator offices. We had numerous call centers. I believe with the operators, the call center and the clerical, and billing, accounting, the females were probably a majority in the local. In fact during that time in the late [19]70s, the local transitioned from male to female and we had female president after female president. Lorraine Wedel, Vira Milirides, Sue Fowler, then after Sue was Nancy Biagini. There was a string of female leaders. The local, then because of downsizing and closing, has now today it's probably 90% male. It's really sad to see there isn't a recruitment focus anymore by AT&T. They had to because of the class action filed in the [19]70s by women and minorities. [In 1973, AT&T signed an affirmative action consent decree with the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission to hire women into technician jobs and men into operator and service representative jobs, and to increase the number of people of color in management jobs. The terms of the consent decree ended in 1978.] There is no push anymore to bring women into the technical titles. It's really unfortunate to see the call center work gone. Plus operator, that's a service that's really on its last leg. But the call center work, they've been closed for a number of years now, I can't even remember how far back.

**Debbie** [00:46:14] The women you mentioned, were they coming out of the service rep world, out of the operators, or out of technicians?

**Louie** [00:46:24] Very few came out as technicians. They came out of the billing. They had a huge accounting and billing center. That was the goal. If you wanted more pay, more than the operators, because operators, bless their heart, always [were] at the lowest level. But they were the badass, best ones to picket with. I'm telling you what, I was a steward first and I was on a picket line with operators, they didn't mess around. They also know how to split loogies. Nancy [Biagini] became a technician.

**Debbie** [00:46:59] I don't remember an [19]89 strike. Was it just Pacific Bell because this was after divestiture. Do you remember what it was about? How long?

**Louie** [00:47:11] Yes. We had actually two strikes that year. We actually had and I may be wrong on the amount of days. I know we had went out for a couple weeks. Then we had gotten a tentative [agreement] and then it was voted down. So then we went back out and the big issues were, I can't recall. Because people talk about the good old days like, damn, I don't know where and when those were. Because even when the company was a monopoly, they were bad. They were damn mean and tough and stingy. And so, I can't remember all the issues. I probably could find something, what they are. But then Loma Prieta earthquake happened, huge earthquake. Got both sides to the table and they worked out their differences. It took an act of God to settle the strike out west pretty much because that was serious and a lot of loss of life, lot of damage. So that's what ended up pushing both sides, well, pushing the company to be more reasonable.

**Jeff** [00:48:29] Tell us a little bit about your progression within the local. So you come in, you're a member, you become a mobilizer. Are you a steward at some point, or are there other jobs that you're doing in the local to an office?

**Louie** [00:48:44] I always loved writing and so I've got a collection of writing. Let me tell you. I've got a bunch of newsletters and stuff and one of my proudest achievements was winning the newspaper letter award when we used to have that competition. But I had written, and I'm going to show you one. I actually was writing, I read one, but before I get to that, let me share my notoriety. One of my claims to fame with Morty Bahr. [CWA national president, 1985-2005.] I believe it was [19]92, maybe. He came out, I may be wrong. I want to say it's [19]92. Him and Florence [Morty's wife] were invited by -- Janice Wood was the [District 9] vice-president. So that was before Tony Bixler was elected, Jeff you might remember.

**Louie** [00:49:40] So Morty came out. It was a great honor for the local. I was a steward, already a rabble rouser, was in the greeting line. He was standing at the entrance with his wife and with the local leaders and with Janice Wood, our district VP. I'm walking through the line, ready and I go shake Morty's hand. I go, Morty, Mr. President, good to meet you. I wish you would resign. And everybody there goes, they're like, what? And so Morty goes, hey let's go outside. He took me outside because that's Morty, very diplomatic, professional. He wanted to know why would I say that. And I told him we should be organizing MCI. [MCI was a non-union competitor to AT&T in the long-distance business.] What the hell is the fucking problem with you? MCI's going to pick our ass, eat our lunch. They're going to take our business customers. CWA should be organizing on a massive scale. And he started hemming and hawing and said, well, organizing's so hard. Have you ever organized? I had been on the organizing committee. We were trying to organize I believe it was National Semiconductor, I can't remember the companies, but I had volunteered and it was difficult. It was not our main industry. The reason, and I'll go back to my father why organizing was so important. When he was a union carpenter, their strategy to deal with the threat of nonunion competitors, that was just starting to develop in the 1970's and [19]80s after the air traffic controller [strike], that whole Reagan bullshit. A lot of industries were impacted by this anti-union and nonunion stuff. So their solution in the Carpenters to control their work was to have everybody, they called them Black Fridays. They would stop working every other Friday to save the work. That did nothing to organize. So eventually the Carpenters did full circle. They had to restructure and get back [a] focus [on] organizing because they didn't want to do -- A lot of them were immigrants. That's where my father's experience -- I knew that if we didn't organize, we're going to get our asses kicked eventually.

**Louie** [00:52:31] [Louie makes a work-related call.] I got to write the log. Part of the problems with the trusteeship is their record keeping. They didn't keep tabs of their cash deposits and stuff. [Louie was trustee of local 9423 at the time of the interview.]

**Louie** [00:52:44] So anyway, in fact, some of my writings in the local what got attention, what I ran on, was organizing and being involved in the community. In fact, yesterday I was the co-emcee at the Lowrider parade, this extreme honor. It's just because of my continued -- just from my family to CWA. CWA, what got me involved was the organizing. [I] always volunteered. I'll go talk to workers even though I was a little introvert. When I was doing the work, I'm not. The organizing, also the community services, [are my] real passion still to this day. But, Morty, also, one of the credits I give him was lifelong learning. I have never forgotten. I always give him credit. The only critique I had of Morty, besides, was the foreign policy, the attachment with the Solidarity Center. Because I was also active with the community ending the wars in Central America. In fact, in 1991 I was part of a delegation of American unionists that went to El Salvador to observe that civil war truce that had ended the conflict there and just incredible, horrible, tragedy. But that will later come into play with the union-to-union project that was part of the influence. So Morty, in fact, I saw him

that was right before the [19]96 elections because I went from steward to president. I don't recommend that path but that's what I chose. I had a disagreement with Nancy [Biagini] and her regime and I basically ran against Nancy. We're friends. We're both helping each other. It never was personal like what happened in this local with the trusteeship. But, I believe still to this day that we need to have a quarter-hour dues increase solely committed to organizing. Like, what the hell are you guys waiting for? Til the last person left to turn off the light? So in [19]96, like I said, I got elected, and it was on a slate about being more active in the community, on being on a platform, being more active, organizing, as well as empowering, more transparency, empowering the members. Increasing member involvement through the local's various committees was a top goal that I believe in, to this day. Members control their local through committee work, not just voting.

**Jeff** [00:55:55] Okay, 1996. You're now president of this local. How big is the local in 1996?

**Louie** [00:56:01] In [19]96, it was almost 2500. It was large. [Local] 9423 is an amalgamation of six different locals. San Luis Obispo, Salinas, Santa Cruz, Mountain View, and San Mateo all merged with San Jose because they were shrinking. At that time, San Mateo hadn't yet merged with us but we had additional offices out as well. So it was a fairly large local in the best part of California, the central coast.

**Jeff** [00:56:44] Talk about a little bit about your experience as president. What were your goals when you got yourself elected?

**Louie** [00:56:54] Because I had been an activist, had been around other groups, in fact that's one of my recommendations to other CWA activists. Don't just be in the AT&T silo. Work with other organizations so you can glean and learn other leadership qualities, styles and so on. So I brought environmental justice work. I was on the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition board as were some of my predecessors. CWA as well was on the United Way board and Central Labor Council as a delegate, had been a delegate since, I believe the late [19]80s. So it was just coming together and becoming more activist. I liked Seth Rosen. [Seth Rosen was CWA District 4 organizer and then District 4 vice-president 2005 until his death in 2012.] In fact, he was one of the those that I credit giving me more skills, more knowledge because I remember getting that handout, I can't remember what training it was, but it was either you're a service union or organizing union.

**Louie** [00:58:13] So [I] tried to implement that, carry that vision forward. Obviously investing in stewards, taking out the mystery of how things work. To me you don't keep that stuff close to your chest. That's something you want to share, the knowledge, the tools. One of the first things we did, we started partnering with the CWA NETT, I can't remember what it was called at the time. Paul Anderson. We established a learning center, because computers were just coming out, the internet was exploding. So we had a computer lab in the local where our members could come in and learn how to assemble, disassemble a computer, but also how to use software and all that. I give that credit for allowing me, like I said, Morty's drive about lifelong learning. Once that registered, I figured, okay, I don't think it's one and done. You don't read a book once, reference manual just once. And then that's it. You need to keep going back and then if there's a newer version or other books or manuals, then you need to take advantage. Read them. In fact, one of my frustrations right now is that people don't read, they don't read, or they just Google stuff and they get the quick answer and there's no vetting. So we did the computer center, the lab here. It was around for about ten years that we were working in partnership with CWA, I forgot what they called it before CWA NETT but that group. Also started improving the steward training operation, trying to modernize it.

So it was just trying to bring all the different programs, especially with the [CWA] Triangle. As I evolved more into a lineman, I liked reading schematics or reading just plans that were easy to digest and that you can explain to the working class. It wasn't complicated, it wasn't like an encyclopedia or something. Just that CWA Triangle to me was the easiest way to describe the pillar programs of CWA and also to the members and get their buy in. Once I got the Triangle concept down is what I tried to implement in the local and that's always easier said than done. [The CWA Triangle includes three parts of the core CWA program: Representation (at the base), movement building/political action and organizing on the other two sides.]

**Jeff** [01:01:12] So, you're trying to bring the organizing culture into the local. What kinds of successes did you have for organizing during that period of time?

**Louie** [01:01:20] The successes from that time are what's gotten the local through its toughest times today. In fact, the local today is probably 50% or maybe 60% telecom, 40% others. Because when I was president, we brought in the airlines and worked with other locals to organize Cingular wireless. [Cingular eventually became AT&T Mobility through a series of mergers and acquisitions.] There was a local [in] San Francisco, well no, it was 9430, the San Mateo local. They didn't want, they had tried them -- so they assigned them to us. From there we got, it was US Airways, but then we ended up with Envoy and Piedmont, which today [are] 100 members. We also brought in SEIU staff. They were looking for a progressive, militant local. And at that time, that's what the local was. Their pay is pretty good. Unions have SEIU, so we have another 100 members there. Also, the substitute teachers at the Pajaro Valley Unified School District., They were looking for [a union] to affiliate and we brought them in, that's a couple of hundred members. Then we had probably easily a dozen CSIs. [communications or service industry units]. That was a goal. The apprenticeship program was up and running which we were instrumental in supporting and keeping. Actually, to this day the local until the last regime was very supportive of the apprenticeship training program. So that's the legacy. We were also supporting the IBM workers. They would meet here. I was also beginning to work on Google. Before I left in 2008, there was momentum. We were clearly becoming a force to be reckoned with here in Silicon Valley.

**Jeff** [01:03:32] Were you guys involved in some cable TV organizing as well?

**Louie** [01:03:35] Oh, yes. Yes, yes. In fact, I hate the cable companies more than the phone company. I say that though because we tried and tried and came close but no victory organizing several times. In fact, we tried when it was TCI, we tried when it was AT&T who turned out to be just as bad if not worse than TCI and also when it was Comcast. [AT&T bought TCI cable in 1998, named the subsidiary AT&T Broadband, then sold the cable units to Comcast in 2000. CWA helped about 20 AT&T Broadband units win union elections; Comcast systematically led decertification campaigns at almost all of those units.] So we have tried numerous attempts. Yeah. The members got it. I would explain why we need to organize the industry. Still to this day that's something clearly critical for our union.

**Jeff** [01:04:31] So, you're local president from [19]96 to 2008 and then you become an organizer for the local.

**Louie** [01:04:40] Correct. Yeah. In 2008, I was starting to lose the flame, the passion. I had always said I just wanted to run and get out. I liked my lineman job. The lineman job is still some of the best times, the camaraderie, but also just being outdoors, the scenery, it's cool. So I had told the

local I'm just going to step down because I ran unopposed for three terms. The first term obviously, [I] ran against somebody, but I didn't want to become a bureaucrat. (laughs)

**Jeff** [01:05:27] So at some point, then you join the staff up in District 9. Who's the vice president then at that point?

**Louie** [01:05:40] Because of politics, I'll be blunt. I was going to run for district VP. But I could sense that it wasn't -- I'm not going to have people kiss ring and I'm also not going to make deals and stuff. So, I toyed with that. But I could read tea leaves. I got a good gut feeling and things and so I knew I wasn't going to do that if I didn't think I could win. And so, I wait around. So, Tony [Bixler, District 9 vice-president, 1996-2009] we had a love-hate relationship. It was because of politics, and I knew I would have kicked ass if they had brought me up earlier and things, who knows? Because of my passion. I always ran the mobilization trainings. They could always call on me, when I was president or not, even before I was mobilization coordinator for years within the district, the NCNC, the Northern California Nevada Council. But, it wasn't until I want to say 2011 that I started working as a SIF [Strategic Industry Fund] coordinator for one of the mobilizations, formally. Because I would do it as a local officer but when I left, that's when I started getting lost time as a District 9 SIF person. [The CWA Strategic Fund provided funding to union projects designed to build power and promote CWA priorities. "Lost time" refers to union leave from an employer to do union work.]

**Jeff** [01:07:29] So when you come on staff, what kind of assignment do you have there?

**Louie** [01:07:35] It was largely through the SIFs, either AT&T mobilization or AT&T Mobility mobilization. I excel at that. In fact, at one of our NCNC steward trainings, I remember Larry Cohen was there. He was a guest. Jeff, I can't recall if you were there. I do this whole routine on how a picket line looks from the inception and how when you add in a drum or you add in whistles -- just because one of the peeves I've got is people that just picket and picket and they don't even chant. They're just picketing or they're just doing that boring, here we are. What I like is showing the full breadth of options that you can do with mobilization. We even took something, [can] you imagine, technicians learning how to do a skit. We did stuff like that too in the garages to get the people excited, laugh and just bring in other elements. So in the trainings, that's what I try to do, is to bring in out-of-the-box [activities] more, hey, bring in drums, bring in instruments, bring in people, their talents. We were even showing movies. One of the things at the conferences I would do, instead of going out to the bar and just drinking, hey, how about we have a union night, a movie night, and we'd show Norma Rae or we'd show Matewan and others. We'd talk about them and Larry goes, oh, man, with all the fights going on and stuff you do, you get watching movies. So, Larry, what do you think? We don't watch movies at night when we're at home? Working families, that's where we go to the movies. But it's just part of that, bringing the working-class culture, storytelling, we would even do karaoke. Like damn, that's what working people do. We sing, we laugh, we cry. Not just march in a picket. That's part of the flavor, part of the perspective. I encourage people to tell their stories. I still to this day at steward trainings and stuff, encourage people to share, learn their family stories, their union experience stories and share them, talk.

**Jeff** [01:10:52] That's what we're doing. Yes. It does feel different. You feel more engaged on a picket line if you're chanting or singing or got some kind of special march. It does engage people more and make them feel more part of a community than just walking around with the sign.

**Louie** [01:11:12] Oh, yeah. Now the local, we've got the best banners. The legacy or the results are evident because we marched in May Day this last week and you could see the banners because they had the tall sticks so that they're raised up because [if] they're at ground level you can't see em unless you're up close. But when they're raised up you can read them. So I did the SIF to "Save the Copper" which I was reluctant to because I get the copper, the attachment, but it's a dying technology. There's nothing as reliable, though. That's the problem, I debate with some of the management that I come across these days with grievances and stuff. You guys don't have a backup system as reliable as the copper does and that's the problem. [He is referring to the transition from copper to fiber cables. Copper has back-up power, fiber does not. CWA District 9 launched a campaign to prevent AT&T from abandoning copper connections entirely.] But I became actually hired full-time by the district in 2015. I was a SIF coordinator, help bring in Direct TV. We got it done and I remember it was like 4,000, almost 5,000 workers. Wow. The sad thing is it's only like 600 today in the bargaining unit in District 9. [AT&T agreed to card check/neutrality after it bought DirecTV, a satellite video company. That business is in sharp decline.]

**Jeff** [01:12:39] Yes. It's tough trying to predict where the industry's going and to stay ahead of that curve.

**Louie** [01:12:49] [I was] staff rep in 2018. Laura Reynolds was the staff person that brought me. She was the first one. Like I said, because of politics, I suspect. I mean, I had been putting in for staff rep years prior and like I said, no grudges

**Jeff** [01:13:14] So you're sort of in a unique experience right now. And if you don't mind, maybe we can talk a little bit about what it's like to be the administrator of a local. How did this come about?

**Louie** [01:13:26] The local after I left had been gradually descending into just constant infighting. That happens, I mean, there's a time and a place for debate, for election and all that. But it became, I guess, all-consuming. In fact, the last several [years], a group of officers, that's been just constant going back and forth, filing charges against each other. Then what also was really unfortunate the pandemic, I think, also led to some of it because the isolation and other things that went on because of that. But that's why I stepped up. I know Nancy Biagini had been asked, because I hadn't retired yet or no, I had retired, because I retired in February of last year. Then she came on in March. It was a lot for her because she's still very active in the community. So in May they asked me to take over in which I've been here since, but I've given them notice that I can only do this for a month or two more and that's it. You really need a solid team and all that to do the work right. But I'm leaving my mark. The building was allowed to go into disarray. The interesting story about the hall, though, let me just mention it. We closed escrow on this hall. It was an incredible find. It's a good location, ample room for training and parking and all that for a member to do the work of the union. Escrow closed on September 10th, 2001 and then on September 11th, we were supposed to close the old hall and then use those monies to drastically pay down the new purchase. Then September 11th happened. We will never forget, of course, the whole country, the world, everything turned upside down. That actually led to us losing money on the old sale because the real estate market was clobbered out, so we couldn't get the money recouped the sale that we thought we were, because the other building was owned by the local. We ended up having to get a mortgage through the national which we had to expect that the amount was going to be very, very small. But because of what happened on September 11th, it didn't work out as planned, so that's the local's connection with September 11th, we went from one high to one low in like 24 hours.

**Debbie** [01:16:38] Louie.

**Jeff** [01:16:39] Go ahead.

**Debbie** [01:16:42] Jeff and you both understand what being a trustee is. Many of the people who hopefully will read this may not understand this. So could you just explain why a local will go into a trusteeship and what the trustees' role is?

**Louie** [01:17:03] In our CWA constitution, there's provisions for certain, let's just say, inappropriate actions by local leaders. They especially involve money. One thing I've told local members is we cannot have members' dues money being questioned whether the local is tracking and also utilizing them appropriately. So there's strict provisions in the Constitution if there's financial misconduct suspected that the local has to take appropriate actions. The local in this case did not. They were, in fact, doing everything else what they could to try to get to the bottom of the alleged financial misconduct, except the CWA Constitution, which has laid out a fair and equitable process with transparency and due process for both sides. Generally the national union has a right, and like I tell the members in the local, it isn't local 9423, it's CWA local 9423 because there's some that think that the local has full autonomy. They don't. Every organization has rules, has bylaws, has boundaries and those are contained in our Constitution. In fact, the Constitution is the glue that bonds all the locals together.

**Debbie** [01:18:44] What is the process by which a local is put into trusteeship?

**Louie** [01:18:49] The local was brought into trusteeship after a [CWA national union] Executive Board poll to support the request to put the local in receivership. And in this case, it was based off of financial allegations of financial misconduct that were not addressed adequately by the local officers.

**Debbie** [01:19:13] So the request came from some of the members or leaders of the local directly to the national union's executive board?

**Louie** [01:19:25] Yes.

**Debbie** [01:19:27] Jeff, I'm sure you've sat on that many times, if you want to add anything to that.

**Jeff** [01:19:31] No, no, I think that encapsulates that. Typically we see a trusteeship happen for two reasons. One, financial malfeasance, some financial issue that pops up that needs to be addressed, or you just have two sides that just are never going to get along and are just tearing a local apart. It sounds like you got a little bit of both in this case.

**Debbie** [01:19:58] And then the trustees' role is to put things back in order and eventually there could be an election of new leaders?

**Louie** [01:20:12] Correct. The trustees' role is to secure the finances, all the assets of the local and to implement all the CWA Triangle programs, to the best of our ability, but to eventually get the local on solid footing so that it can be returned to the members through an election.

**Debbie** [01:20:34] And who makes the decision that it's time to end the trusteeship?

**Louie** [01:20:41] (laughs) I've been told that all rests with me. There's support at national headquarters, legal as well as staff that support the efforts right now. At least we have some remaining open issues. There were some DOL [Department of Labor] as well as bonding issues as well as there's still a charge between the officer that needs to run its course. So those are the things that we're waiting because we want to make sure that any potential candidate is authorized to run, and we'll know that after all these other issues are closed out or resolved.

**Debbie** [01:21:23] So to sum it up, this is an internal CWA constitutional process to preserve integrity and a democratic process and doing the right thing financially.

**Jeff** [01:21:47] Right.

**Louie** [01:21:50] I also state that it's an honor and a privilege to be in these positions and that I carried that throughout my career or my time here and that truly needs to be known by the members that they can trust their local officers to do the right thing all the time.

**Jeff** [01:22:16] So you sent us a little timeline of your career which was very helpful. But in the bottom there you mentioned some international activities. You want to talk a little bit about some of those, some interesting --?

**Louie** [01:22:33] I'm sorry I had lost the sound for a second. Okay. I heard the beginning there. Okay.

**Jeff** [01:22:40] I noticed on the timeline you gave us at the bottom there, you listed some international activities. You want to talk a little bit about some of the more interesting experiences you might have had in that regard?

**Louie** [01:22:50] So I will, are you guys still want to know about local (unintelligible) or is that still there?

**Jeff** [01:22:58] We want to hear your story.

**Louie** [01:23:00] Okay, so [I'll] do the international union stuff because it kind of predates some of the union work I did officially as president. I mentioned El Salvador has been a connection, part of my experience based off of the civil war trauma. Remember in the [19]80s, El Salvadoran immigrants were refugees [who] were being settled in our community. That led to my awareness, but also prior, as a student, when, as I mentioned, in the 1970s [I was] in Guatemala and Mexico. I also want to mention, I did return [to college] in 1991, completed my units I needed, I did graduate thanks to Morty Bahr because I could get lifelong learning. So I did go back, get my degree in Latin American studies. But the opportunity arose to go to Cuba as part of a United States labor delegation. I believe that was in 2006, May 1996, sorry. We attended the May Day celebration and the Workers Congress. I know as a union leader [I] also was open to establishing just equitable relations with a country in our hemisphere. In fact, when I was local president, we had raised a motion in resolution [at a CWA convention]. That was one of the other areas where I had a lot -- that's a whole other chapter, the different resolutions, whether it was against the Iraq war or to try to provide humanitarian food aid to Cuba. Originally it was to end the embargo, but the convention that year was in Miami, Florida, and there was huge resistance to us raising it. In fact, I remember

Morty telling that they will circle the building and they will shut us down if we propose that. So being the realist, pushing hard for the cause but also realistic, it ended up being a resolution to provide humanitarian aid and this southeast District 3 group at the end of the convention, they did a motion to reconsider. Because most people had already left, their supporters were there and that resolution was overturned. But I was blessed, fortunate. I went back to Cuba on another opportunity and just to experience the harm that the blockade was doing. I looked up to Che Guevara as maybe [an] idealistic young person. I remember seeing his photo in the silhouette, one of those famous posters when I was in middle school. That's the first time I learned about Che Guevara. And he's been one of my heroes since.

**Louie** [01:26:42] I was also able to go to Japan[ as] part of the CWA exchange. I remember helping District 6. They asked me when I was there if I could go to the one of their employers and said, yeah, no problem. So I took them, the Japanese, we'd say, let's go. I have no qualms going and helping other workers. In fact, I forgot the brother from District 6. I would see him, say, hey, thank you for doing that to help. They were in protracted bargaining. But our whole our local also received delegations from Cuba, from Palestine, from France. We would host them, we would welcome them, and then they would speak to the membership, but we would have a community gathering here to welcome them. In fact, France, because of our work at Hewlett Packard, we had a bunch of CWA members when I was president that we had a large presence that one of our CSIs worked at throughout Silicon Valley, Hewlett Packard was one of the primary places. They had just bought Compaq computers. The French delegation, or French union, it was CFDT [French Confederation of Labour] I believe the Confederation, it was left center. There's left, there's the Communist, there's center right, the religious right, all these different confederations in France. They contacted us so we worked with them, we hosted them. We did a lot of support for them. And they in turn invited me to May Day over there and I and got to join a contingent of Hewlett Packard workers' and march in Paris.

**Louie** [01:28:49] It was [an] incredible experience to take part in El Salvador on May Day during a general strike to support the Telecommunications Workers Union – SUTTEL. In fact, most of my work has been with telecommunications industry unions. El Salvador was the first May Day, as well, of course, Cuba, but also France. But the biggest May Day experience, where I actually came to tears, was celebrating May Day in 2006 in my hometown. The crowd estimated [at] 200,000 to 250,000 people took part and the local was one of the unions. We had to do security for 50,000 people. One of my memories, and this is the picture I took down from here in the local. I mean it was unbelievable to celebrate May Day in that level in the country I was born, in the town I was born in. I have to give props to Eduardo Diaz because the union-to-union international [program]. When that came about that really helped transcend and give us -- Because the unions that I had been active, and I didn't even list all of them, we were able to assist them and send rank-and-file members to El Salvador. We worked closely. In fact, one of the treasured acknowledgments is their gift to me of a plaque of the work that [we have] done throughout the years with them. Also the Philippines and Mexico and other places, primarily the west coast, the Pacific Ocean rim. But that the Eduardo Diaz union-to-union [program] actually got us more to a different level world view. Instead of the leaders going to conferences giving feedback, which is fine maybe that's important, but having the rank-and-file actually interacting and understanding that foreign, the other workers, are not their enemy. That's really the takeaway that I have. But Eduardo Diaz, I actually met him in Puerto Rico. I was there during the LACLA conference [Labor Council for Latin American Advancement]. In fact, my family knows, we vacation with a purpose. When we were in New York, for example, we went to the Occupy Wall Street. My son was living in New York at the time. So

wherever we're at, we were in the World Cup in South America, we went to see workers' cooperatives in Argentina. We joined the protests in Rio. My family knows, we don't go to vacation to just lie on the beach and get burned. We'll look out, we'll go support union. I will go out of my way to meet a union person. So when we were in Puerto Rico, I went to that Puerto Rican telecommunications union and Eduardo Diaz was there. I didn't bring the picture, but that was so cool. In fact, that's how we met. Whatever I could do to help the program, the vision that Larry [Cohen] and Eduardo and others had on that. That's how I got involved was by random, just happened to be there at that union on the same day Eduardo Diaz was. [Eduardo Diaz was first CWA organizer with Texas State Employees Union and then CWA International Affairs director. When he died, CWA established the Eduardo Diaz union-to-union program.]

**Jeff** [01:32:59] Between Eduardo and Larry, they've really created a sea change in the way we viewed international relations in the movement. So, you were lucky to be a part of that union.

**Debbie** [01:33:18] Can I switch a little bit? You say in your bio that you were a member of the Minority Caucus from 1997 to 2009. I'm very interested to hear your thoughts about how CWA as a union, whether you're talking about the local or the national union or the district, both positives and shortcomings in terms of developing equity and leadership. Particularly, I think you're the first person that we've interviewed who comes from Hispanic or Chicano background. So I'm interested to hear you talk a little about that.

**Louie** [01:34:10] Dennis Serrette was another mentor within CWA. When I first met Dennis, I told him I voted for you, bro. I voted for you because I remember I was always looking for third party or other candidates, but I remember seeing the bio: phone worker, union man. I go, man, I didn't even think twice and voted for him. But he recognized that often we're a reflection minorities of our of our experience. [Dennis Serrette was a CWA activist and leader who ran for president on the New Alliance Party ticket in 1984. He was a founder of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists.] One of the frustrations I had with CWA was just the black and white nature of relations. Everything was either black African-American or white Anglo. There truly is no welcoming space, even the minority caucus. Why I'm not a long-time member of them [is] because I disagree with a lot of the planning. I didn't want to go to a dance all the time. There's so [much] important work that needs to be done. Not that that's all they did, but they didn't reflect the minorities in the country, their leadership and also the focus of the workshops. I remember working with Dina Beaumont and others and Yvette Herrera to try to --[Dina Beaumont was a leader of southern California operators, district vice-president, then executive assistant to president Morty Bahr. Yvette Herrera served as education director and assistant to president Larry Cohen and Chris Shelton.] I did when asked, I would always volunteer if you want to learn about Latin, Chicano working-class history, no problem. I can handle that. So I ran with Dennis. I was part of a slate, and that's why I give credit to him because he had an important role, influential role in the formation of the minority caucus. He recognized too that at some point truly to live up to its mission or to reflect that title, it should be open to more. He had a diversity slate where there was a couple Hispanics, there was a gay white male, as well as African-Americans. We unfortunately lost. But that just was again, count me in.

**Debbie** [01:36:23] It was a slate for the minority caucus?

**Louie** [01:36:26] Correct. Yeah.

**Debbie** [01:36:27] And this must have been with Dennis back in the late [19]80s or [19]90s?

**Debbie** [01:36:32] Late [19]90s. Yeah. I remember in District 9, it was when the election took place at Anaheim near Disneyland. There was some stuff where the local brought in all kinds of members, sign them up the day or previously so that they could vote. That's power of numbers, but to this day, that's a disappointment. Not that leadership is everything, but there seems to be gaps, not only with the Hispanic Latino, but Asian-Americans who are just [as] worthy as well as others. But it seems to me, the best way I'd characterize it, which is true in a lot of areas of the country that I visit. I've been traveling since I was a young man. It's just seems that unless you're on the news, the Latinos especially are invisible. They used to call us the sleeping giant because we didn't vote in our numbers. We didn't get the recognition our numbers deserve and stuff. But it is a disappointment that CWA if you look at the board today, I believe there's one and a half Latino. (laughs) Not to disparage anyone but it's pretty low. At the pace CWA is doing, it'll be another 100 years before there's probably true reflection of minorities. I understand the open seat concept and all of that, but it's just taking forever to showcase the diversity of our union.

**Debbie** [01:38:20] Did you support the at-large diversity seats? You're implying that you think it hasn't made enough of a difference.

**Louie** [01:38:29] Well, there's only four seats and they are limited. Today they're four African-Americans, which they deserve to be on there. But again, if you look at the board, remember when women were very few to be found. I remember when African-Americans -- I guess the point is that it's just taking a lot longer to evolve to that point. And there's no quota or anything like that. I'm not thinking that's the solution. But again, I think it's the lack of support. I had toyed with others establishing the Latino caucus at one point, but I knew my time as leadership was nearing its end so it didn't come to fruition. But that's another regret, not establishing an organization because the numbers warrant it, if you look especially [at] the southwest, many other parts of the state, the Latinos are huge and they're a big part of the membership in many states.

**Debbie** [01:39:48] Louis, what are the numbers? When you first started working your local was about how many people and now what are the numbers?

**Louie** [01:39:59] It was, I believe, about 2500. We represented about 2500 at that time. I would say probably 75% was white, 25% minority. In fact, the crews that I was on were mostly white until over time it just gradually-- As retirements happened it started changing. Today, the membership sadly is probably at a thousand. In fact, part of the duties I'm doing as T.A. [temporary administrator] we're going to have to adjust [the] officer number because they have not been organizing. Attrition has overtaken any growth. It's not a good situation. But today the membership is probably the reverse, probably 75% minority, 25% white, maybe a little, maybe 60/40, but just based off of a lot of the data I'm seeing that's a guesstimate. I don't have the have actual numbers.

**Jeff** [01:41:14] So you talked a little bit about a disappointment there in your career with not starting a Latino caucus. Tell us, over the course of your career, what are you most proud of? What's the thing that you really think "I left my mark".

**Louie** [01:41:41] So one of them is this. (He holds up the article) It was in the *CWA News* from April-May 2003. The title was "CWA Wins Major Overtime Settlement at SBC." I'm proud, when I do steward trainings, I always acknowledge the role CWA had in my development, the trainings. I've been a sponge throughout my career. Whatever I learned, I keep the books. I'm a union hoarder.

My wife would will attest to that. So we won a grievance. Our local was the lead local of the Bay Area locals that won several million dollars. The grievance was a million. That was on behalf of 267 members and our local 9423 had about 100 of them. So one of the things I've got to mention, the highlight is I never did any of this alone. It was always the other officers, Executive Board, stewards, and MEMBERS. I got the recognition, got the pictures, I was always in the *CWA News*. I heard the joke, when is Louie going to be in? But it was the local, the members, the rank-and-file that really stepped up to that, took to heart or were empowered through the committees and other thing to influence the outcome. This overtime settlement, the original grievance was a million. The arbitration was another million. So it's to the day, one of the largest, if not the largest, at least in our district, several million dollars. And that mind you was back in 2003, 20 years ago. So you can imagine the dollars if it were today. But it was the stewards. It was the stewards doing the legwork, the other officers taught local -- When I came in, [the] local training program was expanded. So [for] stewards, we had in-house, additional training, supplemental training, advanced training and so on, taught bargaining. In fact, I went on to teach at the local community college labor studies program, bargaining and mobilization. Because it shouldn't be a best-kept secret. It shouldn't be a mystery. So that's been a goal. And it beared fruit. That was I think one of the top achievements was that grievance settlement and arbitration settlement because of the work that the members, the stewards had done, and the other officers.

**Louie** [01:44:54] Another milestone was the May Day celebration. In fact, this local was one of the regulars, we could be counted on to assist the community. Marching with that quarter of a million people was another incredible highlight of the time that I spent here. There's a few others. The safety, as well, the focus, and that's Dave LeGrande. You know, we don't do this work alone. Dave, and he's out here in California, I don't have time to visit, this job is full-time and then some, but the safety was huge. In fact, this is one of my favorite posts that I learned from Dave LeGrande. It says, "Don't forget safety first, quality second, productivity third, every job, every time." That was the CWA Safety and Health program, which, again, I know we're all struggling with resources and all that, but we used to have a kick-ass safety and health program that was tops. Having been able to instill in the local while I was here. Now we're having to rebuild it. So many locals are struggling. The committees are not up and running. Safety and health is critical. But let me show you this. This is one of my favorite pictures of my time as (shows picture)-- [Dave LeGrande was CWA Health and Safety director.] Larry Cohen had come out here for a rally, but that's my daughter, she's now a nurse. She was one there. I think she's 31 now. So it's always been a family affair. My kids grew up on the picket line. They knew when they became teenagers, if you want to eat, better damn go with dad. That's where the food comes from. The picket line. (laughs) But I got to tell you one story. One year, my wife came in. We always did our own yard work and stuff and chores was always part of our family structure. But she was beet red, ready to laugh. She goes you better go outside. Something's happening out there. So I go out there and our kids are picketing. They're saying and they had made signs that said "End Child Labor." (laughs) They were marching down out in front of our house. That was before social media and all that because now our oldest is 42, but that was hilarious. I know I digress, but anyways.

**Jeff** [01:47:57] Hoisted on your own petard.

**Louie** [01:47:58] Yeah.

**Hannah** [01:47:59] How did that end? Did you negotiate? Did you sit at the bargaining table?

**Louie** [01:48:02] Yeah, yeah. So I did. I said those that are under 16 you can go in and have your lunch and water break and all that. The rest of the you got to continue working.

**Jeff** [01:48:18] Louie, this has been great. Hannah. Debbie, do you have anything else you want to happen with?

**Hannah** [01:48:25] Sure, I can ask you a couple questions.

**Jeff** [01:48:27] Great.

**Hannah** [01:48:29] So, Louie, you talked about one of your proudest achievements was encouraging a more engaged and active picket line with music and chanting and all that sort of stuff. Do you have any memories of, maybe one picket line that was really robust and can you tell us about it?

**Louie** [01:48:49] Yeah. So it was the 2004 strike. By the way, that was another milestone. That was a four-day strike. Morty Bahr had called a four-day strike. I am a stickler for facts and if you give me a plan, you say this is a timeline that's all I need. So the *Mobilizing for Power* guideline, which always give credit to CWA as the book for all of labor. In fact the UAW, if you look at how their strike, how they won [in 2023], it was following the CWA model, the playbook. So the 2004 strike we had a year out had started doing the work so by the time that strike, when expiration had come around for the contract, we were ready to go. One of the things, lifelong learning I learned from Morty, I got my radio broadcaster license, it was an employer-funded training program that CWA negotiated. So I took advantage of that. I got my FCC radio DJ license. The radio station I work for covers most of the local. So on one Saturday morning, I was broadcasting union picket-related music. It was being played on all of our picket lines in the central coast area of California because I'm a radio DJ at KKUP, which is a noncommercial community radio station. And so everybody was dancing and doing conga lines. Everyone was listening to the same radio station. So I was able to give them shout-outs and talking about SBC corporate greed and playing dedications. So that was memorable and in fact some of the old-timers, they say, oh, yeah, I remember your voice. I was able to broadcast to them, which is the importance of media. And I'm glad that the CWA Human Rights Committee has got into radio because it's an important medium and a real important tool. But yeah, that was a memorable strike and also having all the picket lines with the same with boomboxes playing, and all celebrating together the strike.

**Hannah** [01:51:34] What was your DJ name?

**Louie** [01:51:37] Well, I'm Lowrider Louie. (laughs)

**Jeff** [01:51:45] If you see his Facebook page, you'll understand that. (laughs)

**Hannah** [01:51:49] Do you remember any of the songs that you played?

**Jeff** [01:51:53] One was Doctor Loco's Rockin Jalapeno Band's El Picket Sign. That was one because it's actually an old farm worker UFW song that he updated and added lyrics to and stuff. And the other one was, El Raton the Rat, that is a Fania All Stars classic, which went out to SBC management. So that was good. I think they had a rat at one of the pickets. So that was good, good, good.

**Hannah** [01:52:32] Well, I would love at some point if you could email us all the photographs that you had, and if you want to send us your playlists, that would be great. Well.

**Louie** [01:52:42] I would try. I don't know if I have that, but I do want to send you this letter because this is the article I believe I won the award for. It's about subcontracting. I'm going to send you some of the writings and you can see. I even wrote about one of the trips to El Salvador. Whatever I can find, Hannah, if you want email me and I can see what additional items I could find. Definitely. It's an honor, CWA. I tell members why I came back because I've been part of CWA a little longer than I've been married with my wife, and that's true. This union has influenced so many and I'm forever grateful. In fact, my kids, they know CWA, know union because it's not just me. It was the family experience, community, as well as the members have really been the highlight of all of this, just seeing their transformation and seeing their sacrifice and humility. We do this work for them.

**Debbie** [01:54:32] Hannah. Thank you so much for asking those questions.

**Jeff** [01:54:35] You said you were grateful to the union. We're grateful to have had you and especially grateful for these past two hours plus, the times flown by. So thank you for this.

**Debbie** [01:54:46] Absolutely.