

Communications Workers of America Oral History Project

Interviewee: Maly, Ralph

Interviewer: Jeff Rechenbach

Date of Interview: August 13, 2024

Place of Interview: Allen, Texas (via zoom)

Page Total: 26

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 and Hannah 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] Okay, so let's start rolling. We're here today with Ralph Maly, retired vice-president of the Communications and Technologies Department of the Communications Workers of America. It's August the 13th, 2024. And Ralph, you're at home in the metropolitan Dallas area, right?

Ralph [00:00:25] Correct.

Jeff [00:00:27] I'm in Cleveland. I think Hannah [Goldman] is in Brooklyn, and I'm guessing Debbie [Goldman] is in DC today. Okay. All four of us on board.

Debbie [00:00:38] And we're recording this over Zoom.

Jeff [00:00:43] Right. Ralph, we want to spend the next couple of hours just sort of going over your life and career. And to do that, we really want to spend at least a little bit of time talking about your childhood growing up and maybe some influence that might have had on your career in the labor movement later on. So why don't you just start off by telling us when and where you were born?

Ralph [00:01:17] Okay. I was born in Buffalo, New York, in February of 1947. I'm the oldest of six kids, four of which have passed away. Now it's just myself and my younger brother Mike. My father was, for the most part, a truck driver [and] worked a little bit in the auto industry at the Chevy plant. We lived a gypsy life when we were younger. I went to four Catholic grade schools and two public grade schools in my eight years of grade school. The public school actually was one[that] I went there twice. We lived in either the projects or we rented a house for most of my younger years.

Jeff [00:02:50] And did your father carry a union card at any point?

Ralph [00:02:53] Oh, yeah. My dad was actually [an] original member of the Teamsters local in Buffalo, New York. He did an organizing drive while he was a truck driver. They were successful in winning the election, and he was fired as a result of it. But he moved on to another trucker job, became a union steward, had the opportunity to go to a Teamsters convention, but chose not to go. He was a steward for most of his time while he was a truck driver. My mother worked part-time in the evenings cleaning offices. He's probably the one who influenced me to get involved the most in the union.

Jeff [00:04:00] And so you had six different schools in eight years of elementary education. What about high school? What was high school like?

Ralph [00:04:11] It's ironic. When I was in eighth grade, the priest from the from the parish came to visit the eighth grade boys, talk to them about what they wanted to do in their future. And he convinced me that I wanted to be a priest. So I went ahead and applied to the diocesan prep. And my plan was to go to the diocesan prep and then on to the priesthood. My father, on the other hand, thought -- excuse my language -- I was full of shit, that there was no way in hell I was going to be a priest. And as it turned out, the summer before I went to high school, I met a girl, and that kind of changed it. And so I ended up not going to the diocesan prep. There was no

other Catholic high school I could go to because I was too late to register. So I had to go to a public high school. And so I spent four years at Kensington High School. It was a huge, huge difference from what I was used to.

Jeff [00:05:53] So the Catholic --

Ralph [00:05:56] Yeah. Go ahead.

Jeff [00:05:57] No, no, no. Go ahead.

Ralph [00:06:01] Afterwards, completed high school -- I went to work at Western Electric, at the age of nineteen. And at the age of twenty, I had been dating my wife for a while, and we decided we were going to get married. So in 1966, at age of twenty, I got married. We ended up having two kids, a boy and a girl. Now, what were you going to ask, Jeff?

Jeff [00:06:47] No, I'm going off a different line now. So, you started at age nineteen at a Western Electric plant. What was that plant's function? What was happening?

Ralph [00:07:02] The Buffalo factory made spring cords and cables for telephones for both residential and commercial use. Ironically, my first week on the job -- I was in there on a midnight shift -- a gentleman by the name of Ron Woods, who was the chief steward, came by and asked me if I wanted to join the union. In those days, New York was a right-to-work state. And so you didn't have the okay just to walk up to somebody and ask them to join the union. So he did it in between a bunch of machines, kind of like, "Hey, kid, come here." Right. And he actually signed me up and got me to be a member of the union. As I started working there -- and being nineteen years-old and working the midnight shift -- it was, did I want to go to work on a Friday night at midnight or did I want to go out and party and be with my friends? And lo and behold, I chose to skip work and go out and drink and party. Subsequently, the company suspended me for three days for bad attendance. I went home and I told my father that I got suspended because I'd missed work. He said, "Did you talk to your union steward?" He was the one who told me when I went to work at Western, he said, "If there's anything you do, you need to be a member of the union because that's the only thing you have -- your membership." And so I was a member. And he said, "Did you talk to your union?" I said, "No, they're not going to do anything about it. They're kind of weak." And he said, "Oh, you think so, huh?" He said, "You think you can do better?" I said, "Well, certainly I can. I know I can do better." He said, "Well then, get your ass in there and get involved. And don't bitch about it. Just do it." So I said, "Okay." So I went ahead and served my suspension.

Ralph [00:10:13] When I got back there, I went to Ron Woods and I said, "Look, I'm interested in being a steward." Well, he kind of thought about it and said, "I'll get back to you." So for the next three, four months, I had to bug him, constantly bug him. I had to find him in the factory and tell him, "Ron, don't forget -- I want to be a steward." And he finally said okay. So I became a steward. And it's kind of funny. My first assignment, I had a grievance for another employee who had bad attendance. It wasn't as bad as mine, but it was punishable, as far as the company was concerned. I went in there to represent the person. The guy was going to get three days' suspension. The department chief said to me, "I'll tell you what, kid. You're a new steward. I'm

going to go ahead and reduce the suspension from three days to one day, and I'm going to tell everybody you browbeat me into convincing me that I should reduce the suspension from three days to one day." And I thought, Oh, I did a great job. How good a steward must I be? So I left there. I went to the director who is just above me, the guy who handled grievances, and I told him this is what happened. I got it reduced from three days to one day. And he looked at me and he said, "You told him that's bullshit, didn't you?" I looked at him and I thought, yeah, sure. "I told him it was bullshit!" He said, "Good. Proceed forward with the grievance." I said, "Why should I proceed forward?" He says, "What you're doing is, you're reducing it from three days to one day. But you're admitting he's guilty. Is he guilty? Take a look at your case. You had more days off than he did." And so that was my lesson not to be so naive about being a union steward.

Ralph [00:12:47] From that point on, I became very active in the local. A gentleman by the name of John Lakeman, who went on to be a senior staff rep in the Buffalo area, was the local president there. He was working for a guy who was a staff rep by the name of Jan Pierce. I got to know Jan through internal organizing. I became the organizer for the local because -- like I said earlier -- New York was a right-to-work state at that point. So I would go around the factory and I had my list and I would try and sign people up. I would get these reports back. Ron Woods used to tell me, "You know people are signing up because you keep bugging them and you're being a pain in the ass about it." So they would just join just to get me away from them. Apparently that got noticed and so Jan started using me for external organizing [at] New York Telephone. At that time, we didn't represent the operators and the accounting people. I got to work with Chris Krech. You know, Jerry -- what was Jerry's last name? A District One staff rep.

Jeff [00:14:39] Hayes.

Ralph [00:14:39] Yeah, Jerry Hayes. His wife and I worked on campaigns in Syracuse and Albany. We worked for Jan who really got me started on external organizing. He had a lot to do with that. From that point, Ron Woods became local president. He got a call from a guy by the name of -- boy, I'm bad with memory. Kenny, Kenny Majors. He wanted Ron to come out to Vancouver, Washington to help him work a campaign. And Ron says, "I can't do that. I'm a local president. But I got this kid who doesn't know enough to shut up, and he probably would be a good organizer for you." And lo and behold, they sent me on my first external organizing project. As it turned out, I worked the Western Electric manufacturing campaign in Vancouver, Washington. Then after that was done, I got sent to Dallas, Texas. Pleasanton, California and then I did the one in Atlanta, Georgia. At the time, I didn't know I'd be going there permanently, but I helped organize that factory.

Ralph [00:16:19] In the early [19]70s, I was going to leadership school at Cornell University, and Jan called me and said, "Morty Bahr wants to meet with you at Cornell and wants to talk to you about something he needs you to do." [Morty Bahr was then vice-president of District One. He later became CWA president, 1985-2005] So I said okay. So when I got there, I had my meeting with Morty, and Morty asked me if I would run a campaign that apparently had gotten wayward, sideways with finances and everything. And President [Joe] Beirne was kind of upset as to what was going on. And Morty said, "I would like you to run this campaign and get it to an election. Do what you got to do to get it to an election." So I went to Long Island, New York and spent almost a year there organizing a defense plant called Airborne Instrument Lab. The

government got involved. They would not let the regional director of the NLRB make a decision on the size of the unit. It got forced to Washington. And the company was successful. And so with the defense plant, they were successful in squashing it for about a year, year and a half before the board finally made a decision on the unit. By that time, [the] company had to lay-off a lot of those people that were working in that particular bargaining unit. It was about 2,000 people. And so that was the last of the external organizing campaigns I did.

Ralph [00:18:31] In 1976, I transferred. The Buffalo Western Electric plant closed. I transferred to Atlanta, Georgia and became a steward, but that was about it. I didn't have a whole lot of involvement in the local other than being a steward in the area I worked in. I did however, get involved in -- my son was playing a lot of hockey at that time and they had a professional hockey team in Atlanta. So we got involved in hockey. I coached a lot of hockey, coached a lot of the elite hockey players in Atlanta. I played hockey in a pro-am hockey league and I coached Georgia Tech's college team for a few years, which I really enjoyed. Those kids were into school more than they were into hockey, which was good.

Ralph [00:19:52] In 1984, I was approached by a couple of the board members to consider running as the local vice president. Let me back up. After I got into the factory in Atlanta and I was just the steward, the rest of the transferees from Buffalo to Atlanta came to town, including Ron Woods, who was a local president in Buffalo. He decided after about six months that he wanted to run for president of the local against the incumbent. I was approached by one of the guys from the Buffalo local and [he] said, "Look. Ron wants you to run with him as the VP." I didn't want to do it, because the guy who had the job I thought was a decent guy. But this guy convinced me that Ron Woods was instrumental in my involvement in Buffalo and I owed him that much. So I said okay. So I ran. We both lost and I figured that was the end of my union involvement in Atlanta. Lo and behold, in 1984 I get approached by several of the board members, and they want me to run for local vice-president again. I decide, Okay, I'll do it. I did it. I won. In 1985, the local president resigned. He had a drinking problem and couldn't handle the pressure of being a local president. He left. I got elected president and I stayed there as the president until I went on staff in 1989. I served on the bargaining teams in 1986 for manufacturing. And then I was put on the first national bargaining team with Ron Allen for the AT&T Network Systems. It was the first time local presidents were involved in bargaining at the national level. It had always been done by officers in the union, not local people.

Jeff [00:23:01] Let me just pause you right there because I want to explore a little bit more about Western Electric and the work that was done there and what has happened to that work. Are there any Western Electric manufacturing plants left in the country that you know of?

Ralph [00:23:22] When I got involved in the local during the bargaining sessions, my first bargaining in 1986, Western Electric had twenty-five manufacturing plants around the country. By the time I was a staff rep, it had transferred from Western Electric/AT&T to Lucent Technologies -- and within a few years after it became Lucent Technologies, they closed all of the manufacturing plants in the United States moving them to Mexico or China -- or they sold them to subcontractors who then moved them to Mexico and China. [AT&T spun off its Western Electric subsidiary to form Lucent Technologies in 1996. In 2006, Lucent merged with Alcatel and in 2016 Nokia purchased Alcatel-Lucent.]

Jeff [00:24:20] Let me ask you a little bit more detail about your organizing experiences early on when you first went out to Vancouver, Washington, and then Dallas, and then Pleasanton, California, and then finally Atlanta. What was that like? Were you in the plant doing the organizing? Were you knocking on doors?

Ralph [00:24:46] When we did the Vancouver, Washington campaign, it was just me and Kenny Major and we had a local guy, a local president -- Don Trimbulet, his name was -- he helped us out in doing some of the house calls. But basically, our job was to go get the address and go to every single person who worked in the factory and meet with them. And we did a presentation -- like a salesman -- we had an actual presentation about why they would be better off in CWA than they would in the IBEW. Because Western Electric always believed that there should be a union in their factories. They didn't care which one, but there needed to be a union in their factories. It was easier for them than dealing with individual people. And so we always had campaigns. It was always us and the IBEW. Ironically, the interesting part about Vancouver -- when I went there, Kenny had just taken over for somebody else. They were far behind. And President Beirne had decided that he wasn't going to give up on the campaign, even though the IBEW had nine or ten guys there and [CWA had] just Kenny. So when I got there, we were well behind. But we did our job. We did a good job at it, to the point that we made a tactical mistake. We used to handbill as people went into the factory. You'd handbill with literature about the union, and you'd hand it to them as they were driving in. The IBEW used to like to taunt you when you were there. They'd want to get you into an argument or whatever. My first experience with that was -- I grew up in a neighborhood where if somebody yells at you, you punch them. You didn't tolerate standing there talking to them about it. And so my first experience with it was a guy from the IBEW who came up and started taunting the shit out of me. And so finally I just said, "Look. This is what's going to happen. You're either going to back away or I'm going to beat the hell out of you right here on these steps." And so Majors pulled me away and said, "No, you can't do that kind of stuff. You gotta be cool."

Ralph [00:27:57] But we actually went to every house. We turned the campaign around to the point where Kenny was out with me and we were hand billing, and the IBEW came and started giving us a little shit. And Kenny said, "You want to make a bet who's going to win the election?" And they said, "Yeah, sure. We'll bet twenty dollars." And Kenny says, "Nah. You got to come up with real money. I'll bet you \$500 we win the election." Well, that scared the IBEW. They brought in five more organizers and they beat us by a vote. One vote. I had to go there and do the count and my stomach was turning, watching the results of that. And I always thought maybe we shouldn't have been so bold to make that argument. Right? Just leave it alone. It was funny.

Ralph [00:29:12] My job, besides doing house calling in the evening -- and there were people on the day shift so you'd do that in the evening -- but there were people on the evening shift, so you'd do it in the morning. Well, the evening shift people would get off at night. Since we couldn't get a building to rent, we rented a Winnebago and that was our office and we parked it in front of the factory. So if you were driving out, you'd just park your car [and] come in the Winnebago. We had coffee, we had sandwiches, that kind of stuff. So one night -- my job was to be there at 11:00 when the shift got off and anybody who wanted to come in, I'd meet with them.

So one night, nobody showed up because it was raining. So I thought, Oh, that's a good night. I'll get back to the apartment and get a good night's sleep. So I leave. I'm driving down the street. And where the factory was, was right near the Columbia River. You couldn't miss it. That's where they used to take all the logs down the river to be turned into lumber. So I'm driving and I'm making the turn and all of a sudden this woman jumps out into the street and she's just full of blood. And I'm thinking -- my logic where I grew up -- this has got to be somebody wanting to rob you, right? And so I get out of the car and I said, "Are you okay?" And she said, "I lost him. I don't know where he is. I can't find him." And I said, "Lady, you're bleeding pretty bad. You want me to take you to the hospital?" And she said, "I need to find my husband. I lost him. I can't find him." Well, she was drunk and when she came around the curve, she lost control of the car. There was train trestle above and she thought the train was coming to hit her. So she swerved and ended up hitting a tree. So I got her in the car and I drove her to the hospital. She kept wanting to get out of the car as I'm driving. In Vancouver, Washington, the way they're set up is one-way street this way, one-way street that way. So I'm trying to find a hospital. I'm trying to hold her so she don't jump out of the car while I'm driving. There's blood going all over the place. I get her to the hospital, tell the nurses what happened. And so they take her in and that was the last I seen her. I had a -- CWA had these yellow slickers with the CWA logo on it, and it was full of blood. I remember going back to the apartment, and the next day I showed it to Kenny and he said, "Only you could come up with a story like this." After Vancouver, I got home, just before Christmas. And I got a call from Bill -- he was the assistant to the secretary-treasurer.

Jeff [00:33:20] Hipple? Bill Hipple?

Ralph [00:33:23] No, no, no.

Jeff [00:33:26] Billy Webb?

Ralph [00:33:27] No. No. Friend of Ron Woods. He was from Dallas -- Kansas City, originally. [It was Bill Harwell.] Anyways, I got a call from him and he wanted to know if I would be willing to work the campaign in Dallas, Texas. So I said, "Yeah. How soon do you need me?" And he said, "How about yesterday?" So I flew to Dallas. And -- typical New York person -- I had on a black suit with a white shirt and black tie. Got off the airplane. Two guys from Kansas City, Missouri picked me up, drove me to their apartment, and they wanted to know if I wanted to go get something to eat. I'd just got in. I said, "No, I think I'll just relax and maybe go to bed early." And they said, "You just can't use our shower because that's our shower and you can't use ours." [Laughs] So I said, "All right, I'll go eat with you guys." So they took me to this hole in the wall restaurant. A girl said to me, "What would you like to drink?" I said "I'll have tea, a cup of tea." So she brings me an iced tea. And I said, "No, I want it in a cup with the little bag and you dip it up and down." She said to me, "Boy, if you wanted hot tea, you should have said hot tea, ya damn Yankee." She went back and got me my hot tea and that was my lesson. Be careful what you say and who you say it to.

Jeff [00:35:33] How'd the campaign go there?

Ralph [00:35:35] It was nasty right from the start. It was a tough campaign. CWA had won the initial one, but the board ruled you had to have a secondary campaign, or a secondary election, because of the increase of employees since the first election. So we represented the people there but we had to fight to keep them. Billy Harwell was the guy. Harwell had a guy. His name was Dick Spence. He was the person that was responsible for assigning everybody who to go house call with. And so Dick gave me this assignment, and I got all of these locations that were in east Texas. All these little towns -- Balch Springs. Hole in the walls. Right? I was driving to one of them one night, making the house call, finished them up and driving back and it's about 9:30 at night. I get pulled over by the police. It was a county sheriff. So he asked me for my driver's license. I gave him my New York State driver's license. He said, "Boy. What are you doing in this neighborhood at this time of night?" So I told him what I was. I said, "I'm a union organizer and we're out visiting employees who work in the factory." He said, "Well show me your organizer's license." I said, "What?" He said, "You have to have an organizer's license in the state of Texas to organize. We just don't let you people run around." And so I said, "Well, I don't have one." He said, "Well, you know I can throw you in jail." And I'm thinking, I don't have a clue what I can do now. So I said, "Well, I'll tell you what. I'll tell my boss first thing in the morning that I need to get a license." So he said, "I'm going to let you off with a warning, but don't come back here unless you have a license." [I said,] "Okay." So the next day Harwell has this morning meeting and we're sitting around. He says, "Anybody got anything to say?" I said, "Yeah I do." I said, "I almost got arrested last night because I don't have an organizer's license. Can you tell me where I get this?" And he said, "Oh, yeah, I forgot about that. I'll get you one." So I got my license. Later on, I worked the Pleasanton, California campaign.

Jeff [00:38:47] Did you win in Dallas first?

Ralph [00:38:50] Oh yeah.

Jeff [00:38:50] Okay. You won in Dallas. All right.

Debbie [00:38:53] How big was Dallas? And how big was the one in --

Jeff [00:38:58] Vancouver.

Ralph [00:38:59] Vancouver.

Debbie [00:38:59] Vancouver? Yeah.

Ralph [00:39:01] There were a couple hundred people in Vancouver and there was about 400 and maybe 500 in Dallas, Texas. The difference is you're not just dealing with questions about, what can the union do for me? You're battling with the IBEW, who's telling them they're the only real union, right? Because at that time, they represented more Western Electric plants than we did. And they had nicknames for us. We were the Ceiling Walkers of America, and we used to call them the IBEW [pronounced eye-BOO] boys -- the I Been Eating Worms boys. Right. And so you had that constant battle on the handbill lines. In fact, in Dallas, Texas, they would try and set you up. You would get an employee who was actually a supporter of the IBEW [who] asked you to come out and do a house call because they wanted to hear what you had to say. And you'd

get there and you'd start your presentation. And about fifteen minutes after you started, two IBEW people would show up, because they never ran separately. They always ran in groups of two. And you'd end up getting into a debate over the union, right there in the employee's house. And then, if it was an IBEW supporter to start with, then they'd go back in the factory the next day and say, "Oh, guess what happened? The IBEW kicked CWA's ass!" That kind of stuff. So you had to deal with that and you had to be on guard constantly. But we won. We won the election. And the day of the election --

Debbie [00:41:17] In Dallas, now.

Ralph [00:41:19] In Dallas, yeah. The day of the election, the night before, Harwell said to us, "I want you to go get two big Ryder trucks and put big speakers on top of them. And sit out there at night, all night long, and play Guns N' Roses and whatever other music, Led Zeppelin." That was a big one at the time, Led Zeppelin. "Play that music all night long." And the IBEW office was just around the corner. They'd have to hear it all night long. And so we did that. [The] following morning was the election day. And it's a big deal, right? You have your supporters with banners and balloons and all of that stuff, right? Historically, we spent way more money than we ever got back in dues from those particular campaigns. But that was the way it was, right? So the day of that election, we had the vote. And the IBEW had a guy working in the factory who used to ride a horse. He rode the horse in. And he charged our side of the group. And he came close to hitting [me] on the horse. But luckily the police were there to try to keep it separated. And they yanked him off the damn horse. And I guess, apparently, they took him to the jail, or did whatever, but got him out of there. So the election went that day. We won that evening. That was a Friday, I think. And so I'm leaving the union hall. And you got to go right by the IBEW to get back to your apartment. And there's the kid -- no horse -- standing outside by the car or whatever. And so I thought, You know what? It's my turn. So I parked my car, got out of my car, and said, "Hey, you. Come here." And he said, "What do you want?" I said, "I want to kick your ass." And I headed towards him. And he ran inside yelling, "He's trying to beat me up! He's trying to beat me up!" And I thought, Well, I better get out of here or I'll get arrested. So I turned around, got in the car, and left. But it was a good win, a tough win. And, like I said, we spent far more money than we ever made with any of the manufacturing locations that we organized.

Debbie [00:44:38] Ralph. I have two short questions. What did they call CWA? I didn't get that.

Ralph [00:44:49] Ceiling Walkers of America.

Debbie [00:44:51] You mean like walking on the ceiling of a house?

Ralph [00:44:56] Yeah.

Debbie [00:44:56] Okay.

Ralph [00:44:57] You know who they got it from? One of our people, who worked in the factory and was supporting CWA, went to a party that the IBEW had at their meeting hall. Right. He snuck into the bathroom, climbed up into the rafters, and was going to -- I don't know what he

was trying to do. He was trying to get into their internal offices to see what he could find. And as he was trying to go through, he fell. And we got nicknamed Ceiling Walkers. Right.

Debbie [00:45:41] And another question. This is the period, you're saying, in the [19]70s or late [19]60s?

Ralph [00:45:52] Yeah.

Debbie [00:45:54] Why were these factories, Western Electric factories, not organized until then?

Ralph [00:46:02] Well, there were a bunch of CWA factories that were organized. These were new ones that the company was opening. New technology or -- like, the one in California was a sister location to the one in Merrimack Valley. The one in Dallas was a sister location to the one in Shreveport, Louisiana. The factory had two locations just in case something went wrong in one or the other.

Debbie [00:46:34] So this was a period of growth for Western Electric.

Ralph [00:46:39] Yeah.

Debbie [00:46:39] And we're talking late [19]60s, early [19]70s? Or do I have the time wrong?

Ralph [00:46:45] No, you got it right.

Debbie [00:46:47] And what would you tell people was the selling point for CWA over IBEW?

Ralph [00:46:58] One of the good things for me was I came out of the manufacturing local. So I knew the ins and outs of the local. And [unclear] was a history of Western Electric at that time. Right. And my job in the local in Buffalo, besides organizing, I was on what was called the Piece Work Committee. That was where you checked the rates -- how many units you did a day and that kind of stuff. It was time sensitive. The engineers would come in and say, "You could take this pen and you could open it up in x number of seconds and take it out." It was that kind of technology. My job was to make sure when they did a time study that the time study was accurate -- if there were, we thought, any mistakes or if they didn't do something correctly. And the committee was to watch that. What you would do is each month, the group that was in a particular area, like the spring cords -- remember the old spring cords on telephones? That was one of the jobs in the factory in Buffalo. Well, they got -- based on how many spring cords they did a month -- they would get a bonus of 8, 10, 12, 20%. Usually never more than 25. That used to be the most any -- and when it was 25%, it was usually hard physical jobs that predominantly men did. But that bonus was based on the efficiencies of the group. It was a group average. So you had to watch that. And my job, being a member of that committee, I had so many departments that I used to get all the runs from the company on what the efficiencies were, and I could double check to make sure they were accurate. And you could watch. They would fluctuate. People used to think a five-week month was a great month to [earn] extra money. But in reality, a five-week month reduced the percentage of bonus because of the number of units

you ended up having to make. So that was a thing I had experience over the IBEW organizers. They were organizers. They came out of the electrical industry. It could have been an electrician or whatever, but none of them had really any big Western Electric experience. So that gave me the edge for that type of stuff. Does that answer your question?

Debbie [00:50:16] Yeah, and it opened up a whole set of other questions. Jeff, if you don't mind me going down this hole.

Jeff [00:50:22] Go ahead. Yeah.

Debbie [00:50:24] I'm just intrigued to hear about the piece rates. You were not paid hourly rate? And was this true throughout Western Electric?

Ralph [00:50:34] You were paid an hourly rate, but this was above and beyond. So you got your hourly rate for 40 hours. And then if you were able to go beyond what the rate called for, that was considered bonus money. At the end of the month, you would get a bonus based on what your extra rate was.

Debbie [00:51:06] So I want to ask you about how people who are working in the factory controlled against speed-up and what impact that had on solidarity. We heard, for example, from Dennis Trainor, that when he was working outside and started, the old timers came to him and said, "Don't work too fast, because that's going to mean the company's going to increase their expectations for all of us." Within the factory, was there some kind of formal or informal communication among --

Ralph [00:51:51] Yeah.

Debbie [00:51:52] Okay. You know what I'm asking. Go ahead.

Ralph [00:51:54] Yeah. From time to time, the company would go around with their engineers and they would restudy the job. And we always told people, "When you're being studied, use the manual. Follow every detail to a tee. Right. The shortcuts, do not do while they're there. When they're gone, you can do your shortcuts." I will always say this. The Western Electric employees -- if you gave them a rate, they would figure out a shortcut to beat the rate. That was always the pace. And it was kind of like a game. You just had to be observant, that when you were being time studied, you followed whatever the company guidelines were. If they said, "You screw this from right to left," but in reality it was quicker doing it the other way, you did it the way they said to do it, so that you knew you were following the rate that they established. And that meant if you went over rate you would get a bonus. Now, there were always shortcuts you would find. And those shortcuts is what got you, sometimes, big bonuses.

Debbie [00:53:32] And you wouldn't tell your supervisor what those shortcuts were.

Ralph [00:53:35] No, no. You never told anybody that, other than -- you were careful to tell your fellow employees, right. Because you never know. But you figured out -- I'll tell you this. When I worked in Atlanta, and first got there, I hated it. I was looking for a way for the company

to fire me. I just didn't have the guts to do it myself. My wife and kids were back in Buffalo trying to sell the house. I was working the midnight shift in Atlanta. I was working for a guy that worked in Buffalo as a supervisor. And I worked in an area that was predominantly female. It was pulling wires -- little, you know, regular wires, onto a cable box. They use those for plug-ins in offices. It was tedious work and it was more adapted to somebody with thinner hands, smaller hands. And the rate was extremely tough. They had a lot stricter rules in Atlanta than they did in Buffalo. And I would do things like -- you had a fifteen minute break in the morning, or maybe in the first four hours and then a fifteen minute break in the next four. I would always take twenty, just so that supervisor would come up to me and say, "You're violating the rules." I'd always say, "Well, you know, you can fire me." But he was a guy from Buffalo and he knew the struggle that we were going through, because -- don't get me wrong -- none of the Atlanta people particularly liked us either, because we were from Buffalo, right. We were considered damn Yankees. And it was even worse because I was Catholic. So that just made it that much worse. So when they said to me, "We're going to put you on these machines that all these women are working on," I thought, Okay, I'm going to figure out how to beat this thing. Well, I did. [I] figured [out] the shortcuts, how to beat it. And I started teaching the women how to beat system. Finally, the supervisor from Buffalo says, "Look, they want me to fire you. I don't want to do that. I don't think you need to do that to your family. They're trying to come here. I'm going to put you on a job where nobody else is around and you can do your thing and I'll leave you alone." And so he did. That's probably what saved me.

Debbie [00:57:00] Ralph? Jeff, I don't want to go down too big of a rabbit hole.

Jeff [00:57:06] No, no. Go ahead.

Debbie [00:57:07] Can you tell us what was being made in these twenty-five factories? Are these big switches? Are they phones? Are they components?

Ralph [00:57:19] They were 5-ESS [switches]. They were components. They were telephones. They were underground cable. Submarine cable. Baltimore, Maryland made submarine cable when their factory was here. In fact, they would make the cable in the factory, pull the ship up to the dock, and roll the cable right out onto the boat and then go. Phoenix, Arizona. That factory made spring cords and cables for commercial use and offices. We made what we called the large cable that went in the ground and had like, maybe 100 pairs or 60 pairs inside, that big black cable you see once in a while. You'll see them on the highways as they're putting them underground. We made that. And then we -- smart move by the GM [general manager] of the factory there in Atlanta -- we switched from making cable. We became the first fiber optics plant in the United States, making it there. If they had stayed at that, they'd probably still be in the business today, but who knows. But each factory -- and they had a sister factory just in case -- each factory made some different components, some different cable or wire.

Debbie [00:59:05] And this is the time in which all the equipment and all of the phones were made by Western Electric.

Ralph [00:59:20] They were made by Western Electric, and they were repaired by Western Electric, and installed by Western Electric. You could actually get a phone -- it would be sent to

Atlanta, to a distribution center that they had in the other end of Atlanta. And they would refurbish the phone, put it back in service, and sell it as a phone. You'd go to a phone center store, you might get one of those.

Debbie [00:59:53] I think this is the last question. So you talked about -- you had an hourly rate and a piece rate. These factories were not assembly lines?

Ralph [01:00:04] Some parts of it were assembly lines. Yeah. But you couldn't have an assembly line for cutting cable. You might have a tower where you had ten or twelve big reels of cable and you'd pull it down and run up so much -- the order might call for 200 feet, you'd run off 210 feet, cut it, put it in a box, and out it went. But some of the systems -- the first job I had in Atlanta was teaching the women shortcuts. That was the assembly line. Product would go through. And you'd pull one off, do it, put it back on the production line. It was kind of a mixed bag. In Buffalo, New York, it was two different environments. The men drove the fork trucks and did all the bigger work, cutting cable and all that. And the women did spring cords and putting cotton fiber on the wire, the old cotton fiber they had. In Atlanta, that was completely different. Women ran fork[lift] trucks and worked twisters. You know, there was no job separation by sex.

Debbie [01:01:46] And what about race?

Ralph [01:01:49] What about rates?

Debbie [01:01:51] Race. R-A-C-E. The makeup of the employees in Atlanta and Buffalo.

Ralph [01:02:03] In Buffalo, it was probably 20% minority. And they were predominantly women in those jobs that were, quote unquote, classified as women's jobs. In Atlanta, it was probably in the high 30s or mid-30s. I know when I was local president, I think the minority group was about 35%. And part of that was because we had a lot -- we had more -- when they started closing factories, Atlanta got a lot of that work. And we got people from the New Jersey factory. It was Kearny, New Jersey. We got people from Baltimore, we got people from Indianapolis, and we got people from Chicago. We got all that work plus those people. I think, during my days as a local president, we probably got about 800 people and probably signed up -- because I did all of the -- we used to have an introduction. You would come into the auditorium when you first came to the building. And the company would introduce themselves and tell you what the rules were, and your passes, and what you could do and not do. And then they would give me time, whatever time I needed. And I would talk to them about the union, what we represent here nationwide and why you need to be a member, going forward. And because of that, we were able to sign up a huge number. We signed up probably about 90 to 95% during that period. And they had come from locations that were like Kearny, New Jersey. Chicago, they were an agency shop space. So they knew that.

Jeff [01:04:22] So, on this organizing odyssey. Pleasanton, California -- did you win the campaign there?

Ralph [01:04:30] No. We lost that.

Jeff [01:04:32] Okay.

Ralph [01:04:33] It's ironic. You know how we lost that? The AFL-CIO. Do you have time?

Jeff [01:04:42] Yeah. As long as you do.

Ralph [01:04:46] Oh, yeah. I got all day. I'm retired.

Jeff [01:04:48] Well, I'm not sure we got all day.

Ralph [01:04:54] The AFL-CIO got involved after the Dallas campaign because if we didn't spend \$1 million on that campaign, we didn't spend a penny. I mean, there were no limits. And so the AFL-CIO got involved and they decided to have guidelines that you had to run by. You couldn't have any hot meals anymore. Because in Dallas, Texas, we would go to the gate when the people were coming out from lunch and each union would hand out a menu of a hot lunch at the union hall. Just come by and get it. So it was crazy. And both unions did it. So Pleasanton was supposed to be different. There was supposed to be no hot lunches. You couldn't buy meals for people. You could offer a sandwich if they came over. We had scheduled an office right next to the factory in Pleasanton. It was a brand new complex of one level offices -- storefront, actually. And we were scheduled to have one of those. Well, the IBEW -- across the street from the factory, they've rented a big, huge warehouse. They got in theirs. We were not able to get into ours because, ironically, the county electrician who certifies the unit would never certify that row of buildings. So we couldn't get into our office. We came up with the idea of another Winnebago, and so we worked out of a Winnebago, and every day we would pull up to the parking lot of the Western [Electric] plant. We'd have our CWA sign on the Winnebago. And that was our office. And people could come in and talk with us there. The IBEW used to make fun at it, but we were -- and we had a couple guys. We had a guy from Kansas City, Missouri and a guy from Dallas, Texas who helped us on the campaign. They were local officers in the factory, so that was helpful. But we were not successful. And part of the reason why is [that] the first vote we had, we were first, the IBEW was second, and the Machinists -- they got involved in that election and they came in third. And the guys, the organizers who were running the Machinists' campaign, they threw their support to us. But the international union of the Machinists sent a letter to them, telling them they didn't have the authority [and] that the Machinist union, national union, was endorsing the IBEW. And we ended up losing ten votes. However, we did learn a lesson. The IBEW -- they would break the rule. Catch me if you can. They were giving them fried chicken. And I know that's meaningless right now, but that's what drew people in. So Ken Majors went home for the weekend and he was a staunch supporter of the AFL-CIO. [He would say,] "Do not violate that rule any time." And we would argue with him, but he was in charge. So he went away for the week and he went back home to LA. And so one day, myself and this guy Doug decided we're going to have sandwiches at our meeting. But they were going to be good sandwiches. So we went to a restaurant and we ordered 30 prime ribs. [We] brought the prime ribs in, put them between two slices of bread, and said, "Here's your sandwich." And lo and behold, it didn't help. We still lost.

Jeff [01:10:20] All right, let me move on to Atlanta. So obviously, we won the campaign in Atlanta because you wound up working there. But let me ask -- I want to pick a little bit at what Debbie touched on, briefly, about the racial component down in Atlanta and what were -- obviously, you're in the South. I recall you telling me in the past, one of the activists in the local was the Grand Wizard of the [Ku Klux] Klan down there. So what was the experience like for African-American workers in the Atlanta plant?

Ralph [01:11:00] Well, when I ran for VP, I ran against the northern Grand Wizard of the KKK. His name was Danny Carver. In fact, he was on The Geraldo Show with his wife and kids a few years later. And it was me, and a black female, and -- no, it was when I was running for president, not vice president. It was me, a black female, and him. And I almost won it on the first ballot. And I was probably ten votes short. There were about 1,500 people at the time that were eligible.

Jeff [01:12:06] And just to clarify, you needed to get 50% of the vote plus one in order to be elected on the first ballot. Okay.

Ralph [01:12:13] Yes. And so we were having a runoff, and it was going to be myself and a black female. And her name was Ofie Slack. Nice person. Had never been really involved in the local. Just decided she was gonna run. At that time, we didn't have all the transferees of the different factories that closed. We had a few, but not the total number. And I think the makeup of the factories of minorities was probably in the high 20s [percentage], maybe a little more, but that was about it. And I remember Danny Carver seeing me in the factory one day. And he said to me, "I just want to let you know I'm not supporting you in the election." And I said, "Danny, I don't care. I don't want your support." He said, "I'm going to support Opie." I said, "I think you ought to call Opie and tell her that because I don't think she wants your support either." And he said, "Don't you want to know the reason why?" I said, "No, not really." He said, "Well, I'm going to tell you anyway. It's because you've got three strikes against you. She's only got two. One, she's black." And he didn't use that word. "And two, she's a female. But you got three strikes. One, you're a damn Yankee. Two, you're Catholic. And three, I don't like you." And I said, "Well, I think you should at least let Opie know that you're supporting her, because I know she's not going to want your support." And Opie's sister was tough. Tough, tough girl. She didn't like any Danny Carver at all. So I'm sure he didn't go to her to tell her, "I'm voting for your sister." So I ended up -- I won it on the second ballot.

Jeff [01:15:05] In your discussion earlier, you said from there, you then were asked to join the CWA staff. And what office of CWA did you join the staff on?

Ralph [01:15:27] The C&T office in New Jersey.

Jeff [01:15:34] C&T was what?

Ralph [01:15:37] Communications and Technology. It was the old AT&T at that time. In fact, when I did my interview with Ted Watkins -- Morty [Bahr] was the president at that time. And he [Ted Watkins] told me that Morty had said [that] I really don't need to do any organizing -- because at that time, when you went on staff, you had to spend three months organizing

someplace else. And he said, "You don't have to do that. You can go right to New Jersey." And so when I went on staff, I was in Atlanta. We had just finished the [19]89 bargaining, national bargaining. And they were doing a contract explanation meeting in Atlanta. So Jim [Irvine, C&T vice-president] had told me, just stay in Atlanta. You can hook up with us when we get down there.

Jeff [01:16:50] This is Jim Irvine.

Ralph [01:16:50] Jim Irvine, yeah. And the day came -- that morning I got a call from John [Agee]-- he was one of Jim's assistants. He was from Texas. I can't remember his last name. Anyways, he called me and said, "Have you talked to Jim?" I said, "No, I haven't." He said, "Well, when you get down here, you need to go see him right away." I said, "Okay." I went to see Jim and he said, "Change your plans. You're not going to New Jersey to start your job. You're going to Kansas City and you're going to organize." And I said, "I thought I didn't have to do that." He said, "Yeah, well, you gotta." So they sent me to Kansas City to organize a Southwestern Bell Yellow Pages. They weren't organized at the time. And to organize the clerical union unit in the factory at Western Electric, because I had organized our clerical unit in a factory in Atlanta. And so I went there. I organized the clerical workers in the factory in a short period of time. They were real receptive to it. And then I worked the Yellow Pages for the rest of the time. Then Larry Cohen [then organizing director] called me with Morty and said, "There's a unit we represent called Johnson Radio." They had gone on strike ten years ago, they were still represented, and finally had reached an agreement to bargain a new contract. They had gone ten years without a contract. They had cash dues. You had to pay in cash. There were no dues deductions taken out of your pay. The unit was probably 200, maybe 250. And Larry and Morty wanted me to go organize, sign people up into the union and bargain that first contract. Delbert Johnson had started it and [unclear] CWA. And so I had to take it over. Out of the 250 people, we had four people that were members and they were in arrears on their dues. And so it was just basically an organizing and bargaining project. And we did that. We got an agreement, got it settled. We probably signed up maybe half of the workforce -- I was still working on it when I got a call. It had now been six months of organizing and bargaining in Kansas City, and they were getting ready to have a District 6 VP election. And the rumor was that -- I can't remember -- Tommy [Parsons] --

Debbie [01:21:05] Parsons.

Jeff [01:21:07] Tommy Parsons.

Ralph [01:21:08] Tommy Parsons was running. And the rumor was, Bill Harwell was going to run. Well, Parsons happened to come to Dallas when I was organizing. They sent a couple of people right at the end, and Parsons was one of them. In fact, he stayed in my apartment that month he was there. Well, he knew I was in town organizing, and he thought Larry and Morty and Harwell put me there as a seed to help Harwell in his campaign. So he was raising hell with Irvine. I think I was in bargaining. I got a call from Irvine. He said, "How much more you got on this bargaining?" I said, "Well, I think I can be done in maybe a week, maybe less." He said, "Do the less. Get your ass into New Jersey immediately. Let all the campaigns go." I said okay. That was it. I was in New Jersey after about a week. I had to go stop home. I was going through a

divorce. I had to stop home, get my clothes and my belongings, throw them in the car, and drive to New Jersey. Funny story -- Ron Allen called me and said, "I don't care what you do, but I want your ass in this building in New Jersey Monday. I don't care if it's 4:30 at night or 8:00 in the morning. I want you there on Monday." So I said, "Okay." So I drove to New Jersey. I got there about 4:00. I had a key to the office. They had given me a key. I turn the key. I go in. And I don't see anybody. I go to where I know my office is going to be. I put my stuff in the office. I thought, maybe they're in a meeting on the other side of the building. I go to the other side of the building -- nothing. Nobody's there. I can't figure out what the hell is going on. I go back to my room. I'm going to take my stuff out of my briefcase and everything. There's the envelope and it said my name on it. I open up the envelope. It's Ron Allen, one of his practical jokes. He says, "Ha ha, I got you." [Jeff laughs] We raced to New Jersey so he could get me on one.

Jeff [01:23:51] The first of many, I'm sure.

Ralph [01:23:54] Yeah.

Jeff [01:23:59] This is sort of a turning point in your career now. You've gone from this sort of organizer extraordinaire being sent around to projects around the country doing some administrative work --

Ralph [01:24:14] One more campaign. The Long Island one, because that was extreme. That was a defense plant. I would handbill. Ted Watkins was in charge of it and I would report to him. And he'd say to me, "Do I need anybody?" And [unclear] that local gave me a guy from the local to help me. Then a guy by the name of John Smith -- he ran in Local [deleted] election, but lost -- he helped me as well. He was pretty good friends with Watkins. But from time to time, they would say, "Do you need anybody?" So I always said, "No, you know, I'm just a local guy. I don't need to be telling staff reps what to do and where to go." Watkins would say, "I'm telling them where to go and what to do, and they're to meet you and do what you say to do." So every time they'd send me a staff rep, the staff rep would be upset and they'd show up 45 minutes to an hour late. Or we were done hand billing, and they'd pull up and say, "Okay, what do you want me to do?" Finally I had to get Watkins to understand I don't need that kind of help, and I don't want to be a tattletale and turn somebody in. I said, "Just stop doing that. Let me be the way I am. I'm fine." But the campaign was tough because you had the government involved. I'm convinced to this day that they bugged my room, my hotel room, to see what kind of information I had. I remember the day we went to the [National Labor Relations] Board with the cards, and the company wanted to challenge the size of the unit. They said to the Board, "We don't know what the unit should be, so we'll tell you, Mr. Board Agent, and you tell us what it should be." And so we had a court case in the Brooklyn NLRB that, at that time, became the longest running court case in Brooklyn history. It was thirty-eight days of hearings. We had six witnesses who worked in the factory and testified for us. And in the end, it got sent to Washington and we were never successful in it, other than the company attorney and law firm that they used was Cutler Hammond, and they were from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. And the guy said to me, "I don't know how you did it. UAW tried and failed, Teamsters tried and failed, but you got it this far." He said, "Now we're going to kick your ass in this election. But I got to congratulate you. Whoever you had working with you, you guys got it to an election." And that's really what Morty wants. He wanted to be brought to an election, and then we'll take it from there.

Jeff [01:28:10] Just for context, this is during, probably, the Nixon administration.

Ralph [01:28:18] Let me think.

Jeff [01:28:22] [19]68?

Ralph [01:28:22] No. When was the gas crisis?

Debbie [01:28:27] [19]73.

Jeff [01:28:29][19]'73.

Debbie [01:28:27] Around then.

Ralph [01:28:29] Yeah. Because I used to spend my weekends, either Saturday or Sunday, at a gas station waiting in line for hours. I had my coffee, my donut, and my *New York Times*. It would take you hours to get gas. I did it every Saturday and every other Sunday. In fact, we ran out of gas one time coming back. We got hit with a snowstorm. We left the Brooklyn court at like, 3:30 on a Friday. We got on the LIE, the Long Island Expressway. And we were on fumes. Because you couldn't get gas if you had a half a tank or more. And you had to turn your engine on so the gas station attendant could see how much you had. So you couldn't lie, right? And so I had ran short on gas because we weren't moving. We were sitting on the expressway because the snow was coming down. Unbelievable. There were cars parked everywhere. So I ended up pulling off in Jamaica, New York, and we parked the car. It was a brand new Dodge that Watkins gave me. It only had twenty miles or so on it. I had to take me and the six witnesses -- one guy had a bad leg. He had lost his leg. And we had to walk a couple miles to a train station to get the Long Island train out to the Island. And then I had one of the local officers come meet us there and take these guys home or to their cars. It was unbelievable.

Jeff [01:30:28] Wow.

Ralph [01:30:28] All right. I'm sorry.

Jeff [01:30:31] No, no. No worries. So you make this transition now from running all these organizing campaigns -- obviously still do some administrative work when you're president of the local in Atlanta -- but now you're on the CWA staff, and your role changes from organizing to more servicing contract work. Tell us about that transition and the work that you did, beginning at the C&T office.

Ralph [01:31:05] Well, when I started, my assignment was all of the manufacturing locations, and District 1 for the C&T operations contract. I always thought that would be interesting because nobody wanted to handle the grievances from District 1. So everybody was happy when I came to the office because they could stick District 1 on me. I also was involved in -- as we organized clerical people in the manufacturing locations, I was sent to bargain those contracts. I did the one in New River Valley, and I think another one in Greensboro. And the other

assignment I had is -- the fifth level grievances for all of Western Electric, and AT&T for that matter, were handled out of our office. So we had a huge chunk of grievances that needed to be dealt with on a regular basis. So I was in charge of my group and handling those grievances and writing up the answers -- if we decided to close the case, or if we were going to go ahead and arbitrate the case to get it to a write-up for the attorneys. And I did that from [19]'89, and bargained the national contract for the network side of the house, which was Ron Allen's side.

Jeff [01:33:16] So you're in the C&T office at some point. Oh, well, I guess the office had already come together --

Ralph [01:33:26] Yeah.

Jeff [01:33:26] -- Irvine and Allen. So by the time you got there, they were already merged. Okay. And so you're working with these folks. Tell me a little more about negotiating with AT&T and these employers in this post-divestiture environment.

Ralph [01:33:48] Well, when it was still AT&T, the bargaining was handled -- Jim Irvine was the chair of the bargaining team, and I was a member of it, and we bargained that way. When the split came, and it became AT&T and Lucent Technologies or AT&T and Network Systems, Ron Allen chaired the Network Systems bargaining. And I was his assistant during that part. When it became Lucent -- after that split -- I took over and, became the chair of the Lucent bargaining.

Jeff [01:34:43] Explain what Lucent was.

Ralph [01:34:48] For all intents and purposes, Lucent was the old Western Electric. We had installation, manufacturing, distribution, and repair. Those groups all reported to Lucent. We bargained those contracts. And then when Lucent split off, and they created Avaya, I handled Lucent and Avaya, bargaining both. So, I don't remember exactly the time frame for when Jim offered me the VP's job -- rather, the assistant to the VP's job. Ron Allen got promoted to Morty Bahr's assistant. Jim asked me if I'd become his assistant. I'm a huge supporter of seniority, and I was a little leery of taking it because I had to bypass Art -- I can't remember Art's full name -- he was on the operation side -- Art Harris. He was Jim's assistant on the operation -- he was the director. And he would have been next in line. But Jim said, "You're the future. You're going to be the one." And so I had a conversation with Jim about it and decided, Okay, I'll do it. And I became his assistant. And then in 2001, Jim said, "I want to go to lunch. Let's go to lunch." We went to lunch, and walking back, he said, "I'm going to resign and retire and I want you to take over." I said, "I don't want to be VP. I'm happy where I'm at." He said, "Yeah, well, that door is already closed. You're going to become the VP." It was a matter of -- I think the board was meeting at that time. I went back to my office. Jim called me at the board meeting and said, "Get your ass over here at the hotel." I went over to the hotel and waited outside while they were doing their board meeting. It seemed like forever, but it was like, thirty minutes, forty minutes. And they broke for lunch. Jim got me in there -- and he had said to me, he says, "You need to have a project ready of what you want to do when you become the VP, and you need to explain it to Morty. And you got to do it right away." I said okay. So I got in there. They finished their break. I sat down. They gave me [unclear]. And Morty said, "Let me hear what you got to say." I started to talk. He said, "I don't want to hear that stuff. Tell me later." That was the end of it.

Debbie [01:38:47] What year was this? What year?

Ralph [01:38:53] This was 2001. I held that position till I retired in 2013. I moved to Tampa, Florida. I hooked up with the local president in Orlando and Tampa and became the special assistant to the local president. I handled all grievances for the Tampa area [AT&T] Mobility stores. I had seventeen of them, went from Venice all the way up to Tampa and a little bit north. Steve Wisniewski was the president. He said to me, "I want to pay you for doing this." I said, "No. The only thing I want you to do is just get me some cards with my name on it. So when I hand them out, people know who I am." And so they did that. I did that for, I want to say, [20]13 till -- I think we moved out of there -- I did it for four years. I loved it. I did a couple of projects for CWA. I did a charge. I was the prosecutor in a hearing in Texas. I also did a bargaining for the employees of the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, a printing group. I was asked by a guy who was the VP for the printing sector, and it was after Bill [Boarman], so I don't remember his name. I did that. I worked that campaign. I would drive up from Tampa to Atlanta and bargain a contract. We bargained for almost a year, and finally got a contract.

Debbie [01:40:56] Ralph, we didn't get the local numbers for Buffalo and Atlanta.

Ralph [01:41:03] Buffalo was Local 1162. And Atlanta was 3263.

Debbie [01:41:12] Thank you.

Jeff [01:41:14] So you glossed over your time as the vice president. You went right from Jim touching you on the shoulder and saying you're the vice president, right into retirement. But you were vice president during some pretty tumultuous times in the C&T world. Tell us a little bit about some of those experiences.

Ralph [01:41:40] I handled the bargaining in 2009 and 2012 with AT&T. Jeff was involved in that. So you know what that was like. I remember having a conversation with Morty when AT&T was [unclear], or getting to the stage where they could not survive on their own. It was right at the time when SBC bought AT&T [2005]. They were going through the due diligence. And we were bargaining. Morty said to me, "These are the good times, so get what you can get, because AT&T doesn't want the bargaining to interfere with this sale going forward. [AT&T CEO David] Dorman needs this done." But there was a guy from AT&T who was -- we were trying to do early bargaining -- and his name was Frank Ianna. And he hated the union because of an incident down in Atlanta when he went to visit with the employees. They all had their CWA shirts on, and when he started to speak, they all stood up and turned their back. And it said "CWA Forever" on the back of their shirts. And he just hated the union because of it. In fact, when I went to meet with him, over this early bargaining, he said, "Nothing personal, but fuck you." And so I said, "Okay, that's fine. Nothing personal for me either, but fuck you." That's how the relationship was. It wasn't any better than that. And it wasn't just me. He didn't like the union in general. And so we were at loggerheads. Morty said to me one day, called me and said, "Are you going to be able to get an agreement?" And I said, "No, he's not going to allow it." I said, "I can get an agreement. It's the two people sitting on the side of the chair of the bargaining team. They know what to do and they'll get the agreement. But I'm not going to do it. I can't get it. This

guy in New Jersey, Ianna, keeps saying no, won't let the chair of the bargaining team do it." So Morty got a meeting with the CEO, Dave Dorman, this guy Frank Ianna, me, and Morty. Morty asked me, "What's the problem?" And I said, "He is." And I looked at the CEO, and I said, "Here's my question for you. Do you want a deal? If the answer's yes, you want to deal, then you need to tell me that. If the answer is no, then he's your guy because he's going to keep you from getting an early agreement." And Dorman said, "I want a deal. I want to get this bargaining done with so it doesn't impact the merger." He turned around, he looked at Frank Ianna and said, "Frank, you're not going to be doing any more the bargaining. I'll take you off and put somebody else on." Within a week or two we had a deal done, and it was over with. So we got it done. We got a good deal taken care of because we needed to get that out of the way. And like Morty said, it was an opportunity to get what we needed to get.

Debbie [01:45:55] What year was this? I believe the merger was 2005.

Ralph [01:46:04] So it had to be before then. So I would say 2004, 2003, right around there.

Debbie [01:46:12] And at that point, CWA represented whom at AT&T ?

Ralph [01:46:21] What do you mean?

Debbie [01:46:23] It was the call centers. It was --

Ralph [01:46:25] Oh, yeah. It was the call centers, the network systems people, it was comm[unications] techs, the field techs, and the admins.

Debbie [01:46:44] And all manufacturing was gone? When did Merrimack Valley close?

Ralph [01:46:50] Well, that was --

Debbie [01:46:51] That was Lucent by then. Yeah, that was Lucent.

Ralph [01:46:54] Okay. Yeah. And that happened after 2004. Lucent dissolved.

Debbie [01:47:10] Jeff, you're better at this, but in the bargaining during your period was a lot of the focus on job security issues?

Ralph [01:47:21] That was always our number one. That was always our focus. I always told the bargaining team, and I'll give the bargaining team a lot of credit. I always had the philosophy you may be the chair of the bargaining team, but you're not the only knowledgeable one. And that sometimes those local people have better ideas than your idea and you need to listen to it, not just have them sitting there like bumps on a log. They need to be active participants. Each member of the bargaining team had X number of articles that they had to present and prepare for. Because I always felt if I died during bargaining, it just kept rolling. Right. But I always told them, don't get lost in the minutia of wanting more money just as the big issue because you might get more money, but they're going to get their money back by laying people off. What you need to focus on is job security. That needs to be the number one issue. Anything we do around

job security has to entail making sure we have jobs going forward. If they want to close a call center store, they need to have the ability to transfer people and they need to be able to allow people to do things that will let them transfer. Don't put them in a position, say okay you can transfer here. You have these skills and then they don't have those skills to do it. Always remember the focus is job security. That's our issue. We have jobs. You'll get a contract. If we don't have jobs. You don't get a contract.

Debbie [01:49:36] What were some other contractual provisions that you were able to get to protect jobs?

Ralph [01:49:45] Well, we always believed in letting people get education so that if they did get laid-off, there were avenues for them to go to if they wanted to through the Alliance [for Employee Growth] that we had, which in my opinion, was one of the best things Morty was ever to create. [The Alliance was a company-funded, jointly administered education program, first negotiated in the late 1980s.] That was Morty's legacy, education. And through the Alliance, we were able to get training for people to be nurses, all kinds of other jobs. We even had a guy who wanted to be a racecar driver when he got laid-off [from' the new Merrimack Valley plant, he got a job as racecar driver. It sounds funny, but in reality we were focused on trying to make sure that people had a livelihood whether it be in AT&T or subsequent companies or had future jobs there, not someplace where they would get laid-off and had no place to go and no skill to do it.

Debbie [01:50:56] I also remember you bargaining hard for watermarks.

Ralph [01:51:00] Yes, well, that was part of the security. If you had a watermark, it made it harder for the company just to do wholesale downsizing.

Jeff [01:51:17] Explain what a watermark is.

Ralph [01:51:19] Watermark is guaranteed employment for X number of people. So if we had, for example, in AT&T we had 5000 members, 5000 jobs. We had a watermark of 4200. That meant during the life of the contract you could never go below 4200. So it would entice you to find jobs for the 800 out of a location you're going to close. The movement to a job to maintain that 4200. And that was an objective that we absolutely wanted and we achieved. And we kept it until, I don't know if they have it anymore.

Jeff [01:52:13] Your time as the C & T vice-president you also did some work reaching out internationally to try and build some coalitions to leverage. What was going on there? Talk a little bit about that if you would.

Ralph [01:52:29] I did. In the case of Avaya, we actually --

Jeff [01:52:38] Tell us what Avaya is.

Ralph [01:52:40] The spin-off of Lucent. It was their microelectronics division. They spun-off and they basically took care of putting in the systems and maintaining them, like Wall Street. Those were all Avaya techs that worked in Wall Street. Richie Meringolo was the local officer in

charge of them. He was on the bargaining team as well. Avaya decided to go into Europe. They purchased a company in Europe, in Germany, and it was a family-owned company that they bought. And so I got an invitation to go to Germany, Frankfurt, to speak with the union in Frankfurt, to explain to them how we bargain with Avaya, what we did and why we did it, how successful we were. And so I did that. It was interesting because first time I went there, I got to Frankfurt and the German union brought me to the location, the building where the headquarters of the company was. They decided to have a rally in the stair area, stairs that went around the inside perimeter of the building. And in the main hall of their lobby they had all their technicians show up. They were talking to them about a buyout and what we had bargained and why we had to do that. And they asked me to speak. So here I am in Germany. I didn't know a lick of German. Explaining to them in English what we have done with Avaya, what you need to do as a union in dealing with Avaya and that we were supporting them 100%. It was this huge rally in this building that was owned by the company. I thought this is absolutely the way to go. Then they asked me to come back a second time and to bring a local officer. I brought Richie Meringolo along with me. The union, the IGM, Metalworkers Union.

Debbie [01:55:46] IG Metall

Ralph [01:55:47] IG Metall. That's it. They asked us to meet with their board. So we met with their board and we went over, fact we had just finished bargaining with Avaya, and we were explaining to them what we did and how we succeeded. They were in shock because of the fact that we would do things to embarrass the company and we would do things like walk off the job or delays or ten minute stand ups, all the mobilization stuff that we did. Right. And they would ask, well, how do you get away with it? And we'd say, well, there's no law so we do it. It just flabbergasted them that you could do that when you didn't have it in the contract. Okay. So it was a new awakening for them with Avaya. I don't think Avaya is still over there. I think they gave up on that. It was not, what I would say, going to make them a global player. At least I thought that it wasn't big enough. (pause) Want to know about my hockey?

Jeff [01:57:33] Debbie, do you have some follow- up questions you want to hit before we lose Hannah here?

Debbie [01:57:39] I want Hannah to have a chance to ask a question.

Jeff [01:57:43] Oh, yes. Right, right. Hannah. Ralph. So, you know, Hannah is, Debbie's niece, and she's been the producer of all of these. She does all our technical support and she's not a CWA person. So she hears all these interviews and comes up with questions that those of us playing inside baseball might not come up with. So Hannah why don't you fire away.

Hannah [01:58:15] Sure. Hi, Ralph.

Ralph [01:58:17] Hi Hannah.

Hannah [01:58:18] So you had quite a career and you've organized in many different places. I just wrote a few of them down. Buffalo, Atlanta, Dallas, Vancouver, Pleasanton. And you spoke

a little bit about cultural differences, but I wonder if there's anything that you wanted to add about the work culture in any of these specific places that stands out to you?

Ralph [01:58:45] Yeah, I think each one of them was a little different. Vancouver, Washington, they were kind of laid-back, typical Portland, Oregon, because there were a lot of people -- Vancouver, Washington is right across the bridge from Portland, Oregon. Portland, Oregon people are kind of the original hippies, in my mind. So they were kind of laid-back and easygoing and when you went to their house, they invited you in. There was no question about it. Dallas, Texas however, was different. You didn't come in with their accent, or you had an accent, they didn't. I remember one time I went to a house and knocked on the door. Guy opened the door and he had a shotgun and he said, back up. Nobody comes to my house. You just got to go. So they weren't always this friendly. It was not unusual to see two guys in Dallas, Texas get into an argument there at the union hall. Fact, one night we had a little party. Bill Harwell and his wife, Irma Harwell at the time. She worked in the factory and they had told us we're going to have this little reception and party. Be nice but nobody should drink. So we were fine with that. The party went on and lo and behold, after about an hour these two guys are in an argument. They go into the men's room, fist-fighting, breaking shit, they broke the sink, everything. Come out of the bathroom arm in arm, like two buddies and walk out the door.

Ralph [02:00:42] So it was different. Pleasanton was different in a sense that you had people that were real hippies. I remember going to at a house there and having to sit on the floor. I have trouble holding my leg and so sitting on the floor for me was a real challenge. But that's the way they wanted it. In Atlanta, ironically, when I was there as an organizer [it] was easier than when I first went there as a permanent employee. When I went there as an organizer, I went to a place one time to meet with two guys who worked in the plant. And you walked into this restaurant and it had dirt floors. It was in Forsyth County which is the headquarters for the KKK [Ku Klux Klan]. And when I got in there, I thought, I've probably seen my last days here. I'll probably be dead. They'll never find me. But they were very cordial and very nice. It was a little different when I got there as an employee because there was that belief you're taking the job away from a person in Atlanta. And I had officers who used to feel that way. It never changed.

Hannah [02:02:23] Wow. Thank you. That's quite the arsenal of stories. Debbie, I'll let you ask any final question.

Debbie [02:02:33] I have an overarching question, Ralph. You started your career at age 18, 19 when AT&T, in terms of its manufacturing, its repair, its equipment was growing, and you spent a decade or so in that environment. Divestiture in [19]84. The regulatory opening of equipment manufacturing and connection to non-AT&T non-Western Electric equipment really started the constriction of Western Electric and then the [U.S.] trade policies both in manufacturing and eventually even the call centers incited the outsourcing and then the offshoring. So your career, once you had risen to be vice-president of these units was one of seeing the end of this once glorious --.

Ralph [02:03:43] Yep.

Debbie [02:03:45] So I want you to just talk a little bit about that. What it felt like or feels like, and also if others of this generation are listening, things that they might think about how do we keep these good jobs, whether they're manufacturing or call center or service jobs? What do we need to keep them in America? So start with the feelings. What does it feel like to look at this incredible career?

Ralph [02:04:17] When I look at -- going back to the first day of working at Western Electric and seeing what I considered a good job. I think I made, start with \$2.13 and thought I died and went to heaven. And 50% of my health care was paid for. I was coming from a job that paid \$1.35 an hour. So I thought this is the cat's meow. To see that and to see that growth, you never thought at divestiture and the splitting of AT&T and Lucent. You never thought that was going to come down to what it did. And I know this may sound cliché. But if you asked me what company could you name that best describe how to ruin a business. I would say it would have to be the old AT&T and Lucent Technologies. Lucent Technologies had the ability to wipe out Cisco in their heyday. It really did. I remember going to a meeting with the CEO of Lucent. He came to the meeting and he had sunglasses on. And he sat down and he said, the future is so bright I gotta wear shades. And we're making nice with Cisco so we can destroy them. It was that kind of mentality, thinking that they were above and beyond. I personally think -- Who was the woman who ran for president? Carly Fiorina. Remember her? She was the head of Lucent Technologies Sales at the time when Lucent took their crash. It was because her and the CEO had decided to go ahead and book the profits that they foresee in the deal with Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia was notorious for not paying their debt on time or at all. They wanted to come in at the end of the year booking those numbers of sales that they had when they really didn't have the money. And once Wall Street caught that it was Katy bar the door. You were talking about the darlings of the industry who split their stock four times. It was \$120 a share at one point and it dropped, got all the way down to \$4 a share. To me, that was the disgrace of somebody who mismanaged the business and how Fiorina got away with moving to another company to destroy that one I'll never figure that out. And the gall to run for president of the country [in 2016]. That's even more shocking. But the sad part is to see all that happen and go away. I did think though when [Ed] Whitaker bought AT&T that would be the savior for them. It didn't save the members that I had because they just moved the work from AT&T to BellSouth or not BellSouth, SBC territory. And we just continued to lose.

Ralph [02:09:02] Gotta remember. At the time Lucent became a company, we had 175,000 retirees between us and the IBEW that we had to worry about in bargaining for health care. That's why we reached that agreement that actually saved health care. We got Congress to change the rules on how you can, what do they call it, how you can book it or charge for it. You could only take pension money out [to fund retiree health care] if it was overfunded, and you can only take it out for that year and year after, I think. We got it changed so you could take it out as long as the pension fund was [funded] above 120%. It took us from 2004 to 2006 to get that done. You were involved with it for a while, Debbie. That to me was a huge challenge that people just don't realize. In what we did in that bargaining. I'll give the bargaining committee and Mary Jo Riley a lot of credit in coming up with the booking process of how we do that because up until just recently, we had money that we were using that we got in 2004 from Lucent Technologies to pay for retiree health. And all those people that needed to be helped. Now that number of 175[000] has dwindled quite a bit and those that retired prior to 1989 were saved as

part of the whole deal. That to me was a huge deal that a lot of people really never know much about. And, I will say this too, the UAW when they did theirs, they patterned what we did and just added more to it, but we had the wherewithal to do it first, and then they modified what they needed for it. But that was a big saver for a lot of retirees that probably will never know why or how.

Debbie [02:11:58] You mentioned the bargaining committee. Since you're one of the few people that we interviewed from the [legacy] AT&T and the Lucent units, maybe you'll mention some of the people who were often on the bargaining team in those units.

Ralph [02:12:22] On the Avaya side would be Richie Meringolo, Art Frindt, Kevin Kimber, staff rep in Florida and Phil Pennington. Pain in the ass Pennington. I loved the guy. He was great.

Debbie [02:12:43] And what about the AT&T bargaining committee?

Ralph [02:12:45] AT&T bargaining? I probably had what I think was the best bargaining [committee]. I had Laura Unger, I had Mary Ellen Mazzero, I had Lois Grimes. One of the bargainings I had Jerry Klimm, he was a nitpicker, but he was thorough. Lois was very thorough. Let me think for a minute. District Four.

Debbie [02:13:23] I'm thinking of Linelle, an operator.

Ralph [02:13:25] Yeah, LaNell Piercy.

Debbie [02:13:29] And there was somebody from the South, wasn't there?

Ralph [02:13:37] I had David Blackburn one time. Larry Ihfe. Larry was excellent. Actually, Larry was better than I thought he was going to be. He turned out to be much, much more acute as to how to bargain, what to bargain, and how to do it. He was very impressive in the way he handled things. I had Roy Heganbart, remember Roy. He was extremely good. Another one. Very smart. I was blessed in that area. I had smart people that you could depend on. Smarter than me. They could do the job. I know Mary Ellen Mazzeo did health care and did the numbers, to the point where ad nauseum, because I'd look at it and think, what the hell is she talking about? But she knew what she was doing. And I was lucky to bargain when Seth [Rosen] was around. I bargained with him twice, when we did that split bargaining. Jeff, I don't think I ever bargained with you, did I?

Jeff [02:15:18] No. Not directly.

Ralph [02:15:21] I guess you're lucky. (both laugh)

Jeff [02:15:24] Yes, I was stuck with Irvine. So to wrap it up. Just to follow up on Debbie's question, What advice would you offer to young leaders in CWA today and those that are thinking about building a career in the labor movement?

Ralph [02:16:01] I would say a couple of things. One, you're not bigger than your union. And never forget that. The union has to be first. You just need to accept that. And don't think that it's you and then the union. But it's not. If you want to be a leader of the union, then you have to accept that as part of working in this environment. You never want to be afraid to do it. I can remember one time we organized this [unit] back in Atlanta, and one of my VPs, good friend, name was Billy Kaiser, passed away two years ago. But we had just organized the clericals and we were having a meeting with all the clerical supporters, all the clerical people to talk about what we were going to do going forward, bargaining the contract, that kind of stuff. I was in my office and Billy came in there. And he said to me, he said, oh man, I'm glad I'm not you. I said, why? And he says, there's a bunch of irate women out there that had voted no union and they're all coming to the meeting to bitch. I said, well, I'm sure there's some people there too that wanted the union. He says, yeah. We had a seating arrangement that had an aisle in the middle of it, and one side were all the antis and on the other side were the pros. And there was a hell of a lot more anti than the pros because the pros got what they wanted. The antis didn't. And so I said to him that's fine, I can deal with that. And he said, yeah, but they're going to hit you with a lot of questions. And I said to Billy, I said Billy, I should know more than they know because I'm the president and that's my responsibility. But if they say something that I don't know, then I need to listen to them because they may have a better idea and you shouldn't put blinders on it. You only have the answers. So we went out and conducted the meeting. And yes, there were a lot. There were a few that went to the mic to bitch about the fact that they voted no and they wanted to have another election. We proceeded to tell them that's not going to happen. We're here to talk about what we're going to do going forward. But the union is here to stay and you got to deal with it. So I would just tell people, don't think you're bigger than the union because you're not and always remember who are you representing. Not about how much money you can make on it. It's how well can you represent the people that have given you the opportunity to do that. And you should do that with pride. That makes sense?

Jeff [02:19:42] Ralph, this has been terrific. Thanks for doing it. I really, really appreciate it.

Ralph [02:19:46] Thank you.