

# A TEI Project

## Interview of Henry Fiering

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#### 1. Transcript

##### 1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, Side One (August 13, 1987)

DONAHOE

Okay. Why don't you tell me where you were born and something about your early family life.

FIERING

I was born on the Lower East Side in New York City in 1913, March 4 to be exact. When I was about six weeks old, my family migrated to Cleveland, Ohio. My father [Nathan Fiering], mother [Anna Fiering], and I moved there in search of work and he worked there. I was the firstborn child of my parents' marriage, and he did find work in the steel mills in Cleveland. We lived in Cleveland for about six and a half years and had to move back to New York because my father suffered a blacklist as a result of the steel strike of 1919, and couldn't find work in Cleveland. During that period I had three sisters born in Cleveland, Beatrice [Fiering Koslofsky], Dorothea [Fiering Wolf], and Nettie [Fiering Rubinstein]. After several years in New York, my parents adopted my brother, Louis [Fiering].

DONAHOE

He had been trying to organize steel and that's why he--?

FIERING

He worked in the steel mill. There was a national steel strike in 1919 in which he participated as a striker, which was broken, and he couldn't get back into a shop, couldn't get a job. He was blacklisted. So he had to scrounge whatever way he could to make a living. Couldn't make a decent living so--He had a brother who lived in New York who owned a furniture shop, and his brother [Max Fiering] arranged to have the family moved back to New York and my father went to work for his brother as a furniture worker, as an upholsterer--a trade he was at for the rest of his life.

DONAHOE

So you moved back to--?

FIERING

So we moved back to New York in late 1919 and lived in East Harlem and then the Bronx.

DONAHOE

And what about you and your schooling? You went to school--?

FIERING

Yeah, I went through DeWitt Clinton High School, went to CCNY [City College of New York] close to five years at night while working during the day, or trying to look for work during the day and my interests were diverted to other things than my schooling. One of the interests was of course the radical movement.

DONAHOE

What year was this?

FIERING

Well, 1929 is when I graduated from high school and went to CCNY in the fall of that year. Never did get a degree. I went to work on Wall Street during the summer of that year, as soon as I did graduate, and I didn't become a millionaire immediately. I saw I couldn't be one before I was twenty, so I quit. I worked for Hornblower and Weeks at the time.

DONAHOE

Why did you go to Wall Street?

FIERING

Because that was my orientation. I wanted to be rich.

DONAHOE

You're serious.

FIERING

I'm serious.

DONAHOE

Okay.

FIERING

Yeah, I had my eyes set on being rich.

DONAHOE

What capacity were you working for?

FIERING

I used to deliver securities. That's what a beginner would do on Wall Street.

DONAHOE

So very rapidly-

FIERING

Very rapidly I was disillusioned. I left before the crash and I got work as a shipping clerk in the garment industry there in New York and, of course, the crash came. After working for about a year, year and a half, I was laid off, and couldn't get work for nine months after that. I was out of work for a long period of time. I went to school at night, but my mind was really not on it. In fact, at that time, I was pledged to a fraternity [Lambda Gamma Phi]; I was still in that mode. Gradually with the deepening of the Depression, of course, my interests changed. I then got work again, laid off again, got work again, and the rising movement of the unemployed got to me and the radical movement got to me. I was thrown into a milieu of many radical youth and became radicalized.

DONAHOE

And this was the heart of the Depression?

FIERING

This was the heart of the Depression. This was before 1933.

DONAHOE

So like between 1930-

FIERING

Nineteen thirty-one and 1932. I became involved in many of the activities of the radical movement, particularly the communist movement, with the unemployed, and with the antifascist movement.

DONAHOE

So at this point you hadn't really had a regular job or a skill. You had been working at various jobs.

FIERING

I had no skill, that's right, I had no skill.

DONAHOE

But this was more or less your introduction also to the labor movement.

FIERING

That's right. This was my introduction and my interest; it's when I developed an interest and awareness of the labor movement.

DONAHOE

Because of your meeting with these radical people and what was going on in the country and in the world. Okay, you want to tell me some more about that? Like what you did with the unemployed.

FIERING

Well, what happened with me was I became involved with what at that time I think was known as a workers club, and at the ripe old age of nineteen, I became its president. Now, you have to understand, the workers club was made up of mature individuals, older people, and my expression of interest was of interest to them. I was active in it, and [for] whatever it was they saw in me, they made me the president of it. It was the Tremont Workers Club at the time in the Bronx.

DONAHOE

Tremont?

FIERING

Tremont. And we used to go out and make speeches on street corners and all that kind of thing that you may or may not have heard about.

DONAHOE

Not the workers clubs.

FIERING

It's strange today.

DONAHOE

I heard of making speeches on the street corners.

FIERING

We used to have little platforms we used to carry out to get up on it.

DONAHOE

The soapbox.

FIERING

That's right.' Then I made the move to join the YCL [Young Communist League] in 1932.

DONAHOE

Now, the workers clubs, were they made up of all kinds of workers?

FIERING

Yeah, all kinds of workers. They were not set up on the basis of skill or trades; they were set up on the basis of neighborhoods.

DONAHOE

Oh, I see.

FIERING

They were a factor in all the working-class neighborhoods in New York. Of course, in New York, the radical movement was a whole lot different than anything else that went on in the United States because of tremendous numbers of immigrants, the radicalization of the immigrants, and the socialist sympathies generally of immigrants there, particularly among Jews. I don't think it was mimicked anywhere in the country, but that's because of the peculiar situation.

DONAHOE

All the factors.

FIERING

Yeah, all the factors in New York, right.

DONAHOE

Do you think that there was involvement of any socialists or communists in the workers clubs?

FIERING

Oh yes, there was. Oh yeah. As a matter of fact, there was a part of the program of the CP [Communist Party] to build workers clubs.

DONAHOE

And on this neighborhood basis, which was really important.

FIERING

On this neighborhood basis, yeah.

DONAHOE

So that was your first real involvement.

FIERING

I was involved, became a member of it, active in it.

DONAHOE

And they liked you?

FIERING

They pushed me for leadership because I suppose at that time I looked quite Anglo and quite American--all that jazz. College boy, you know, that kind of thing, guess. It all contributed.

DONAHOE

So the workers themselves had elected you to be president.

FIERING

Oh yeah, yeah.

DONAHOE

So then after that is when you joined the YCL.

FIERING

Yeah, about that time, 1932. Yeah, I was about nineteen years old then.

DONAHOE

And what did that involve? What kinds of activities?

FIERING

Oh, what's involved in joining the YCL is essentially joining supposedly a youth group of the political party, but in essence it doesn't operate any differently than the political party, except it operates among youth.

DONAHOE

But you were still involved in labor.

FIERING

Well, I was involved with the workers club. But in 1933 after Roosevelt was elected and the NRA was passed- don't know if you've heard of the NRA, National Recovery Act, with its section 9 or section 7.

DONAHOE

Section 9.

FIERING

It was section 7, wasn't it? It was a whole upsurge of organization of workers all over the country, particularly in New York, and in the garment industries, they took heart and regarded this as a Magna Carta for union organization. At that point, I made my first foray into direct contact with the union movement and went down to the Textile Workers Union [of America] and offered to volunteer as an organizer.

DONAHOE

Okay, so that was your first real organizing job, the Textile Workers Union, and that was--?

FIERING

But that was not a paying job, I wanted to do it. It was the idealization of being related to a union, doing something for a union.

DONAHOE

So you were a volunteer.

FIERING

I volunteered, yeah. I did and several other young people did along with me. I remember meeting with the organizer and he had a bunch of, I look back on it now, he had fresh meat on his hands. A bunch of patsies ready to go out and do work for nothing. To the old labor leadership, that was unheard of too. But, in any event, we tried to do some organizing. [There was] some excitement. It was really exciting to us, just the idea to be able to say we were associated with a union. I can't recall what specific organization we achieved. I do remember we used to go into some textile plants in the garment industry, just shut down the plant, turn the workers out, and the organizer would talk to them. One time I got chased by this guy with a great big stiletto, and I never knew I could run so fast. [laughter] But, in any event, it was relatively short-lived, but it was my introduction to a union. Not long after that--But then, of course, I continued to operate in my neighborhood as far as YCL was concerned. It was really part of a learning process in a way, because they coopted me into the national office of the YCL as part of the organization department. I was given an assignment to teach YCL units, YCL groups, how to set up an organizational apparatus so that they could protect themselves from being found out and discharged. What it really did for me was it taught me elements of organization. It was a valuable lesson.

DONAHOE

Teaching the other people, you learned yourself, right.

FIERING

I learned myself, right, because I didn't know a damn thing about it.

DONAHOE

And this is for on the job. I mean, you were teaching them for on-the-job situations-

FIERING

That's right, that's right.

DONAHOE

--how they could stay there.

FIERING

In fact, I remember one instance I had had a meeting with a group of the YCL unit in Macy's. After I got through with them, I began to hear a tremendous uproar from the YCL. I had gone in there and taught them how to bury themselves so deep nobody could find them.

DONAHOE

How did you learn this to tell them?

FIERING

I didn't, I just improvised. I said, "This here is an assignment you got, they said this is what you're supposed to do, and they don't know whether you can do it or not. Nobody else knows how to do it either, you know." So I did it. But I learned a lot out of it.

DONAHOE

What kinds of things did you do?

FIERING

I learned something about principles of organization, which has stood me in good stead for the rest of my life. I really became a very, very good organizer, even if I say so myself.

DONAHOE

I've heard a lot about it. What did you tell them? Do you remember the kinds of things you told them, generally?

FIERING

Generally, how do you operate among large groups of people when you want to organize it. How do you operate among them when you want to politicize

them. When I think back on it now, I was being very presumptuous. I had never experienced it myself, because when I worked in a shop, had worked as a shipping clerk, or I had worked as a clerk in another office, not with large groups of people, just with a couple of people. I never had a chance to experience that sort of thing. Very likely, as I think back, very likely I had read about that in left-wing literature, in Marxist literature. And whatever it was I gleaned out of it is what I was parodying in a way. But, in any event, the sum total of it was that it was a learning experience for me. Then a group of us organized out of the national office of the YCL--or the district office of the YCL. We were assigned to organize a new union, and we were all shipping clerks.

DONAHOE

Where were you working?

FIERING

I was in the garment industry.

DONAHOE

Oh, you were still in the garment industry. All this time?

FIERING

Well, yeah. In fact, at this particular time, was a clerk, an office clerk in a credit house, which was a credit house for the garment industry. A group of us had gotten together who worked in the industry and we were told that we should organize a shipping clerks union. You have to know something about the garment industry too there. There are hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of small garment and textile shops, and everyone of them has got shipping clerks. The ILG [International Ladies Garment Workers Union] and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers [of America] had been successful, by the way, as a result of Section 7 of the NRA. Even though later it was declared unconstitutional, they established a good base in the industry. Then we came along and wanted to take that group that was not eligible to join the--or were not organized by the ILG or the Amalgamated. Those were shipping clerks. That was one of the classes of work. And there were eleven of us, all YCL members, at that time, and I was the chairman of the group of the YCL group, and one other fellow became the business agent of the group. We had eleven

members and the union had eleven members--the same eleven members. We struggled along there, not with very much success for quite a spell. That was a period when I met my wife [Clara Wernick Fiering], too. And eventually though, after I'd left New York, that outfit became District 65.

DONAHOE

Oh, really?

FIERING

And the guy who was chairman of the union group, whereas I was the chairman of the YCL, became the guy who was a leader of District 65.

DONAHOE

Now, is that the retail clerks?

FIERING

Well, now they're in the UAW [United Automobile Workers of America].

DONAHOE

What were they initially?

FIERING

They were initially independent.

DONAHOE

But what were they called?

FIERING

The Shipping Clerks Union. I was in the Midwest in 1936 when they retitled themselves. I don't know much about that.

DONAHOE

That's it, just Shipping Clerks Union?

FIERING

That was it, Shipping Clerks Union. There was a lot of talent there. One of the guys from there, one of my very close friends--Well, this is right after I left

New York. We struggled along for about a year or so. And he went over to the furriers union [International Fur and Leather Workers Union] and became a leader of the furriers union. He died about five years ago.

DONAHOE

Okay, we were discussing the Shipping Clerks Union.

FIERING

Right, and one of the people from there went into the ILG and I understand he became the education director of the ILG. There were others who went in different directions, but the eleven of us summed up a lot of talent. All the guys there (in an expanded left group of all shades) were bright boys, all bright boys. As a matter of fact, you can say that for the left. They were really bright. I can't begin to tell you about the stimulating-Before the thing started to, what's a good expression, before it began separating out into a distinct YPSL [Young People's Socialist League] group that was anticommunist or a YCL group that was anti-YPSL, or social democrat or Trotskyist group-

DONAHOE

The factions.

FIERING

All before that and when it was all together, it was the most stimulating bunch of young people you would ever want to meet. Highly intelligent.

DONAHOE

So this was before all the different splits and everything?

FIERING

This was before the splits. This was my initiation into the movement--that kind of atmosphere. Of course, I don't want to start assessing blame here and stuff like that. A lot of that will come up and some of this as we go along. But it was most unfortunate that it began separating out that way into the various groups. That's my vision of a real socialist movement, where you have that kind of thing, see, and I was fortunate enough to at least experience it for a very limited time.

DONAHOE

For a short time, yeah.

FIERING

Very short time. It was so stimulating.

DONAHOE

Now, can I just ask why you had decided to form a new union and not go with the ILG?

FIERING

Well, it was a directive. For one thing, the ILG was anti-red.

DONAHOE

At that time?

FIERING

Yeah, there was already a deep split in the ILG between the left--well, it was all left--between the far left and the near left. But I would imagine if we had approached the ILG, they would have looked down their nose at us. If they had perceived who we really were, they would not have had anything to do with us. But we never got that far. It was just decided, a directive that we were handed: go organize a shipping clerks union; wherever it may take you, go organize a shipping clerks union unaffiliated to anybody.

DONAHOE

Okay, because I was wondering if that was the time of the independent unions and saying not to go to-

FIERING

It had nothing to do with the TUUL [Trade Union Unity League]. It had nothing to do with anything or anybody. Whatever somebody else may have had in mind, see, it had nothing to do with anybody. Well, nobody is really that much sophisticated about unions in the left, [that's] my own view.

DONAHOE

In this time.

FIERING

There wasn't that much sophistication. The idea was just organize, organize.

DONAHOE

Obviously people were really ready for organization.

FIERING

Oh--Well, of course, it's hard for your generation to really get the feel of what went on in America at that time. It's difficult enough to just relate it in words. It's much more difficult to transmit the feeling of the people at that time after some years of Depression and terrible suffering. When I talk about suffering, I'm talking about what you may casually read about what people were doing and think, well, that's kind of exaggerated. People did eat out of garbage cans. People were not eating, they were thrown out of their homes. They had nothing. It was terrible suffering and you have to experience it to fully understand it. It cannot be--I have found at least, in my experience with young people, that while they try to be receptive, try to understand it and there's some feeling about it, it is almost impossible to really convey the experience unless you experienced it. Anyway, there we were with--Well, we didn't care. We were young and we didn't care if we missed meals, we didn't care about going hungry. That was not the important thing in my life. A few of us were married. But even if you were married, you weren't married to concentrate on raising a family. You were married because you married somebody who [along] with you was married to the radical movement. That's all you really thought about. That was what the world was all about.

DONAHOE

This is an aside, but you had said that you started out going to Wall Street to make a million and now you went the exact opposite you can say. How did your family feel about your changes?

FIERING

My father was always a socialist. In fact, when we lived in Cleveland, there was a time when--And I didn't know this until later in life, as a matter of fact. When I was younger he tried to influence me about socialism and I was very

unsympathetic. He was glad to see me become sympathetic to it, but it wasn't until then that I had learned that my father was involved in the socialist movement in Cleveland and was at the convention where there was a split between the lefts and the rights that set up the CP and the SP [Socialist Party]. I didn't even know that, because had I known that I would have taken a lot more interest in my father's background. But my father then was oriented towards feeding his kids once we got to New York. Well, anyway, where were we?

DONAHOE

Okay, so you had organized the independent Shipping Clerks Union with the eleven people.

FIERING

I don't know how much mileage we made, I can't recall now. We hustled around, we met, we passed out literature I remember. We had meetings, and I can't even think back about the substance of many of the meetings or how many were there, how many were not there. We went for quite a while. In fact, I didn't leave New York until '36, and as I recall, we were still meeting then, not making much progress, but we were still meeting. That union really came into its own. That group really came into its own beginning with '36. That's when whatever it was Dave Livingston did, he did a hell of a job as its president. received an assignment from the YCL to be the district organizer of the YCL in Missouri, Arkansas, and Kansas, and she went there in 1935. She had been at a women's college (what is now Rutgers[--the State University]) on scholarship and left when she was seventeen years old and came and joined the movement in New York and devoted full time to the movement. So she became a full-time organizer, a fulltime official as a section organizer in Brownsville and then given the assignment in 1935 in the Midwest as the district organizer.

DONAHOE

She was pretty young.

FIERING

Well, she was a little over a year younger than I was. In 1935 she was twenty-one years old.

DONAHOE

It was Clara.

FIERING

Clara, yeah. And we had sort of committed that we were going to get married. It was not a smooth path.

DONAHOE

Two headstrong people, huh?

FIERING

Yeah, especially at twenty-one and twenty-two and her eleven hundred miles away, but that's not important.

DONAHOE

What was her maiden name?

FIERING

Clara Wernick. She was really the best organizer I have ever met. That covers a long time.

DONAHOE

Political and trade union?

FIERING

Political and trade union, yeah. And so, anyway, she would come back; she came back a couple of times--she was headquartered in Saint Louis--came back a couple of times to New York, and of course we were always together and corresponding. Then in '36 we sort of agreed I was going to leave New York and I was going to go out there to Missouri. So I arrived there in April of '36, and no job, no nothing. She was making the grand salary of five dollars a week, but we didn't worry about that.

DONAHOE

So you got a job?

FIERING

Oh yeah, I looked for a job. When I was in New York I had long periods of unemployment which really opened me up to all of this, because once I was out of work for nine months, which was murderous, murderous. That's when I opted out of my fraternity and everything else. I began to see things differently. But I didn't have a lot of difficulty getting jobs in Saint Louis. I was very young and naive, that kind of thing--very hirable.

DONAHOE

Did you do any particular kinds of things, or just anything?

FIERING

Anything. I worked for Purina Mills in Saint Louis for a while. I worked for some other outfit for a while. I forgot its name.

DONAHOE

So really at this point, you didn't have a skill?

FIERING

I had no skill, absolutely no skill. Matter of fact, in New York, the YCL was trying to colonize a number of plants, and I did try to get into a number of plants. used to go down and try to get work there and did not succeed. I can only guess why. Companies were on their guard against people colonizing; they knew about the radical movement, what the YCL was trying to do. New York employers were much more aware of the radical movement and its intentions. But I didn't get a job anyplace where I could develop a skill.

DONAHOE

So these plants, they would be like industry, basic industry?

FIERING

No, no. I was in the shipping department at Purina Mills, not a highly skilled job.

DONAHOE

No, the one where the YCL wanted to colonize.

#### FIERING

Oh, now you're talking about New York again. Well, what it was they were plants that employed large numbers of young people. They were not necessarily basic plants at all. One of them was the Eagle Pencil Company, if you've ever heard of Eagle Pencil. But the reason for wanting to colonize it and organize it was because it was a big plant and employed lots of young people, a couple thousand young people. So they wanted to get where there was a big base they could work in. It was that kind of colonization. There was no real basic industry in New York as we know it in the Middle West. So that was for that experience. But, anyway, in Missouri I didn't have any skill, but what I did do I did get heavily involved in the youth movement.

#### DONAHOE

In Missouri.

#### FIERING

In Missouri. And I became the head of the youth movement, which included church youth, university youth-oh, all kinds of youth organizations, language groups, ethnic groups of youth; now, you had a lot of that in the Middle West. You had Croatians, Poles, Italians. Because the immigrants were relatively fresh immigrants, not too long in this country, and so their children militated to the ethnic organizations that the parents belonged to because the kids started in them when they were young. And then they grew up in the thirties; they were in their late teens, early twenties. They had grown up together, so they maintained themselves as ethnic organizations. Those things to a large degree have disappeared as they became Americanized. But at that time, that covered a lot of territory of young people. I remember most distinctly the Croatians; we were very close to [them]. And so we used to raise a lot of hell in town. We made a lot of noise in town, very active, and developed community issues. I remember one of them was an issue for a community college. There was no such thing at that time as a community college. I remember we came in with this fresh idea of a community college, which became very popular. And there was of course the antifascist movement, the peace and democracy [movements] at that time, which were very popular. I

was the head of that American Youth for Peace and whatever it was called [American Youth Congress], in Saint Louis. As a result of that, I was contacted by the CIO [Committee for Industrial Organization; after 1938, Congress of Industrial Organizations] regional director.

DONAHOE

As a result of your youth activity?

FIERING

Yes, as a result of my youth activities. And, what the hell was his name? I just talked about him the other week to somebody who knew him well here. John, John, John, John, John-

DONAHOE

Let's see if I have his name somewhere here.

FIERING

Oh, man, his face is in front of me. I'll think of it somewhere along the line because I-

DONAHOE

He was the CIO regional director in Saint Louis.

FIERING

Yeah. [pause] This is, oh, God, the first time I've forgotten his name.

DONAHOE

It will come back to you afterwards. When you try to remember you can't.  
[John Doherty]

FIERING

Yeah. Anyway, he got ahold of me and he called me in and wanted to know if I'd work for him and the CIO. I said, "Gosh, yes, I certainly would."

DONAHOE

For money this time?

FIERING

For money, too, for pay. The pay wasn't so hot.

DONAHOE

But it was something.

FIERING

But it was something, that's right. It was more money than I had made I think at any job I had worked in.

DONAHOE

And they were just getting off the ground.

FIERING

They were just getting started, the CIO was just getting started, right. And he thought, well, here's a guy who--He knew that I had had contact with all these young workers, you know. I established something of a reputation with the noise that we were making there, I suppose. I agreed I would go and he told me what my assignment would be. I went and he assigned me to the Steel Workers Organizing Committee.

DONAHOE

The SWOC.

FIERING

The SWOC, right.

DONAHOE

So that was your assignment, to help organize steel.

FIERING

Steelworkers.

DONAHOE

And you didn't have the experience for that at all.

FIERING

I didn't know a steelworker from any other kind of a worker, except in my imagination you idealized the basic industry workers, you know--oh boy, this is great. There were a couple of plants that I was asked to start in on; one was the American Machine and Foundry, and the other was the Saint Louis Car Company.

DONAHOE

Okay. Saint Louis Car Company?

FIERING

Yeah.

DONAHOE

That was a steel-

FIERING

Oh, yeah, sure. Street cars were basically a steel product, and they'd forge steel and melt it and everything. But my job was just to go out and sign people up, sign up cards. Well, before I started doing it, anything sounded romantic, you know, so I started doing it. During that period the UAW [United Automobile Workers] strike in Flint [Michigan] broke, and with that, the UAW wanted some of the other General Motors [Corporation (GM)] plants shut down. One was in Saint Louis, the Fisher Body Plant, a division of General Motors. So we helped with that. We weren't key, but we helped because they had a small number, relatively small number of people in the union. They had about four thousand people in the plant. GM was out there in full force with all its guards (security guards) and the police and everybody else to break any attempt to shut the plant down. The UAW tried to organize the best it could and needed some help, and we helped. But we kind of held the picket line for quite a while. There were a lot of struggles, a lot of warfare there. They succeeded in shutting the plant down though.

DONAHOE

They were making the bodies and the chassis?

FIERING

They were making the chassis for GM cars, that's right.

DONAHOE

So it was very important.

FIERING

Very important, very important. But that was a good experience, a learning experience for me, too. And it was a thrilling experience to participate in that.

DONAHOE

But you were still working for the CIO?

FIERING

I was working for the CIO. As a matter of fact, they were the ones who said this is going to happen. They got their orders from [John L.] Lewis to send over whatever people they could to help the UAW people, and so we went over to help too. I would just stay and just help, that's about what it amounted to. But it was a nice experience. So I got in on the key strike, all the elements of a strike. It involved all kinds of struggles, the organization of unions during a strike. [pause] Lessons I had to apply to my own shop a short time later, almost the identical thing. And then, of course, we went back. I maintained the work of my assignment of signing up people, and it was very difficult in a way. Signing up people themselves was not hard in those days, but for me it was not what I had dreamed about in being an organizer, and it got very boring. Not only that, but I didn't drink. The story I like to tell is my wife would know by the way I staggered into the house how many people I had seen that night.

## **1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, Side Two (August 13, 1987)**

DONAHOE

This wasn't the way that you preferred to organize, that is, drinking.

FIERING

Yeah, not only that, but you see, people like the guy I was working for had come out of the miners union. John L. Lewis had staffed CIO leadership with ex-miners, and this guy was not even a miner, he was an accountant for the miners. John Doherty was his name. So he had not gone through even the

experiences of the miners, you know, and their struggles to organize their union. And didn't know much that he could give me to help with organization. So I was on my own, and that kind of activity, that limited activity, was just not my cup of tea. So we had a talk about it, I leveled with him, and he understood where the hell I was coming from. He wasn't very happy about the way I felt, and we agreed to separate on friendly terms. But we agreed to separate and I went my own way. About this time--[tape recorder off]

DONAHOE

Okay, so you found this kind of organizing boring and you decided to part.

FIERING

Right. See, about this time, one of the things that provided the incentive for that--for me to leave--was that the YCL had made a decision. The UE [United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America] had just gotten off the ground that year. They had formed UE in 1935.

DONAHOE

Nineteen thirty-six?

FIERING

Nineteen thirty-five.

DONAHOE

A lot of things were happening that year.

FIERING

Oh, 1936 was an exciting year. They're interested in organizing their industry, the UE, and the basic parts of the industry are GE [General Electric Company], Westinghouse [Electric Corporation], and the major independents--the major competitors of GE and Westinghouse.

DONAHOE

Like Philco [Corporation]?

FIERING

Philco is in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and was part of the original group of union locals to form UE together with GE and Westinghouse locals. Well, Philco in the radio industry, but otherwise Saint Louis, Missouri, see. They had the big electrical manufacturers who were the chief competitors for the national companies: that was Emerson [Electric Company], Wagner [Electric Company], and Century [Electric Company].

DONAHOE

Emerson, Wagner-

FIERING

And Century, the major independents.

DONAHOE

Those were the three.

FIERING

Those were the three biggies.

DONAHOE

Challenging?

FIERING

They challenged Westinghouse and General Electric. Now, they didn't have the range of products that GE had, but in specific areas they were just as big a manufacturer as GE and Westinghouse, see.

DONAHOE

And they were all housed in Saint Louis?

FIERING

They were all in Saint Louis, right. So the word went out, and of course, UE was led by a left leadership, by the party people.

DONAHOE

I was going to ask you about that. Okay.

FIERING

A lot to be said about that. But the word went out that UE had to be helped, and so the party kind of took that assignment down to help the UE grow, to help the UE build. That translated itself into a decision that the YCL was going to undertake organizing the electrical manufacturers in Saint Louis. That was its baby. At this time, there was the beginnings of the turn in the Depression, too. Companies were starting to hire people, things were starting to move up, ever since '35 it started to move up. The deepest part of the Depression was '33, '34, see. So here we were a bunch of young guys and gals. My wife was head of the YCL, and she was the one who got the group together to transmit the decision, to work out details on the decision. We picked our territories and I went into Century. There was a little bit of a base already at Emerson. Emerson had a company union which showed signs of independence and, to make a long story short, there was a lot of skill in working with that, and eventually they affiliated with UE. They destroyed themselves as a company union and decided to support UE.

DONAHOE

Was that the--?

FIERING

[Local] 1102.

DONAHOE

That was 1102.

FIERING

That's 1102. Emerson was 1102. I was in Century, and I was the only one in Century.

DONAHOE

All by yourself?

FIERING

All by myself. I had managed to get in there.

DONAHOE

To get hired.

FIERING

I got hired. I had no problem getting hired. I had problems staying, but I had no problem getting hired. Then there were a couple of guys went into Wagner, which was the biggest plant. Wagner employed about seven thousand people.

DONAHOE

I had read that Emerson had a fifty-five-day strike.

FIERING

Yeah, a sit-down strike.

DONAHOE

Oh, my goodness. So was that when they entered the UE or when they had that--?

FIERING

No, that was after they affiliated with UE and requested recognition and were denied. That was after, but it was all part of the--This was before--See that's another thing I was going to bring up. This is all before the National Labor Relations Act [NLRA] was declared constitutional. It had been passed in '35, during which there was a spurt in organization. When the NLRA was declared unconstitutional, the Congress then revised the unconstitutional parts and then passed the Wagner Act in '35. And in '37 it was declared constitutional, but this was prior to its being declared constitutional when this organizing took place. It started in '36, see. So we didn't have the protections then of the National Labor Relations Board.

DONAHOE

So that's very interesting. So actually a lot of the sit-downs and a lot of the work was undertaken before the actual government protection.

FIERING

That's right. They were organizational efforts and organizational strikes.

DONAHOE

That's very important.

FIERING

So I developed an organization at Century, and there were a number of us fired, and the organization was growing very rapidly at Emerson, particularly since the leadership of the company union had been won over. Emerson couldn't get recognition by asking for it, that is, UE couldn't get recognition by a request for recognition. They couldn't go through an election, because the Wagner Act wasn't recognized. So they declared a strike, and their strike was a sit-in. We had a bunch of people fired (I was one of those fired, too) and it was hindering the development of our organization, because people were frightened. In Century they had tried organization in 1934--the machinists had.

DONAHOE

Before you had gotten there?

FIERING

Yeah, and they had a strike and the company broke the strike. The Century management was the most rabid anti-union management of the bunch. They were the ones who headed up what was called the National Metal Trades Association, which was a spy organization, a labor spy organization.

DONAHOE

The National Metal Trades Association.

FIERING

So what we did, we decided, "Well, we're going to go for broke." We had just a relatively small (fifty-two) handful of people out of 1,500. But we had a lot of sympathy, there was no problem about the mood of the workers. The mood of the workers was to fight at that point. I'm not just talking about Century workers, I'm talking about workers allover. They were mad by this time. They wanted to do something, because they couldn't get in any worse shape than what they were. So there was only one way to go and that was up for everybody.

DONAHOE

And the unions offered that answer.

FIERING

Right. The unions offered the answer. Not just UE, but the unions. Because when you're talking about unions, you're talking about the CIO drive at that time, which was conducted in large part, in not just that area but throughout the Middle West, with party people in the lead who had been assigned on the basis of an understanding that Lewis had with the party.

DONAHOE

Oh, really?

FIERING

Sure, of course.

DONAHOE

I was going to backtrack for one minute, when you said that the fellow from the regional office of the CIO had approached you, but he knew you were YCL.

FIERING

Of course he did.

DONAHOE

So this was their policy?

FIERING

This was their policy. They knew who the best organizers were, the most devoted people.

DONAHOE

Well, we hear this all the time, but we don't-

FIERING

This is true. The most devoted people, the best organizers would go through hell or anything, would not make any demands on anybody. And, hell, we had Ralph Shaw (he just died a couple of weeks ago), who had been a party organizer in Missouri and had been organizing for the party in the mine areas

for many years, too. He was one of the people that Lewis dealt for to get onto the CIO staff. So was Bill [William] Sentner. So was Gus Hall. As a matter of fact, Gus Hall was the one who made the first breakthrough in one of the most important steel mills, the Youngstown Sheet and Tube [Company], I think. That was a landmark victory, that organization. There's a whole lot I got against Gus Hall, but I'll say that for him. The only condition was, as Ralph told me, his instructions from [John] Brophy, Lewis's assistant, "Keep your card in your pocket."

DONAHOE

So, in other words, John L. Lewis of the CIO actually made some-

FIERING

He made an arrangement.

DONAHOE

Made an arrangement to utilize-

FIERING

The party organizers. \*[Look, I wasn't there at the meeting. But it was pretty well understood.] \* Mr. Fiering added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

DONAHOE

The party organizers.

FIERING

The other guys organized the basic industries, especially the steel industry and the electrical industry. And the auto industry, of course. And the auto industry, it was pre-[Walter] Reuther. And rubber for that matter also.

DONAHOE

Well, a lot of people do acknowledge this. All basic industries sure.

FIERING

Lewis dominated the CIO even though party people may have been the key organizers.

DONAHOE

But I had never heard this actually, you know, that they made some kind of arrangement.

FIERING

There was no secret about who these people were.

DONAHOE

In those days there wasn't that much of a problem, the political problem wasn't as-

FIERING

Well, there wasn't as much of a [problem] it's true, because people who are hungry enough don't give a god-damn about labels. And people like Lewis, who was determined to organize, he sensed that, he recognized that, and he knew what he could do with a good organizing machine with good organizers.

DONAHOE

All right, so now you're in Saint Louis and-

FIERING

And so what we did we called a meeting of the shop--I'm talking about myself now, not so much anyone else.

DONAHOE

At Century, right.

FIERING

Yeah, at Century.

DONAHOE

Okay, now I understand.

FIERING

And even though we had probably less than a hundred cards signed up, we had a meeting that had about 250, 300 people there; we had about 1,500 to

1,700 people in the shop. But I think we had that many people come out to the meeting, because we announced that we were going to have a strike vote, see. Emerson was already out, and they had a picket line and they had a sit-in strike going. They had both. They had a force of people inside the shop holding that down, and then they had a picket line supplementing the sit-in. So what we did, we declared a strike at Century and we used the Emerson picket line as our picket line while the rest of us went around assuring that no scabs would get into the shop, that we were going to close down the shop. So we were in and out of jail all week, all month as a matter of fact. We were out for twenty-eight days. We closed the shop in three days; it took us three days, we closed the shop.

DONAHOE

You closed the entire shop?

FIERING

The entire shop. They had it closed down. You know, you can't do that today anymore. The Emerson people only got involved to the extent that they maintained the picket line. The rest of us did all the other work. The strike went for twenty-eight days, at which time the Supreme Court declared the Wagner Act constitutional. It was in April of '37. April of '37. That became the basis for a settlement of the strike: that the company would agree to an election, we, including all discharged workers, would agree to return to work.

DONAHOE

Who worked it out?

FIERING

Bill [William] Sentner. You see, Bill, though on the CIO payroll, was assigned by the party to work with the UE, and Bill became the leader of the UE, leader of the whole UE there. He left the CIO payroll once UE was established.

DONAHOE

He had been with the party?

FIERING

He had been a party organizer. The CP considered people like Shaw and Sentner on loan to the CIO.

DONAHOE

And Sentner became the head of the whole UE?

FIERING

He became the leader of the UE.

DONAHOE

Of that region?

FIERING

Of that region, that's right. He became a vice president of the UE, national vice president of the UE on the basis of that. The guy made a lot of sacrifices, a lot of sacrifices. He wasn't really elected at that time. He just took it over and we all agreed. Later he was elected.

DONAHOE

Yeah, but that should have been a democratic procedure.

FIERING

Well, you think of it today as such. You wouldn't think of it at that time. He probably couldn't have gotten away with it with anybody else, but he could get away with it because the party wanted it and we supported it. No one would challenge him. The union was in a formative stage. I was going to be the full-timer.

DONAHOE

Organizer?

FIERING

Business agent of my local.

DONAHOE

Oh, okay.

FIERING

My title was financial secretary, but in effect I was the business agent of the union. The contract was yet to be negotiated, and that's where I played the leading role.

DONAHOE

So all they did was recognize you.

FIERING

They didn't even recognize us, they agreed to an election, see.

DONAHOE

Oh, boy, one step beyond.

FIERING

That's right, but it was a tremendous victory, see. Especially with this company, which was, of all the companies in Saint Louis, the most bitterly anti-union company.

DONAHOE

And they were just called Century. Did they have like Century Electric-

FIERING

Century Electric Company.

DONAHOE

Oh, okay. I was wondering what their full name was. Were they all called that?

FIERING

Wagner Electric, Emerson Electric, yeah.

DONAHOE

Okay, so that was just part of their title like Bethlehem Steel. When you became the business agent or the financial secretary, was it for all of UE or was it just for this particular local?

FIERING

Just this particular local.

DONAHOE

Okay, and what was that local?

FIERING

Local 1108.

DONAHOE

That was 1108. Okay.

FIERING

I was the first member, and I was the one who organized it.

DONAHOE

So now it was up to you to negotiate a contract.

FIERING

That's right. Then we elected a committee. We went through the procedures, we had an election which we won, and we elected a committee, a negotiating committee, and I was the head of the committee. We went in to negotiate a contract and I had a big run-in with Sentner then, because the company finally offered us--Of course, when you talk about a contract then as compared to what a contract is now, there's a world of difference. All you negotiate is a wage increase, a grievance procedure, and a modified seniority clause. That was the basic contract. There was no union security clause. It was an open shop. There might be a few other conditions around it, but essentially those were it. You don't think of it as elaborate as it is today with fringe benefits and all that. They didn't exist then. And the company offered finally the minimums we wanted on conditions and also a two-cents-an-hour raise, which at that time was supposed to be a good raise and which I rejected. I got into another hassle with Bill, who insisted that I was going to have to accept it, and I told him I was not going to accept it. rallied the workers around it and we got a four-cents-anhour raise, which was a very good raise, see.

DONAHOE

Yeah, for that time.

FIERING

For that time it was a very good raise. I'm really pointing this up because we're talking about 1987 now and what four cents means now compared to then.

DONAHOE

I think they'd like to go back to that today.

FIERING

Yeah. And so I became the business agent of the local and I lead the local, and we had some significant things happen. Oh, we might mention too that, you know, my YCL activity--Both before my entry into Century and even after, we were involved in a lot of things as part of the youth movement there, with the unemployed struggles, you know. We used to have a group of guys who would go around town whenever we heard of an eviction and we would go up to the house where people were being evicted. Have you ever seen an eviction?

DONAHOE

Putting people's things on the street.

FIERING

Where the sheriff goes in there and he supervises a moving company or somebody taking the people's stuff out of the house and putting it out on the street. Everything. It's horrible, it's cruel, and the people then are left out on the street with no place to go--nothing. And the landlord had to pay twenty-five dollars to get the sheriff to do that; it was a fee. Well, we used to stand by and watch the things being put on the street and as soon as the sheriff left, we'd pick up the things and put them back in the house.

DONAHOE

I've read about that.

FIERING

And if it happened again, we were there again and we did the same thing. Wherever that happened, if we heard about it we were there. It became unprofitable for a landlord to do it, because he wasn't even getting that much in rent. Twenty-five dollars rent was a whole lot of rent in those days. And so

rather than suffer that, the landlord would just permit the people to stay there until better times when he could ,extract the rent from them, because he was losing money. But that was part of the kind of things that we did. Unemployed demonstrations, there's all kinds of that. There were demonstrations at the relief offices and all of that, part of which I learned some experiences which reminds me what I wanted to get to because it reminds me of my being a business agent too.

DONAHOE

Oh, okay. Like the unemployed councils?

FIERING

The unemployed councils and these--Because these were learning experiences also for me, which I then used as a business agent.

DONAHOE

They're all helping you learn how to organize people.

FIERING

Not just organize people, but maintain the union. (I'll show you what I mean in a minute.) One of the things that we had to contend with in a contract was you didn't have checkoff. You collected dues whenever you could. We had an office set up right near the shop, and people would have to volunteer to come across and pay their dues once a month. It was a very difficult way to make dues payments because people would put it last on their list. By the time it got to dues-paying time each month, they didn't have the money or they could use the money for something else. And so it was a constant struggle to maintain the union that way. But one of the tactics we used was something we picked out of a newspaper article that carried a story from France about picketing people's homes. You couldn't possibly do that today. It would be antisocial and create tremendous antagonisms today. But at that time when everybody was in a ferment and pro-working class and everybody was strong for a union, what we would do for the picket line is take a group of guys out of the shop and we'd go over to somebody's home who refused to join the union, who was giving us a hard time, and we'd set up a picket line at that person's home. So the whole neighborhood would know this is an anti-union

neighbor you've got living in your neighborhood. We used to drive those people up the wall after we came through. [laughter] We used to do this on weekends and we'd wind up in jail every weekend. And we knew it. The first time we were unprepared for jail and we had to spend time there overnight.

DONAHOE

What did they arrest you for?

FIERING

They arrested us for being a public nuisance or because there was a complaint. There was no law against it, you know.

DONAHOE

I was going to say, what's the law?

FIERING

But of course after the first or second time, after we'd experimented, we learned to have a lawyer ready so that by the time we got down to the jail, we had a lawyer who was already there and who was ready to spring us. But every time we'd pull something like this, it would get all over town and the next Monday morning--this was on a Saturday when we did it--the next Monday morning the streets would be lined up for two blocks with people waiting to come in and pay their dues. [laughter] Before they went to work.

DONAHOE

That's wonderful.

FIERING

I'll never forget that. Eventually the newspaper started to editorialize and write us up and just tear the hell out of us. We just kept on until, by golly, we'd established a good solid corps of dues payers in the shop. Then at that time, the recession hit, 1938. It was another recession and thousands of people were laid off out of the shops. We had about five, six, seven hundred people laid off out at Century. Well, what do you do with them? Well, you see, all these experiences were registering with me, so the first thing I did, I said, "We have got to have some action. We have got to show action, show some leadership here." So we called, as soon as the layoffs were announced, we

called a meeting of all the people laid off. We had a meeting of hundreds of these people laid off, and a rip-roaring meeting. We elected a big committee of about seventy-five or eighty people, that's our committee. We said, "We're going down to the relief office. We're not going to suffer through what we did before." And everyone of these people who had been on relief knew what it was about, see. And had gone hungry or had gone without rent paid or without coal or anything. And winter was coming on, so we took these people, we took the whole bunch of them down to the relief office. As a matter of fact, remember I showed you that letter I got from Saint Louis from this woman who's doing this study. That's one of the things that she picked up that she wants the story on, on what happened in the relief office, because my local came through that thing and everybody was asking how we did it. Well, what happened was we took the whole crew, the whole committee, to meet with the department head of the relief office. There's another side I'll never forget. Here we were at a tremendous table, a long table, and he's sitting--a tremendous room--and we've got people lined up on both sides of the table and back towards the wall, you know. I'm on one end of the table, and he's on the other end of the table, and I'm the spokesman for the laid off people. I say, "Our people are going to be laid off now. They just got their notice, they're being laid off. I want you to know that we don't intend for anyone of them to go hungry, to worry about their rent, or to worry about food. Where are you on this?" So he started hemming and hawing, and we had an argument. I said, "I want you to understand one thing, we're not leaving here. You see this office? This office is going to be a shambles before we get out of here unless we get your commitment that not one of these people is going to go hungry, worry about coal, or worry about food or shelter." And we got a commitment from him, and through that whole recession, there was not one member of my union that had to worry about a single thing in that recession.

DONAHOE

So they were guaranteed relief?

FIERING

Guaranteed. If ever there was a slip up, all I had to do was get on the phone and, by God, we got action immediately. I used to have people coming up from all over, asking me, "How do you do this? How did you get this done?"

DONAHOE

Because that was so important.

FIERING

And that made the union, that made the union. When those people went back to work, because they all went back to work--by '39 they were all back to work--that made the union. Not only that, but after I left Saint Louis and they had the strike again in 1940, that was a solid organization.

DONAHOE

Because they knew that the union would back them up on everything.

FIERING

That's right, that's right. Because they never forgot that experience. They'd never had that kind of experience through the whole Depression. They never forgot that experience. There was one other thing there about that time that was important. Jesus, what the hell, the thought just crossed my mind and it slipped my mind. Maybe I'll think of it as we get back.

DONAHOE

In terms of making this the solid union with different experiences that you had learned from?

FIERING

Yeah, oh yeah. The other thing was, I was a paid official as a business agent. When the people got laid off and the finances of the union ran down, I took a layoff with the people, and I went on WPA [Works Progress Administration]. I got a job as a teacher on WPA and most of my classes were the stewards' classes of my local or the executive board meeting of my local. I became educational director for the upholsterers union, the upholsterers district council, Upholsterers International Union, AFL. When those people went back to work, because they all went back to work--by '39 they were all back to work--that made the union. Not only that, but after I left Saint Louis and they had the strike again in 1940, that was a solid organization.

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DONAHOE

Even though you were working for UE-

FIERING

Well, I was working for the government.

DONAHOE

I see, so then you went to work for the government, but you were still doing your-

FIERING

They gave me a title. They didn't have to pay me, because the government was paying me, so they gave me the title as educational director of the Upholsterers International district council.

DONAHOE

That's pretty funny when your father had been an upholsterer.

FIERING

At that time he was already an upholsterer. He was in that union, as a matter of fact, in the East, in New York. But, anyway, it was an accumulation of such experiences. We set up a stewards council, we set up a good internal mechanism in the union; it was a good union. And we used to have rank and file actions.

DONAHOE

Yeah, I wanted to ask you about that, about the actual structure, because it's really important. You know, other unions didn't always have this rank and file activity in the stewards system. How did you set that steward system up?

FIERING

Well, we got recognition of the steward system. We had a grievance procedure recognized on the basis of a steward system in our contract. But you see, some of that education came out of learning about the labor movement from the CP. I never knew anything about stewards. But I knew if you set up a union, a good rank and file union has got to have a steward system. So the workers handle their own grievances, they handle their own problems. That's a rank and file union. So we had a very effective--Oh, I know what I forgot to tell you now.

DONAHOE

Okay, you tell me that and then we'll go back to the steward system.

FIERING

Okay. When I set up my union and became the full timer--See, you have to understand Saint Louis. Saint Louis is a Catholic town; the Catholic church is very, very strong there. What brought it to mind is the ACTU [Association of Catholic Trade Unionists] that you mentioned. Well, because then by '41, they started organizing as an opposition to the left-wing leadership. But Saint Louis--and the majority of my shop was Catholic, and devoutly Catholic--but Saint

Louis is run by the Jesuits, the Saint Louis church. Saint Louis University is a Jesuit school.

DONAHOE

They were liberal?

FIERING

Well, they were, yes, I would say by comparison they were liberal. They were anti-red, but they were liberal. But they were peculiarly interested in me and went out of their way to be friendly. And I wasn't smart at all. If I was a little more human I would have done didn't. I was too hep on the party line--like a lot of other party people who gradually more and more became paranoid--everybody's against you, that kind of thing. Well, at that time also, the Spanish Civil War was on, and the role of the church in the Spanish Civil War prejudiced your feelings against it. But these were nice guys and they invited me up to their cloister, something that they didn't do with everybody. And by the hour we would sit and talk and philosophize. They were extremely nice to me and wrote me up in their school paper (Saint Louis University) as what every good young Catholic should be like. So I got a national write-up in the Catholic Worker also the same way.

DONAHOE

You mean they wrote you up as--1 Oh, my God.

FIERING

They wrote me up--this is what a good young Catholic should be like.

DONAHOE

Isn't that incredible?

FIERING

And I didn't save the damn clipping.

DONAHOE

So in other words they were pretty much in control of the church in Saint Louis--I mean of the Catholic population.

FIERING

Well, yeah, they ran Saint Louis University for instance, and that's where the cloister was.

DONAHOE

They were very interested in you.

FIERING

They were very interested in me.

DONAHOE

And unfortunately you are saying you didn't realize the potential. FIERING: I just didn't handle it right. I'm very ashamed of myself for that now. It's a little late now but--I didn't appreciate it. I was a young snot nose and I was arrogant.

DONAHOE

Did you alienate them?

FIERING

No, never alienated them, but I kept them at arm's length.

DONAHOE

You could have worked a lot closer?

FIERING

I could have worked a lot closer.

DONAHOE

And that would have had an influence in terms of the workers, too. FIERING: Of everything, of everything, that's right.

DONAHOE

Looking back, we don't know though. Hindsight is what makes us all geniuses.

FIERING

And it's not the only mistake I made, so. But regret that one for a lot of reasons. Anyway, I came out in 1937. There was a whole lot of red-baiting at that time too, I mean the UE was being red-baited way back from the time it started. And so the party made--YCL had made a decision. (I wasn't in the party; I was not a member of the party.) But the party had made a decision that somebody has to come out openly, to show, you know, that communists are human. Nobody asked me to do it, but I decided one day while at a stewards' meeting and there was a lot of red-baiting going on, in my own stewards' meeting, see. I got up and I said, "Listen I'm a communist. So what do you want to do about it?" Well, I got not quite unanimous [support]; there was one guy who was against me. I said, "Do what you want about it." I knew I could handle it, I felt very confident. And they voted me a vote of confidence and all of that, you know, I'm a great guy and all of that jazz. But one older guy after the meeting came up and took a swing at me. [laughter] And I took a swing at him, and people broke it up, and that was all there was to it. Tony Broz, I'll never forget his name. Good old guy, good guy.

DONAHOE

Tony?

FIERING

Tony Broz. Yeah.

DONAHOE

What was--?

FIERING

He was a worker, a steward of ours, a good union guy.

DONAHOE

No, I mean his name sounds-

FIERING

It's Croatian. Good, good guy. But it was unfortunate about that. But I was accepted, and all the time I was there, I was elected and reelected, never had any opposition. As a matter of fact, the company played a very active role with trying to take advantage of that, splitting the union using all the publicity in

the papers. Generally, they attempted to create a red-baiting atmosphere. They called in the leaders next to me, the leaders of the union who were Catholics. Called them into a meeting with the heads of the company and tried to convince them to dump me, and these were young guys. And these young guys told them to go shove it. They came and told me the story of what their answer was to the company. They asked the company, "If you were sick, what would you do?" (The plant manager was a vicious bastard.) He said, "I'd call a doctor." And the spokesman for the workers answered, "Well, that's what we did. We were sick, we called the doctor. Henry's a doctor."

DONAHOE

That's really incredible.

FIERING

So I made it stick.

DONAHOE

Even though you weren't technically a member.

FIERING

I was not a member. But I was YCLer, so I say I'm a communist, you know.

DONAHOE

Did you make a distinction to them?

FIERING

They wouldn't understand the distinction. I mean, if you believe in it, then you are it. It's not a question whether you are affiliated or not. That is not the important thing.

DONAHOE

Since people weren't upset, do you think they understood that you had been politicizing people earlier?

FIERING

I did politicize people. As a matter of fact, even though I was not a member of the party, I recruited forty of them into the party.

DONAHOE

So your politics wasn't a secret. I mean, that's a lot of people.

FIERING

That's right. Because I was open about it. Not only open about it, but actively pursued it, and I had forty people. Do you know what a unit of forty people is? And we used to line up with literature and they'd put out the literature at all the meetings and all of that. But essentially, they followed me because of bread and butter. Because when I left, it all fell apart.

DONAHOE

They left too.

FIERING

With the exception of maybe three or four of them, it all fell apart. Because their interest in me was bread and butter, see, that's what they saw in me. And whatever I would do, it was okay.

DONAHOE

So, in other words, you're saying they respected you because of your trade-union-

FIERING

Leadership.

DONAHOE

--leadership and you came through for them all the time. But they went along with your politics because of your trade union.

FIERING

Yeah, and if I said this was okay, it was okay.

DONAHOE

That's also interesting because there have been similar experiences for people. But you were always open about your politics.

FIERING

I was open, always open, that's right, from that point on when I got up in the meeting. There was no secret about it in Saint Louis anyway, before then. I wasn't hiding it in the youth movement, I was open there, too. But that had no relationship to the shop. They didn't know it, they were not involved in anything I was involved in. The shop and the union were an entirely different thing, and when I came out openly there, it was new to them. But it's an interesting lesson about people and about the times. You couldn't do it today. Couldn't do it today and survive. Though I don't know. I have my past today and I'm accepted. I don't hide it from those who don't know it and the old-time leadership knew it anyway.

DONAHOE

Now, okay, let me go back for a minute. I was just going to focus on this for another second. Most of these people that followed you, they were Catholics also?

FIERING

Catholics, too. There was a cross-section of the workers there.

DONAHOE

It seems like that's been a common experience, that workers, when they did follow people on the left, you know, members of the party or whatever, they did it again on the basis of the trade union, and not necessarily the politics.

FIERING

It was the economics. I wish I had my daughter [Roberta Fiering Segovia]'s paper here. She made a real study of it.

DONAHOE

Oh, I'd love to read it.

FIERING

I hope she contacted the university. She said she would.

DONAHOE

That's very important. I'm not sure what this says about American workers in terms of their political understanding.

FIERING

Their political understanding is low, yeah.

DONAHOE

Okay. Also your being open, though, was important because then you didn't leave yourself open to be red-baited. You had already taken the offensive, which is very important. Now, I was going to ask you about a steward system, how you knew how to set up a steward system and what it was like.

FIERING

I really knew how to set it up, because I used to read the Daily Worker, organ of the CP, believe it or not. It was a good paper at that time. I don't think it's worth a hell of a lot today. But at that time it was a good paper. Of course, the reason it was a good paper was because there were a lot of reds and they were all over industry and the paper had a lot to report on in terms of experiences. And the party was immersed in the workingclass struggles of the time, see, and it was reflected in the paper--had a lot to teach. I was an avid reader of it to pick up experience, and I did. That was one of the experiences I picked up, from the kinds of struggles they conducted elsewhere. I picked up the short-term struggles, the stoppages, inside-the-shop struggles in the settlement of grievances, rank and file actions. Not just the mechanics of the grievance procedure, but the basic things in a grievance procedure--the constant support of the rank and file in the grievance procedure and how you mobilize the rank and file for support of the grievance procedure. For the day-to-day support of a union, and it's not just the mechanics, see. I learned a lot that I must admit. And I teach it today.

DONAHOE

Well, that's really important.

### **1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, Side One (August 21, 1987)**

DONAHOE

We're going to go back a little bit and talk about how your parents [Nathan and Anna Fiering] felt about going to Saint Louis and even the area, because

we were going to go back and do that. And then we're also going to talk about your wife [Clara Wernick Fiering]. So first we'll talk about your parents.

FIERING

We were rather a tight family, pretty close family. I was brought up very close to home. Although I had a lot of leeway in what I did, what freedom in what did, nevertheless I was close to home. I lived at home up until the time I left to go to Saint Louis, and at that point--Well, prior to that time, I had had a serious love affair with a girl who was not Jewish. That created awful trauma in my family. In fact, she was half-Jewish. That wasn't good enough; she had to be all or nothing.

DONAHOE

With all their politics.

FIERING

Yeah, well, my mother was not really into politics anyway. She was very traditional. And my father just wanted to keep her happy, because my father didn't care. But anyway, it was a very upsetting period when I was about twenty or twenty-one. And I "harbored a lot of resentments, but nevertheless, I did live at home, and I was a good son. I brought my paycheck home like all the Jewish boys did, gave it to your mother and she gave you an allowance. And we were a nice family, as families go we were a pretty nice family. Until I made my decision that I was going to leave to join my girlfriend in Saint Louis. I brought her to the house, oh at least a year before that, and introduced her as the girl I was going to marry. Took her mother [Dora Wernick Bohn] up, introduced her to the family. But we didn't do the traditional things that families do in mixing prior to the marriage. Talking about a formal marriage, I just announced I'm taking off and that was traumatic. It was hard to live with for the period before I left, hard to live with. Tears and tears and more tears. And I wouldn't listen. My girlfriend, as you might surmise, was a very modern-type girl. She wasn't about to come back and participate in a formal marriage. So I made a decision to go. So one day I packed up and took a bus downtown and then took a bus to Saint Louis. One of my best friends, Seymour Rubinstein, was nice enough to accompany me to the bus. It was a very lonesome feeling. Today he's my brother-in-law.

DONAHOE

Just like that.

FIERING

Just like that. Saved up enough money for the fare. I don't recall whether I had a job and left it. may have, as I was working on and off. I would have left the job anyway. It didn't mean much to me, because the big thing to me was the whole working-class movement, that was the thing in my life, nothing else was important. And so I arrived in Saint Louis and we settled down to it.

DONAHOE

Okay, now the yeL [Young Communist League] didn't say anything about whether you were leaving New York.

FIERING

No.

DONAHOE

They didn't do anything like that.

FIERING

No, in many respects I was somewhat undisciplined. I used to do what I wanted to do and I didn't bother to consult anybody.

DONAHOE

You didn't even tell them?

FIERING

Oh, I told people there, oh yes, I was going, I had some position in the national office there. It wouldn't have made any difference. At that time they might have called it irresponsibility. But when I make up my mind to do it, I do it. So I did it. Of course, they probably didn't mind it either, they probably thought it was a good thing. Here's another force going out to the wilds, because my mother said, "Where is that, where is Saint Louis?" There's a Yiddish expression, "Du geist in alle shvartz yorn," it means every black year. It has no relationship to race, but it means darkness--the end of the world. And it was

far way from New York, boy, far away. I had never been farther west than Paterson, New Jersey. Anyway, so we set up housekeeping and neither of us knew how to keep a house, but it didn't matter much. I maybe did not take my marriage as seriously as one would, or as one should. I was a good boy, but I didn't take it seriously. It was 8 little bit rocky, and I was not really prepared for it.

DONAHOE

You were only twenty years old?

FIERING

Twenty-three. At that time I was twenty-three.

DONAHOE

That's still young.

FIERING

Still young, yeah. By today's standards, too young, of course. And it was rocky. Our first child [Maxine Fiering DeFelice] came along--Well, as a matter of fact, we had separated for a while in--let's see, my daughter was born in '38, we separated in '37. And we got together again at the national convention of the American Youth Congress. I think it was the American Youth Congress which was the organization. I think the convention I was talking about right now is either the League against War and Fascism or the American Youth Congress.

DONAHOE

I think you said the League against War and Fascism. That was like '38!

FIERING

That was in the middle thirties, '36, '37, '38, yeah. There was a national convention in Chicago and I was a delegate to that representing the Saint Louis youth organizations, and my wife was a delegate also. We got together again there, and we went back together.

DONAHOE

You had how many children by now?

FIERING

I had none yet. In fact that was the night my first child was conceived. I keep telling her, my daughter Maxine, I know exactly when you were conceived, the date and everything. [laughter]

DONAHOE

She was born in '381

FIERING

Yeah, she was born in '38.

DONAHOE

And then you stayed together after that.

FIERING

Yeah, well, we stayed together after that, but not permanently; we had another split-up. We split up when I left Saint Louis for Ohio, that was a split.

DONAHOE

When was that?

FIERING

That was the end of '39.

DONAHOE

So that was like two years later again?

FIERING

Yeah. That's when I became an international rep for the UE [United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America], field rep for the UE. That was my first assignment, it was in Ohio. So it sort of became a convenient thing. If I had an assignment to go to, it was away from Saint Louis. That occurred at the same time as our split-up. It was a heavy moment, that was a heavy moment. I never did--I wasn't the best parent, but tearing myself away from my children was always traumatic.

DONAHOE

But then you all got back together again.

FIERING

Oh yeah, we got back together, in '41, we got back together.

DONAHOE

'Forty-one?

FIERING

Yeah. As a matter of fact in 1941, yeah, it was in '41.

DONAHOE

And you were still the international rep for--?

FIERING

Yeah, by that time I was the international rep in Ohio. There's a difference between a field rep and an international rep: the international rep is a sort of a supervisor, the regional director.

DONAHOE

Okay, and did you then move back to Saint Louis?

FIERING

No, no.

DONAHOE

You still stayed in Ohio.

FIERING

No, Ohio and Kentucky were my territory, and my wife came to Ohio.

DONAHOE

So the family moved to where you were.

FIERING

Yeah. As a matter of fact, she went to Chicago on an assignment to lay low, because there was a great feeling that the CP [Communist Party] was going to

be outlawed and they wanted to develop an underground apparatus to stay alive. She was assigned to go to Chicago and just be quiet, lay low and hide out there.

DONAHOE

Okay, so that brings us to about '41, I guess.

FIERING

Well, yeah, but of course it doesn't tell what happened-

DONAHOE

Yeah, what happened between '38 and '41

FIERING

Oh, there was a whole lot. We built the union on struggles and on good organizing experiences, internal shop experiences, because you didn't have checkoff at that time.

DONAHOE

Oh, we talked about that and how you went to the people's homes and picketed and everything.

FIERING

Before that, we used another tactic to pick up dues and new membership. We had big groups out in front of the plants, I don't think I mentioned that. It was dues day and we were to have all of the stewards and activist rank and file out in front of the plant, collaring people as they went in in the morning, reminding them that it was dues day or we solicited membership. And then, of course, that spirit carried over into the plant and there was general turmoil in the plant. And we were operating by union contract by now. But of course an open shop.

DONAHOE

Oh, yeah.

FIERING

But no checkoff, you had to collect dues by hand; people had to volunteer to pay dues and volunteer to join. And while there were good intentions to pay dues, dollar dues were still--a dollar was a lot of money. And it was a universal experience. One month they tell you, "Well, I'll give it to you next week, or tomorrow," and tomorrow never comes. So the dues liability built up for these people and that occasion is using this tactic, which--I forget where I picked it up, [it was] some damn place. But it worked, going out and picketing.

Picketing people at their homes, all of whom lived in working class neighborhoods, and everybody was becoming pro-union, militantly pro-union. People were masquerading as prounion people who were not. My particular plant had undergone loss of a strike in '34, and there was a large area of conservatism built up and fear about the union people. We just had to take more extreme measures to convince them to join the union. And so somewhere I picked up this idea about picketing and I used it. We were the only ones that did it, but it work ed.

DONAHOE

It worked.

FIERING

It worked. The next morning the streets were black with people lining up waiting to get to the union hall to pay their dues or join up.

DONAHOE

So once the UE was formed, that was in March of '36, I think, then, and you had organized Century [Electric Company], right?

FIERING

In '37.

DONAHOE

'Thirty-seven. FIERING: I went to work there at the end of '36, and I went through that period where we had a strike. A bunch of us were fired, we called a strike with a minority of people, and used the Emerson [Electric Company] people for picketing.

DONAHOE

Right.

## FIERING

Yeah, the Emerson people had an interesting experience in their organizing. That was a different story there. They had an independent union, a company union, it was called. Anything that wasn't affiliated was a company union. And they had a couple of influential radicals in the--matter of fact, they were YCLers [Young Communist League] working in the shop. They had a number of people who were socialist, socialist-minded people, working in the shop. These people had managed to work their way into that company union, and with the organizing effort, signed up people in the UE. There were pressures built up on the company union and they were convinced ideologically for a change and something had to be done, because they were pressing the company for answers to their problems and they weren't getting them. And as they were not getting answers, they were moving to the left. So the leadership was convinced that they should affiliate. And that, together with the movement for building UE, UE organizations, swung that whole shop over to the UE, and that became the occasion for a good strong organization. They declared a strike before Century did. You see, we tried to work things in tandem. We couldn't move fast enough because they were getting our key people too quickly. And so the Emerson people voted to strike and they organized a sit-down strike. They had a fifty-fiveday sit-down strike. I think at that time, next to the UAW [United Automobile Workers] Flint General Motors [Corporation] strike, it was the longest sit-down in the history of the country. Well organized, well organized. It was a beauty of organization. I have to give it to [William] Sentner: he did a good part of the organization of that. He led it. And I would get in there. I was in there once or twice, slept over to see what it was like--just like a machine, very well organized. And, of course, that was also eventually settled, but we used them at Century to help us close that plant. They held the picket line while the rest of us did the fighting to keep the scabs out. And then--I think I covered that the National Labor Relations Act was declared constitutional-

## DONAHOE

Right, right. So that came in.

## FIERING

--during the course of the strike, and that became the basis for settlement.

DONAHOE

The recognition of the union.

FIERING

Well, it wasn't recognition, it was an agreement to an election.

DONAHOE

Recognition to hold an election. [laughter]

FIERING

Yeah. Up until then, we had petitions filed with the National Labor Relations Board, but they didn't mean anything, see. But with that decision, of course, both companies agreed to elections. So on that basis, with the agreement for an election, we convinced the workers to return to work; it was a victory. Went back to work, elections then came, they were won overwhelmingly, and then Wagner [Electric Company] didn't have to strike. They had an election without a strike.

DONAHOE

So Emerson and Century set the pattern for Wagner.

FIERING

Yeah. By that time Wagner just rolled on in. That was a big shop; that was the biggest--seven thousand.

DONAHOE

Seven thousand? Oh, okay.

FIERING

Big shop.

DONAHOE

And you won overwhelmingly in all of them.

FIERING

Oh, yeah.

DONAHOE

So UE solidly-

FIERING

UE rolled right through Saint Louis then, because that was the big industry in Saint Louis.

DONAHOE

Okay, so that was about 1937 or so.

FIERING

That was '37, yeah, the first half of '37.

DONAHOE

Initially, then, you became the financial secretary-

FIERING

And business agent.

DONAHOE

--and business agent of your local.

FIERING

Of my local.

DONAHOE

But then later you became the international rep for the-

FIERING

The field rep for UE, not there, [but] in Ohio.

DONAHOE

Right, but that was when you moved up in the union.

FIERING

Yeah, well, yeah.

DONAHOE

You told me that one of the parts of the settlements was that you wouldn't work at Century.

FIERING

I wouldn't return, right.

DONAHOE

And Sentner signed that agreement.

FIERING

That's right.

DONAHOE

Okay, but then the UE offered you this position of international rep.

FIERING

Well, I wasn't concerned about that because I knew I was going to be elected as a full-timer; there were enough people there to support a full-timer. That didn't concern me. I should have been, just as a matter of principle. I should have fought it. But the other didn't come until two and a half years later.

DONAHOE

After the organization of the-

FIERING

Yeah, I was a business agent for more than two and a half years before I got the offer to be a field rep.

DONAHOE

So you were in the area still for two and a half more years.

FIERING

Oh, yeah, I worked as a business agent for them, right until Christmas week, 1939.

DONAHOE

Okay, okay. And then the offer came through to go to Ohio.

FIERING

Yeah. Now, you wanted to know about some specific organizing?

DONAHOE

I wanted to know about your organizing campaign.

FIERING

Yeah, well for instance, starting with Century, I got a job there as an assembler. They used to manufacture motors, electric motors. I got a job as an assembler, and, I was making twenty-eight cents an hour. Before I got fired, I was making thirty-two, a big raise, of course.

DONAHOE

Four cents.

FIERING

That was a big raise. And my wife was working in the Century Electric plant also for a while, before I got there, but eventually she got fired because someone tracked down that she was a red. She then went to work at American Can--it was American Can or Continental Can--yeah, she went to work at one of the can companies. It might have been Owens-Illinois. Then there was a great exposé on her while she was working there, and [it] showed her leading meetings with reds in town. There was her picture in the paper. She didn't last long; she got fired. But none of that stuff really fazed us. You know, we were too young to know better or to be worried about things like that, and whether we ate or didn't eat really didn't amount to much either. And we really didn't have much to eat. At one point we were both unemployed, and I remember we had one slice of bacon between us for the day and that was it. You didn't care, you didn't care where your next meal was coming from. There were some nice people in town, older people with the left movement, who used to act like our parents and sort of assured that we would get something to eat. But it was a nice--it was a good period in a way, an educational period.

DONAHOE

When you went into the plants, did you come right out and tell people your politics?

FIERING

Oh, no. Oh, yeah, let's get back to that; I get sidetracked sometimes. I went into the plant and I kept quiet for a while just to establish myself as a good worker. And I was a very good worker, very fast. And the department supervisor wanted to keep me, you know, I was productive. My first thing was to just get acquainted with people, because I had known about the history of the plant in a previous strike, busted strike, there. So I wanted to find out where the hell I was at, who was there, who I could talk to--get acquainted with some people, which I did. It took me a week or two to get acquainted with some people, and when I sounded them out and I knew who I would talk to, I would talk to an individual here, an individual there about the union and either managed to slip them a card there, or else I would arrange to go to their home at night and sign them up. That went on for a little while and eventually the company caught up with me and I got fired.

DONAHOE

There were spies I'm sure, allover the place.

FIERING

There were eight of us fired.

DONAHOE

All at one time?

FIERING

Not at one time. I was the first one fired, then another one was fired and then another one. But even after I was fired, I continued to work on the plant, on organizing the plant. The times were different. The fact that I was fired did not create panic like it might today, see. If you announce today when you go out to organize that you're organizing something, some key person gets fired and you can't do anything about it, it creates a panic. Well, we didn't have a National Labor Relations Board at that time to reinstate me; you were on your

own. But there wasn't the feeling, because at that time the workers were in a different mood. They were coming out of the Depression, things started to shape up a little better and there were jobs opening up. The country was beginning to pullout and people were angry. There had been auto strikes in the country--and not too far from Saint Louis for that matter. As a matter of fact, there were shutdowns in Michigan, which is not too far, and there was the Flint [Michigan] strike, and you had the Toledo Auto-Lite strike in '34, you had the longshore strike on the West Coast. We didn't feel too much about what was happening on the Coast, but in the Middle West you felt pretty much everything. There was a whole movement by. the CIO [Committee for Industrial Organization; after 1938 Congress of Industrial Organizations] see, and it was making headway, penetrating the basic industries, and the workers were in a militant mood and the fact that somebody was fired did not stop or put a damper on that militancy, didn't stop them from organizing. You could go ahead and talk and organize.

DONAHOE

So you still have a corps of workers within the plant to work with even though you're outside. You can still do it, which is really important.

FIERING

That's right. But the most important thing is to appreciate the mood of the working class at that time, a generally rising militancy. And when that happens, they don't give a damn.

DONAHOE

They're ready.

FIERING

They're ready. Nothing is going to frighten them. And that's the mood that they were in, thanks to the CIO and John L. Lewis, which is what we need today.

DONAHOE

A new one. [laughter]

FIERING

Yeah. I feel today that something like that could happen if we had a strong leader like Lewis who could inspire the kind of spirit you saw at that time. There are some unions today that may have that kind of leadership ready for a John L. The workers are.

DONAHOE

It almost has to be rebuilt.

FIERING

So anyway, you organize that way and--See, the reason I mention the Emerson thing was because that was different; no one was fired there, because of the company union thing which had broad support. It was a company-created instrument; the company permitted it to be created years before, I think in about '34. It wanted to use it and bend it to its own purposes, but the times moved it in other directions. So it was a mass organization, and they handled problems of workers. They were ineffective up until this point--not too effective, put it that way. The company might give them a crumb here or there, but with the rising tide of organization, it became more effective in handling problems. They kept pushing and pushing and pushing, and as they did, their expectations became larger and they thought in broader terms than they did in just settling a grievance. The whole idea of union with a contract became a big issue, and, with their broad base, they were able to--Well, here was the UE signing people up and building its organization, and here was a company union which already had an organization to merge, so you had the ingredients of a tight enough organization to pull a sit down strike. They had practically everybody in the shop in the union. Once the company union affiliated with the UE, announced an affiliation, endorsed the union, then everybody became a UE person. That's another way to organize. You don't find that today because you find very, very few company unions. There are still some really independent unions that are kept alive because the company prefers that and gives them concessions so they don't join the AFL-CIO [American Federation of LaborCongress of Industrial Organizations], that is, the general labor movement. But other than that--Of course, if you want another experience, we can go to different techniques in organizing. My first experiences as a field rep for UE, I went to Ohio. My specific assignment was the Hoover [Company].

DONAHOE

Hoover?

FIERING

Yeah, Hoover vacuum cleaner. Here I'm thrown into it--well, they'd say, "Here's a plant, go organize it." What they had there was also a company union, but a real instrument, and we had few UE sympathizers in the plant and my job was to get them together to see if we couldn't take over, bust the company [union] and sign people up-enough people so that we'd qualify for an election and have an election. Well, what happened was that the company union got the jump, they saw what was coming, and they petitioned for an election. And we didn't have enough to win, [but] we had enough to get on a ballot. So there was a big argument that arose inside the ranks of the UE organization about what course to follow, and that's where really came into the picture. The union had nobody else in direct contact with them and that's why I was sent in. So I was given a line to follow: We didn't want to get on the ballot and lose an election.

DONAHOE

What percentage of the workers do you think you had at that time?

FIERING

Oh, maybe, looking back, we might have had (in cards) 10 percent, I'd say.

DONAHOE

That's all?

FIERING

Oh, yeah. Well, there was no campaign there. We had some people who were sympathetic who would write to New York and say, "Send us cards, we want to organize the UE," and so they did this on their own. We had minimum organization that way, had nobody to guide it. So here was an election schedule and the question was what position should we take. So I was given a line. We didn't want a loss, so the next best thing to do was to fight to defeat a victory for the company union in the election by advocating a "no" vote. The ballot would be market "yes" or "no" for the company union. So I had the job

of sitting down with people and convincing them. They thought it would be the end of the world if you didn't get on the ballot and try to win, you know, it would be the end of the world. I had to convince them, "Well, we'll be patient. We'll take our time and then we'll wait the one year and we'll be ready to come back if we defeat this company union now." And to make a long story short-Because it was very interesting getting into these discussions with these workers. You discuss it with them, and they come up finally with the decisions, see. You just argue and you give them an argument here and an argument there. But they among themselves come up and make the decision on what the right thing is to do. And they agree that we would go into a negative campaign, a "no" campaign. And we were successful in pulling it off, and so we defeated the company union. They thereby lost sale collective-bargaining rights. Then we started organizing our own union, and we were ready by the end of he year to file our own petition. And this company was fighting us viciously. This is a plant--Hoover's located in North Canton, Ohio, which is right outside of Canton. Canton, Ohio, is a steel town. Do you know much about the area-Canton, Massillon?

DONAHOE

Isn't that near Youngstown and everything else?

FIERING

Yeah, Canton, Massilon, Youngstown, all those.

DONAHOE

Right, all the big steel mills. Canton was not. See, interestingly, North Canton had a population which was more native American. Canton, Massilon, Youngstown had a heavily ethnic population. North Canton, a black couldn't live in the town--couldn't get into the town--which was not true for the mill towns.

DONAHOE

A lot of Slavic people too.

FIERING

Mostly Slavic or Italian. Slavic mostly, the great bulk of immigrants were Slavic. Those are the kinds of people I worked with in Saint Louis when I was working

for the CIO, those Slavic groups. One of the reasons that they asked me to work for the CIO was because I had a lot of contact through the movement, through the left movement, with the Slavic groups.

DONAHOE

Yeah, you had been telling me, especially the Croatians.

FIERING

Especially the Croatians, who were very politically hep. And, well, very pro-union, of course. But they were politically aware, very politically aware, and would naturally take a lead in organizing the unions.

DONAHOE

But in North Canton it was totally different.

FIERING

In North Canton it was totally different, totally different, WASP and native Catholic. So during that year I would be in Canton and I went down and did some work in Sharon, Pennsylvania, on the Westinghouse [Electric Corporation] drive, which was essentially the same kind of thing I experienced in North Canton, because there it was the beginnings of a drive--we were faced with an election, we got in late and so the best we could do was prepare for the following year. That was a big Westinghouse plant.

DONAHOE

In Sharon.

FIERING

Sharon, a big Westinghouse plant.

DONAHOE

They have one out in West--Mistvale or something like that.

FIERING

West where?

DONAHOE

Right outside of Pittsburgh?

FIERING

Oh, Midvale. Oh, East Pittsburgh, that was their big plant.

DONAHOE

Yeah, it's still there.

FIERING

It's still there. It's not nearly as big as it used to be, but it's still there.

DONAHOE

So in Sharon you had the same kind of situation as North Canton in terms of the company.

FIERING

Somewhat like North Canton, yeah, the same kind of thing. There was another case where the first--But this was during that period when we were building a union in Hoover. So while the people were signing people up, was running down to Sharon--I was working on that plant. There was another guy with me at the time, too, in Sharon. We essentially did the same kind of thing that we did before. We prepared the way for when we would be in command of the situation.

DONAHOE

So eventually you managed to win the union elections.

FIERING

Oh, yeah, yeah. And we had eliminated the company union the previous year. Well, so in Canton we finally--There was a lot of resistance by the company, a lot of resistance. And we won the election. But how do you build it? You build it brick by brick. You sign up people, then you build committees, then you organize it in the departments, and you carryon what today is called--They got a fancy name for it today. They [are] looking for ways to avoid strikes, so they carryon actions within the plant. What do they call it?

DONAHOE

' I know the term that you mean, right. Instead of going on strike, it's an internal situation.

FIERING

Yes, that's right. Well, you know, that's just the past resurrected, but that's the way we built the unions before. You build a union by getting a corps of people, sign up a bunch of people, you set up a committee, you spread your organization in the departments, you consolidate a department organization. You don't wait. If there are problems there you figure out how you can tackle solutions to those problems with the organization that you have. Even though you're still illegal, not legal, you don't have legal recognition, you learn to work, you learn to motivate and to push people into action en masse, see, so they each protect the other. See, what I mean? It's difficult for a company to grab hold of any one person to make a sacrificial goat out of him.

DONAHOE

Because you have enough-

FIERING

And that's the way you organize it. Today . they've rediscovered it and they think they've invented it, you see.

DONAHOE

It also seems like you're saying patience is very important.

FIERING

Patience, that's right.

DONAHOE

You don't move ahead too fast before people are ready.

FIERING

So we carryon these day-to-day struggles and you build the union. Every time you move people into motion that way, the primary thing is sign cards up, build the union, build the organization, and when an organization is built very well in the department, that department can move ahead and start getting solutions to problems without any one person being out there way out in

front getting chopped off. The company can't zero in on somebody. And there are techniques that you develop on how the mass moves to solve a grievance, how you present a grievance, and how the grievance is made known to the management. And that used to be ABC in the building of a union and the UE was expert at doing that.

DONAHOE

On involving everybody?

FIERING

On building a union like that.

DONAHOE

A real rank and file democratic union.

FIERING

A real rank and file.

DONAHOE

I wanted to ask you about that, about the structure of the UE. It's sort of at the end here, but the UE has a reputation as being one of the most democratic unions-

FIERING

Yeah.

DONAHOE

--in terms of the structure of, you know, some of the other ones. And I was just wondering how that actually worked in practice with stewards, and constitutional conventions--?

FIERING

Internally in a local union, the UE was extremely democratic. It was democratic, I'd say, to a fault. I think it was a fault because you did not have the "discipline" that you have in unions like developed in the UAW, where there is a top national leadership that enforces a certain discipline on the membership as a whole. Shop by shop, you couldn't beat it, you couldn't beat

the democracy in the UE. But the UAW was a democratic union even then also. Today it is too.

#### **1.4. TAPE NUMBER: II, Side Two (August 21, 1987)**

DONAHOE

Okay, we were talking about the structure of the UE.

FIERING

Well, the structure of the UE. How do you start, what do you want to know?

DONAHOE

Okay, like, did you have an elected stewards system?

FIERING

Yeah, that was ABC. You had to have a steward system by election, an internal organization to enforce the contract, which was completely democratic with stewards elected democratically and a grievance committee elected democratically. Local union officers--all elected democratically. Freedom of speech-

DONAHOE

How many stewards did you usually have?

FIERING

Well, as a general rule, you have to play it by feel, because you could have a plant which had a department, say, with a hundred people and you'd want to have a representation of about one to thirty on the average. Or you might have a department which was isolated which had fifteen people, so you would want somebody from the department who knew something about the work to represent those people, so you had one steward for people like that. You'd compensate for it, because the management didn't want too many generals walking around. There was logic in that--couldn't have too many generals walking around. So where you had one for fifteen someplace, you'd compensate by one for forty in another place where you have forty people working closer together doing the same kind of work, you'd have one steward who could easily look after the needs of those people, see. The more

important thing is that the philosophy of the union, of a rank and file union, is that you have to enlist the constant support of the rank and file in the solution of problems, the solution of grievances. It is not a mechanical thing just like electing a steward going in there and outsmarting the boss. The steward had to learn how to enlist the support of his membership if he was going to be effective in representing them with their immediate boss. That was the difference in the UE, and a union like the UE, and that's what our people were brought up to understand--our stewards were made to understand. See, after a while it became almost routine. If you have a rank and file union which operates on its muscle all the time, then whenever a steward goes in, he doesn't have to worry, "How am I going to line up my membership to put the pressure on this boss," unless he needs it, unless it becomes--in the unusual case he might need it. He might need some kind of demonstration of strength. But where a union is created, the people are educated to understand that the operation of the union involves their involvement, constantly. They are responsible, in the last analysis, for the solution of problems. The steward eventually goes in and when the foreman or the supervisor or whoever it is he deals with, deals with it, he knows he's got a militant group backing him that the foreman has to be concerned about. Or else what happens is it degenerates and the steward operates as an individual and he forgets about his base and the base lays there dormant and things go downhill. That's what happened in a lot of industries.

#### DONAHOE

Definitely. Like, see in the auto workers, they used to have the steward system. Then, after the war, it was changed to the "committee" people and they kind of did . away with the name "stewards" and everything became more formalized in the grievance procedure where you couldn't really resolve things on the shop floor. Now, this is in the big auto plants. It didn't involve-

#### FIERING

Well, it wasn't--I don't know if it was a--See, we had General Motors [Corporation] plants--I made before mention about Frigidaire--and I was involved in the organization of the GM plants in the UE. See, General Motors had an electrical division and we happened to get there first. The UAW was furious about it. They figured that belonged to them because it was General

Motors. What it came to was we represented 10 percent of the General Motors workers, 35,000. There was Frigidaire [Company], there was Delco Products, there was Moraine Products--all in Dayton, Ohio. And in Rochester you had Delco Products. In Syracuse [New York] you had a Delco Products plant. In Warren, Ohio, you had what was called Packard Electric, which made the electrical systems for automobiles, but it was a UE plant. And there was another one. In any event, we got the backlash of what happened in the UAW with respect to their grievance setup. And it wasn't really that bad. We had stewards, we had--Essentially, the structure of the grievance system was based on what they called committeemen, because the company couldn't stand the word "stewards." And the committeemen represented the bigger group than what we normally would allow stewards to represent. We carried it over, but we made it work, and we made it work the same way that stewards work. We called them committeemen, but they were really stewards, see. And they were, by contract, set out so that each committeeman covered x number of people, a hundred people or something like that--seventy-five people, whatever.

DONAHOE

It was quite larger.

FIERING

Whereas in most--they were much larger--in most contracts you would have a breakdown of one for forty in thecontract, but there was flexibility in how it was -applied. But we made it work like a steward system and what happened was, of course, the committeeman, because they had larger areas, the concession the company made in order to avoid stewards with smaller groups was that they gave them more time, so that you had your grievance committee of seven people in a plant, a big plant, who did nothing for eight hours a day, but walk around settling grievances. In other words, they were full-time grievance people, see. And that was your top committeemen. The lower committeemen had a set number of hours in which they could use for settling grievances. Everybody got paid time because they had larger groups, whereas normally what we had in contracts then was, where you had the steward system, you had one for forty, one for thirty and you had people who would take time as they needed it. In some places they would run away with

it, that is the stewards would run away with it and really abuse it, so the contract might limit the number of hours. But if it wasn't abused, there was no problem if you had a strong rank and file. But that was the thing about the auto plants and the UAW contracts versus the way-

DONAHOE

Exactly.

FIERING

So we carried that UAW setup over. It was pushed on us, but we adapted.

DONAHOE

But you turned it around--?

FIERING

It worked, it worked very well. I remember one instance we had in Frigidaire. I became secretary of what was known as the General Motors Conference Board in UE after we had the GM electrical division organized. And was handling--I was in Dayton at that time. I moved to Dayton because that was the hub of the GM electrical division, and I was in on the organization of the GM plants there, too. And we had one foreman--We had one department where the company started to kick up its heels and they would refuse to settle grievances. Our contract provided that each individual worker--See, it's a question of being able to take advantage of the legalities in a contract to be able to move people into action. Contracts provide that each individual has got a right to handle their own grievance. Now, I think this is a result of the law.

DONAHOE

With the help of the-

FIERING

No, they could have a steward if they wanted. In some cases the steward had a right to be there, even if the worker did not want him, because it might be dealing with a contract question, and it's our contract, it's the union's contract. But the individual had a right to take up a grievance for himself. Anyway, in the contract, in the GM contract it specified that. We had a

contract with Chrysler [Corporation] in Dayton. It was the same thing. It was uniform for their industry, so wherever we took over plants that were in their industry, we pretty much emulated that type of contract. But here's a case where the supervision wouldn't settle grievances. So we had this provision in the contract which said every individual has a right to take up their own grievance. Now, the alternative to that is that the steward can take up a grievance for the whole group. So everybody is working while the steward goes in and argues the grievance. But if you're not going to get a grievance settled with a steward, what do you do? Well, here's another section in the contract that says the individual can take up a grievance. So we lined up all the workers in that department to put in their grievances individually and to go in and handle their own grievance. And you had a large number of workers. So for three shifts--it was a twenty-four-hour operation at Frigidaire--for three shifts you had workers lined up waiting to present their grievance. The foreman legally had to listen to the grievance within a set period of time from the time they filed it--like twenty-four hours, see. So he had to sit there and he would listen, first one worker, then another worker, then another worker, and you're talking about one hundred or two hundred workers and three foremen couldn't do a thing. All day they couldn't supervise, they had to listen to the grievances. Well, they finally came to the conclusion it's much easier to deal with a steward and have production going than to do that. And all we needed was one lesson like that.

DONAHOE

To show them. But it was important to involve the workers.

FIERING

That's right.

DONAHOE

That's the main thing, because it seemed that when the Auto Workers instituted that committeeman system, they really cut off-

FIERING

It was a step away from-

DONAHOE

--it was away from the rank and file.

FIERING

That's right.

DONAHOE

But you turned it around to your purpose, yeah.

FIERING

They worked it well. And, of course, the UAW has a little bit different setup than ours; it became more a machine setup. The factionalism and red-baiting fed that. But we became that too somewhat.

DONAHOE

Theirs became less democratic.

FIERING

Well, I wouldn't go that far, I wouldn't go that far. I think the UAW is a good union, a damn good union. You can't minimize its achievements to me. But we had differences with [Walter P.] Reuther so we used to say they're not so good. Well, Reuther is another one of these people who said he's sorry he did what he did, made a mistake, before he died. Like Father [Charles Owen] Rice. But then, a lot of UE people say the same thing for UE. We made our share.

DONAHOE

It really turned around in his face, didn't it? He never thought it would go that far.

FIERING

Well, if he had been living today he would be different, I think. In any event, you wanted to know how--You're really concerned about rank and file involvement, am I right? Now, so UE was a democratic union in that regard. But this is kind of summing up of the final of what I'm saying, but I'll say it now. The attack on the left--which was so sustained and so severe, even though the UE local in its internal operations was democratic, in terms of the operation of the UE, as I view it looking back, the attacks on its leadership and on the left made us paranoid and what it did more than anything else was

encourage the factionalism, much like the factionalism that you had in the UAW or anyplace else--the lefts against the world.

DONAHOE

And it happened within the UE too?

FIERING

Oh, of course, it happened within the UE. And we were very concerned at all times as to who was going to be elected to what. Because, "Did we control this guy, or didn't we control him?" "Did we influence this guy, or didn't we influence this guy?" And it did not make for the kind of wide-open thing that, for instance, what I learned later when we came out here, that you had in the ILWU [International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union], which is to me the most democratic union in the country, was--and still is--under Harry Bridges. That was the way to run a union. But, of course, when you're talking about the Coast, you're talking about an isolated section of the country, you're not talking about everything that went on in the Middle West for instance or the East, where you had UE thrown among a milieu of tremendous political union struggles, political struggles. The ILWU operated by itself here; it was isolated from the mainstream of American industry and from everything that went on in American industry. We constantly felt the pressures of the Auto Workers, the [United] Steel Workers [of America], all the rest of the labor movement, the rest of industry, and the rest of politics, and it made us paranoid, I think, so that we operated in kind of a factional way.

DONAHOE

But wasn't that a little bit later when that happened? That factional-type--?

FIERING

Well, when you talk about later, it can't be too much later, because you had the [Martin] Dies committee [House Committee on Un-American Activities] in the 19308-

DONAHOE

Nineteen forty-one.

FIERING

--and 1940s, yeah. You had the Dies committee, right? And shoot, they were gunning for us from the word go. Then after the Dies committee you had--I forget who the hell the head of it was, whoever he was--but the House [Committee on] Un-American Activities was constantly in operation. And you had the hysteria about the reds all the time, even during the war, even when we were helping the Soviet Union, when we were allies with the Soviet Union, there was still a violent anticommunist hysteria. Well, I'm sure you've read the [James J.] Matles book [Them and Us: Struggles of a Rank and File Union] where he talks about [James B.] Carey.

#### DONAHOE

But then, it seemed that so many of the political people were in key positions in the union, like [Julius] Emspak and [Albert J.] Fitzgerald.

#### FIERING

Yeah, sure they were, but how did they stay there? We had to convince the people that we were good leaders. And how were we good leaders? Because we were militant, we brought home the bread and butter, see. And many workers took the position, "I don't give a goddamn what he is." This was like in my own local in Century when I came out openly. They said, "We don't give a goddamn what he is," they told the boss at the plant when he called in a group of people to tell him. "We don't give a goddamn what he is, he's doing the job for us." And that's generally what convinces workers. As long as the union is militant, was doing the job, bringing home the bread and butter, that was the primary thing. And Jesus, my daughter [Roberta Fiering Segovia] can't get that thing. She called up [University of California] Berkeley, and Berkeley destroyed it; they destroyed the stuff after--I was after her for years to save that. That was the thing about her piece, too, that her research brought out. The reason that the left was able to maintain itself in leadership was because they could do the economic job. But they didn't do the political education to go along with it.

#### DONAHOE

That's what we're finding out. I've been finding that out in my own work, the same thing. They're respected for their trade union work.

#### FIERING

But they were never able to carry it over politically.

DONAHOE

To politics?

FIERING

That's right.

DONAHOE

I don't know where that leaves us.

FIERING

And so as the attacks became more intense, we became more paranoid. We only looked for people who we could count on. We were afraid of people who had slight differences, because those differences might in the course of time with pressure become more and more magnified and drive people away from us, just because they were afraid to associate. That's really what happened to a large extent when the crunch came. A lot of people who left us, left us crying, literally crying. They just couldn't take the pressure. They were good and they loved us, but they couldn't take the pressure\

DONAHOE

Do you think that's it? Like, it's not that you weren't open politically, it's not that you didn't try to explain things to people?

FIERING

Well, I don't know. There are all kinds of evaluations made on where were the mistakes made about that, and that's one of them. If we had been open from the beginning, would it have been different?

DONAHOE

Well, you couldn't be open from the day you walk in a plant.

FIERING

Not [the day] you walk in a plant, but once you've established yourself, like I did with my plant.

DONAHOE

Right, but you were-

FIERING

That was right in the beginning. As soon as we won the election, we had a contract, we got the stewards set up, I was accepted as the leader unquestioningly, and I came out.

DONAHOE

Told them who you were?

FIERING

I told them who I was and I was accepted. There was never a question anymore while I was there, about redbaiting, at least not by my own local; I was red-baited by everybody else, but not by my own local. But who knows, I don't know whether that was so. You know, you can't compare the United States to other countries. The general political level and the background of our own history is a lot different from what it is in any other part of the world.

DONAHOE

But there's always been such a concerted effort on the part of the government and everything against any kind of leftism, you know, socialist ideas.

FIERING

Well, that was a part of weakening the union, that was their strategy.

DONAHOE

I mean stronger than in any other country.

FIERING

Stronger than any other, but they had the material to work with here. You didn't have a history in the United States like you had in the European countries or colonial countries of a socialist consciousness. This is the land of the rugged individualist, you know, and developing capital. So who can say? I don't know.

DONAHOE

It's a very hard question to answer. We could probably go on forever.

FIERING

That's right, even a Monday morning quarterback can't answer that one.

DONAHOE

So did you have much contact with most of leadership, the top leadership, like Carey?

FIERING

Oh, of course. I was the international-

DONAHOE

It was such a small organization that you had lots of interaction with each other.

FIERING

You're talking about within the UE? Of course, had constant interaction with them. I was the international rep. That means I had a chunk of geography that I was responsible for. I was in and out and I dealt with major corporations, so I had to have constant contact. And I wouldn't want to forget my wife because she was involved in General Electric [Company], and she and I were involved in the landmark cases on equal pay for equal work, War Labor Board cases in GM, GE, and Westinghouse on equal pay for women.

DONAHOE

Right, that was very important.

FIERING

She and GE, me and GM. She did the best job. We were the only two that successfully negotiated the equal pay decisions, and I did so with concessions. She did without concessions.

DONAHOE

That was during World War II, wasn't it?

FIERING

That was a result of the War Labor Board decision.

DONAHOE

You were the only union that did that.

FIERING

That's right. And she negotiated with GE.

DONAHOE

Yeah, that was a landmark.

FIERING

We won two decisions from the board, one in GM and one in General Electric. I think Westinghouse also, I'm not sure. But in any event, following the War Labor Board decision, then the order was go ahead and negotiate. Well, I was at GM and I was in charge of GM, so I picked it up at GM, see, and she was at General Electric, so she picked it up at General Electric and we negotiated to a conclusion. Others went into negotiations but before they could resolve the problem of equal pay, the war ended, and with that the decision went out of effect.

DONAHOE

The whole thing, yeah. Well, I know you were the first ever to take that up. Now, I was wondering, you said the Dies committee began in 1941, and that was kind of the beginnings of the ACTU, the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists?

FIERING

Well, they started out about--I forget if it was 1940 or 1941 with Carey or before that. I don't recall hearing about it before 1941.

DONAHOE

Was that the first time they were really starting strongly to exclude communists? It was a Lynn [Massachusetts] group that wanted to change the constitution.

FIERING

Yeah, well Lynn was a General Electric plant which brought an amendment to the constitution. They weren't the only ones. I'm sure there were other locals that also periodically brought in amendments to the constitution at conventions barring reds. We had all these pressures on us from outside, you know, that were being used as examples, like the UAW. The UAW did it. They modified their constitution to bar them.

DONAHOE

That early?

FIERING

Well, during Reuther's period. That's how he got elected. That was in the early forties, and he was head of the GM department from '40--See, I used to meet with Reuther every year when we both were going in on contract negotiations, so we lined up our demands so that there was similarity in our demands. At that time he was head of the GM department. That was his springboard to win the UAW presidency, and that was '45 or '46.

DONAHOE

I think it was '46 he was elected against [Rolland J.] Thomas and some of those people.

FIERING

R. J. Thomas, yeah that's right.

DONAHOE

And that's when he started using the whole redbaiting campaign.

FIERING

Well, he was using red-baiting before then-

DONAHOE

Yeah, but he used it real strong.

FIERING

--and that culminated in him getting elected president on the basis of isolating the reds.

DONAHOE

But that wasn't happening as strongly in the UE, was it?

FIERING

Well, they couldn't get off the ground, because we were more firmly entrenched in UE than the left wing was entrenched in the UAW. I suppose we could start examining what the factors may have been. We organized the UE, and as we organized the UE, we built support for ourselves. We circled the wagons and always protected our rears. In the UAW you had a lot more volatile situation because it was a different kind of an industry, different industry. In any event, our counterpart for Reuther would have been Carey, but he was not as smart as Reuther, he was ineffective. He was 8 self-seeker. All he was interested in was getting promoted. In 1937 there was a big article in the New York Times. He got nationwide publicity--the youngest labor leader in the Cla. And so he was made the secretary of the Cla by John L. Lewis. He was a youngster, he was in his twenties, and the New York Times wrote an article: It looks like some day we might have Jim Carey be the president of the United States, because he's just young enough and the labor movement is growing so powerful, you will be able to elect the president of the United States. I'm paraphrasing, of course. He believed it, see. That was his fatal mistake. He believed it, he never let goof that. And in terms of his ability, it just didn't measure up. He was a very shallow guy who was ambitious, but he didn't have enough moxie to back it up. He organized the Philco [Corporation] plant, that was his main achievement when he was in his early twenties, very early twenties; he was a boy wonder. On the basis of that when UE was formed in 1935--in Philadelphia Philco, GE in Schenectady and Lynn, RCA [Corporation] in Camden, and a couple of other plants--he was made the president. It should have been Emspak, but it wasn't.

DONAHOE

And he knew the pol!tical outlook of these people, like Fitzgerald, Matles, Emspak, and you. He worked with them.

FIERING

Fitzgerald was a conservative, by the way.

DONAHOE

Oh, he was?

FIERING

Oh, yeah.

DONAHOE

I couldn't quite figure Fitzgerald out.

FIERING

He was an honest conservative.

DONAHOE

He was a progressive.

FIERING

He was really an honest Joe. He was not flashy, that was the problem.

DONAHOE

But he worked very closely with Emspak and Matles, and he was conservative?

FIERING

Because he was honest, and he was for building the union.

DONAHOE

Through the good trade union person?

FIERING

Yeah. And these guys--You know, Matles was a goddamned good organizer. I know, I organized with him. He was a crackerjack negotiator, smart. I learned a lot from him. And that's what Fitzgerald wanted, that's all he wanted. As far as politics were concerned, he believed in UE democracy.

DONAHOE

But Carey--?

FIERING

I give Fitzgerald a lot of credit. But Carey was dishonest.

DONAHOE

I mean you hear the story that Carey utilized the left to help build the union and then later would turn against them.

FIERING

He didn't utilize the left. Carey didn't have the brains to utilize anybody. He was trying to ride along with the left in a growing influential union, and he was the president, he would be king, so he was just trying to use all that. He wasn't using the left, he couldn't use-He didn't have the brains to utilize anybody. And so when he went too far afield, he was dumped. You can see how effective he was, it was so easy to dump him. A guy who's really the president of an international union like that, that kind of a union, who's got his roots sown into the rank and file, you can't dump him. Not if he's anywhere near a half-smart operator. But this guy was dumped like nothing.

DONAHOE

Who became--1

FIERING

Fitzgerald.

DONAHOE

Fitzgerald, right. Now, oh, let's see, I'm trying to get the dates. The Dies committee started in '41 and they start a whole big political problem and that eventually led to a split in around '45. Was that the first split within the UE?

FIERING

Well, the first split within the UE was in '41 when Carey was defeated.

DONAHOE

Okay, so that was the actual first split.

FIERING

From then on he became the center of a developing faction, and of course, basic to that faction was the ACTU because he was a Catholic.

DONAHOE

He was very strongly involved with the ACTU. mean, they were like entwined-

FIERING

That's right.

DONAHOE

--like Father Rice.

FIERING

Father Rice took up the cudgels against the reds and we had a factional fight at every convention.

DONAHOE

But at this time they weren't trying to form the new union.

FIERING

No, that didn't come until 1949.

DONAHOE

Oh, that was 1949.

FIERING

When Phil [Philip] Murray stepped into the picture, see. He gave Carey and his people a charter and it was an invitation to the UE to get the hell out. The UE says, "Well, we left the CIO." (They hadn't left it. They were pushed out.)

DONAHOE

Okay, I want to talk about that.

FIERING

You've got a way to go before we get to that.

DONAHOE

Okay, so back in the forties they're starting to form a whole new faction, but Fitzgerald is president at this time, and he's working with Matles and Embspak and all these people. So things are pretty strong still. And then no other

groups were successful at this point in changing the constitution in terms of excluding communists from membership. Nothing like this is happening.

FIERING

No. We'll talk about the mistakes later, about the noncommunist affidavits.

DONAHOE

Well, that doesn't come until '47.

FIERING

That's right.

DONAHOE

So what I wanted to ask you about right now was that southern organizing drive that you started telling me about that happened right after World War II.

FIERING

You wanted to know about my activity?

DONAHOE

Right. I thought you said you had been involved in that.

FIERING

Oh, yeah.

DONAHOE

I want to know everything about your activity from your perspective.

FIERING

Chronologically, my activities. My first shop was the Hoover plant, which I organized. It was about three thousand people; it was a nice victory. And then I did some work in Sharon, but then I was then reassigned to Dayton, Ohio. That's where we were conducting the big organizing drive against General Motors. That was in 1940. And I was still handling Hoover vacuum at the other end of the state.

DONAHOE

Okay, and now it's General Motors.

FIERING

That's right. And there were four of us assigned there. Four of us, all still living.

DONAHOE

Just great. [laughter] Do you remember who?

FIERING

Yeah, let's see, there was Bob Kirkwood, Art Garfield, who later became a judge, I hear, in Colorado or Wyoming, and Ernie DeMaio.

DONAHOE

Oh, I've heard of his name.

FIERING

Then later on two other people were brought in, Bob Logsdon and Dick Niebur. Ernie and I were the key people in the drive. He used to do the speeching and I used to do the organizing. My specialty became developing the internal mechanism in the organizing; building the apparatus inside--what I was describing to you--signing up; the creation of an organization out of what we got signed up; motivating them for more signing up, more organization, and so on. And that's how we organized these. Hell, it was thirty thousand people involved in both plants.

DONAHOE

And you were on full time.

FIERING

Oh, yeah.

DONAHOE

So you were working basically from the outside of the plant.

FIERING

Not basically. I was working from the outside.

DONAHOE

Yeah, okay. [laughter]

FIERING

Ernie was technically in charge of the staff and he used to be the speech maker. He's a born agitator, and we would have meetings of our stewards--I don't remember whether it was every week or every two weeks--in these plants. Three GM plants going at the time and there were a number of other plants in the area which we were tackling peripheral to what we were doing. Centrally GM was first. And when we organized, everybody got into the act, including Congress. My job, I was handling the internal organization, I developed the stewards council, which was the organizing mechanism that we used. We'd get them to a meeting and we'd have a couple of hundred stewards. Every one of them was a member of an organizing committee; it was not a stewards council, it was an organizing committee. And Ernie would get up and make a speech, and that son of a gun could speak. He would drive their enthusiasm to new heights at each meeting. He was a marvelous orator, marvelous. We honored the people who did the best signing up, you know. I'd call them up. At a certain point, I'd say, "Who has cards?" I'd get people marching up proudly with membership cards and everybody would applaud. It was nice fun and stimulating. And all of us on the outside with the papers tearing us apart, the Congress tearing us apart. But didn't nothing make any difference. Can you imagine speeches on the floor of Congress with resolutions against UE organizing General Motors when steel, auto, and rubber had already signed with CIO. It was intended and did make headlines in the press to frighten workers. We had an election in 1940. We failed to get a majority, but we got into a runoff. I forgot who the hell was opposing us--some company union or other was opposing us. Then we had the runoff election and we won it. Boy, with all the obstacles everybody tried to throw in our way in the runoff! They tried to stretch it out to give them time to work out on our people. In any event, we survived it, we won it. And it was a very critical victory for the UE. It established a certain relationship with the UAW, with GM, which was the biggest company in the world at the time. I became the secretary of the GM Conference Board and the international representative for the UE in Ohio and in Kentucky. We built a union. God, we

did a remarkable organizing job, and then extended it right through the war years.

DONAHOE

The war was just beginning, right?

FIERING

Just beginning, yeah. Then in '42, '43--we had a staff of fifteen people in Ohio-- we had sixty-seven elections and we won sixty-six.

DONAHOE

That was fantastic.

FIERING

It was fantastic, it really was. It was an unusual experience for the labor movement. And we consolidated a pretty good union--very lively, very effective, and very influential. UE had a hell of a good reputation allover. Not only in industry, it had a good reputation in the state. Played a good role. Not a sufficiently strong role, because we were more into organizing and consolidating our union. We weren't into really plunging into the political situation, which is what we should have done. But that reflects pretty much the people who are leading it--me, for one. Here I was--as far as the nonelected people, I was a leader of the union--and was organization oriented and bread-and-butter oriented. I'm not really political; I'm not knee-deep into the politics, unfortunately. If we had had someone like that, we would have played more of a role in the political life of Ohio, because we were very influential in the state. But, in any event, we did a fair job and had a good union.

## **1.5. TAPE NUMBER: III, Side One (August 21, 1987)**

FIERING

Because I think we just instinctively knew that our survival depended on retaining the close relationship with workers, and the way to do that was the bread and butter job. And we did it, we did a very excellent job on that. UE [United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America] had the best contracts in the state. As a matter of fact, now here's an interesting story. That

reminds me of this story I told to USC [University of Southern California]. They've got it as one of the experiences they've got in their book [The Homefront: America during Wor1d War II]. You know what they did. They did a thing on the fundamental changes in the country during the war years, how the war changed the U.S. from '41 to '45.

DONAHOE

I think you showed me that book, yeah.

FIERING

That was one of the things they picked up. I think it was just before, or maybe after, the war started when [Franklin D.] Roosevelt issued his executive order on fair employment practices. It was the first FEP[C] [Fair Employment Practices Committee] order that was ever issued. You couldn't get Congress to pass it, so he issued an executive order. And with that, the plants--well, they were drafting a lot of the young men--the plants started to run into shortages of man power and woman power, and the Hoover Electric Company plant in North Canton [Ohio], which had been lily-white ever since it started, ever since there was a town, had brought in some black women to work there. I'm up in Cleveland, my headquarters was up in Cleveland at that time. We had the state kind of divided. I was handling the northern half of the state, and Art Garfield was handling the southern half of the state and Kentucky. And so I get a call one day from the president of the local. He says, "Henry, our plants have shut down and walked out. The company just hired some black women." So I said, "Jesus Christ." "We can't do anything with it." He says, "Everybody's out and they're refusing to work." I said, "I'll be down." So I called up the guy in Cleveland who was connected with the FEP[C] office there, a black guy, told him the problem, and asked him to come down with me, because I wanted a government official with me for impact. We came down to the plant, met with the committee and the company, and before we had that meeting, we had a meeting with the committee and I told them, "Now look, this is an executive order of the president, this is the law,. It's not a question of what you like and don't like, you have an obligation to tell your people that they have got to do this." And they said, "We can't." They were scared to--well, there was hysteria. You don't know what hysteria is. I saw my first experience with a lynch mob. I never knew what a lynch mob was except for what I read in the papers. This

was my first experience with a lynch mob. So I said, "You've got to go out there and tell these people this." They says, "We can't, we're not going to go out." So I says, "Well, let's meet with the company." So we met with the company, and the company is sympathetic with us and they say, "We want to do what we have to do, but this is the situation. You've got to do something about it." So I turned to this guy, who was a black guy from the FEP[C] and I says, "Do you want to speak to these people?" And he says, "No." He didn't want to speak to them. And justifiably. I mean, of all the people, I should have had more sense than even to ask him or even think he would. He was scared to death, he was shaking. Well, that's only one alternative that leaves and that's me. I says, "I'm going out and I'm going to face those people." I don't know whether it was I didn't have any sense or not, but I had a very strong feeling about my relationship with those people. I just negotiated their first contract, and it was a beauty. Not only that, I'd won a very important arbitration case right after the contract and they won, oh, hundreds of thousands of dollars. The company thought I had screwed them. The fact is, as far as the workers were concerned, my standing was excellent. So I just took it for granted that I could go out and talk to them. So I went out and I got on a soapbox or some damn table. Here's a couple of thousand people surrounding me, and I open my mouth, and those people start screaming at me and threatening me and calling me everything under the sun. They loved me just ten minutes before that.

DONAHOE

Really?

FIERING

Hey, listen, there's interesting things that happen. And the more I stood there the more determined I was that I was going to have my say and I was going to win this goddamn thing. So for about two hours we went back and forth like this. And these people were hysterical, hysterical. I had never seen and never have since seen a group of people in that shape. If a black had walked in there, they'd have strung him up right then. And I took on the whole goddamn bunch, and the more time went on, the quieter it became, and eventually I convinced them to go back to work and to accept the situation.

DONAHOE

How long did it take you?

FIERING

It took me a couple of hours. They went back to work, the black women went in and worked. The company continued to hire black women, and those women became the highest-paid women in Ohio during the war. They made more money than any plant paid any women in Ohio.

DONAHOE

Because of when you got the comparable pay and everything?

FIERING

No, it had nothing to do with comparable pay, had nothing to do with equal pay. See, they had incentive systems at the time which were piecework systems. That's one of the ways I beat the company in an arbitration case, see. I had a wording in there which was just ideal for the workers, and the piecework system paid off in such a way that they became the highest-paid women. The rates in the piecework system. And with this they built a hell of a good union.

DONAHOE

And that was in North Canton?

FIERING

Um-hm. What an experience that was! I'll never forget it.

DONAHOE

Okay, so with that we were talking about what your wife [Clara Wernick Fiering] had been doing also while all these elctions were going on.

FIERING

My wife worked for--she was a business agent for a big General Electric [Company] local in Cleveland, which is called NELA Park. That stands for National Electric Lighting Association. That's got a long history about how General Electric bought up some independents and created this big complex, the center of their bulb manufacturing industry, and they called it NELA Park. It was set out like a park too. She became a business agent of that local, and

with that she rose in the whole GE setup in the UE and was a member of the national negotiating committee and was one of their best negotiators. In fact, she wasn't the GE coordinator, but she was the best negotiator that they had. In fact GE made an approach to the officers of the union. They called [James J.] Matles, [Julius] Empek, and [Albert J.] Fitzgerald, had a special meeting with them and said they would like to hire Clara to be their personnel director. She wouldn't have to face the union or anything, just be the personnel director, because they said she was the nearest thing to Frances Perkins that they had ever seen.

DONAHOE

Oh my goodness.

FIERING

She was quite a woman. As I said, she subordinated her life to me, which was a tragedy. If I was smarter then, I would have subordinated my life to her.

DONAHOE

Maybe you did, you don't realize it.

FIERING

She was extremely capable, very capable. She was the best organizer I have ever seen. Excellent negotiator, excellent leader, excellent leader. She did stuff with people--I'm pretty good and if I would have to say one person who was better, she was.

DONAHOE

You must have learned from each other too.

FIERING

Well, I suppose we did. We'd sit--That was one of the problems we had with the kids. My kids, by the way, are Maxine [Fiering DeFelice], Fred [Frederick Fiering], and Bobbi [Roberta Fiering Segovia]. We'd sit there at supper, you know, and we'd talk back and forth, having a lively conversation about the union. The three kids would be sitting there listening to us and not involved in the conversation much. They remember that to this day. But they evaluate it as being competitive, see. That's the way it came across to them--that we

were competitive. And they reminisce about that to this day. And two of them are now in middle age, but they won't let me forget this. They felt left out.

DONAHOE

So you were on the General Motors [Corporation] Conference Board and she was--?

FIERING

She was on the General Electric Conference Board.

DONAHOE

General Electric Conference Board. Okay. And like, all this time, all these years you were building a strong union movement in that whole area.

FIERING

Well, anyway, there were all kinds of experiences. I suppose if I start thinking back about individual things that you're involved in, in the organizing--you just constantly organize. You have staff people involved in the campaigns, and I was there; I was in it with them. I participated in a lot of organizing. In that two-year period we organized--I have to start figuring the numbers out--from '41, '42, '43, I think we organized about ~75,000 to 80,000 people.

DONAHOE

That's when you said you had about sixty-six, sixty-seven elections.

FIERING

Yeah, sixty-seven elections in 1942 and 1943.

DONAHOE

Now, this was during the war. How was the war? Obviously it's not taking away from the organizing campaigns. What about the no-strike pledge and these things?

FIERING

Well, we did it within--Life is not a smooth path, you know. I mean, just because you've got a no-strike pledge doesn't mean you're going to sit on your fanny and take a beating. You don't call formal strikes, but nevertheless,

you're not going to keep the people from reacting to grievances. If they are severe enough, they'll react in severe ways. They'll either have slowdowns, or stoppages of work, or walkouts. Well, that's what happened as a matter of fact, with the GM [General Motors] plants. They had that, they walked out one time. But that stuff goes on all the time. You still have a no-strike pledge, so you don't have a normal strike. You don't take a strike vote and have a regular strike.

DONAHOE

How did most of the people that you were in contact with feel about it?

FIERING

I think they were sympathetic to it because the war was the major thing in everybody's life. But you're not going to take a lot of crap just because you signed a no-strike pledge. You're not going to let the boss kick you in the face. And you are in a good position because you've got, to some degree, government backing for continued production, but you also have a shortage of man power, so, you're in a good bargaining position. So if a boss goes off the deep end once in a while and you hit back, chances of your coming out okay are pretty good. You're not about, you don't have to worry too much about more severe reprisals like discharge. Once in a while you do have a discharge, but then, at that time, of course you had the creation of the National War Labor Board. The War Labor Board was pushing arbitration into all contracts so you have an out; you could go into arbitration. In some cases, an employer had to discharge people as an example. He had to. So you go to arbitration instead of fighting inside the shop to get the guy back to work. And if you had a good enough case you won it, and if you didn't have a good enough case (and in some cases you didn't), it was deserved, discharge. The guy lost and people accepted. But the war was the main thing in everybody's life then. Whatever you had to do to keep production up, people were sympathetic to that.

DONAHOE

But you found ways of getting around that?

FIERING

Oh, yeah, you don't put your people in a strait-jacket; you don't tell them you're going to suffer all kinds of what do you call it. But, you see, there were a lot of grievances being built up during the war and a lot of purchasing power being built up during the war, and when that war was over, there was an explosion. Then there was a whole rash of strikes.

DONAHOE

Nationwide.

FIERING

That's right. GM was one of them, and I headed up the GM section--the GM strike in UE--and at the same time that the UAW [United Automobile Workers of America] was out. Matles was the main contact guy with GM in Detroit, and I was secretary of the conference board. used to head up the negotiating committee. Matles was a very, very clever operator, very clever strategist, and at that time, for instance, right after the war (this was in '46) steel went out, rubber went out, auto went out, UE went out in GE and Westinghouse [Electric Corporation]. The UE GM strike didn't come until much later. And the general pattern of agreements was eighteen and one-half cents an hour.

DONAHOE

I remember that.

FIERING

Remember it? And [Walter P.] Reuther got hung up. He got into a box on nineteen and a half cents an hour, and the company came in with seventeen and a half cents an hour. They were perfectly willing to settle, but it meant one of them would have to compromise. And neither of them wanted to be the first to offer compromise because it would look bad. It was a face-saving thing, see. Somebody had to. So here is UE sitting there on strike also. So we went in and we settled; we didn't have that hang-up about nineteen and a half cents. We just go in for a general increase that is satisfactory. Everybody else settled for eighteen and a half and here's Reuther with nineteen and a half, see, and GM with seventeen and a half for auto. So here comes UE and says, "We're arguing for more and more money," and finally says, "We'll settle for eighteen and a half," and GM says, "We are settled--eighteen and a half."

That broke the back of UAW. They settled for eighteen and a half, for which Reuther never "forgave" the UE. It was an excuse for him.

DONAHOE

I know he was very angry.

FIERING

Very "bitter," publicly.

DONAHOE

Because that broke the pattern or something?

FIERING

Of course not. It was the pattern, and it made sense. He got himself in a goddamn box, and the people were out for a penny.

DONAHOE

A penny.

FIERING

And they suffered. You know, they were out for several weeks for a goddamn penny.

DONAHOE

One hundred and twenty days.

FIERING

Well, yeah, but they didn't have the eighteen and a half cents until toward the last several weeks.

DONAHOE

What about the other--? I know Reuther, that was when he made his big demand that GM should open the books to prove that they couldn't afford it.

FIERING

Yes, that was in 1946, I think.

DONAHOE

Yes, this was the same strike.

## FIERING

This was also '46. \*[Now you remind me of the chronology of events. Its an interesting story, because that strike propelled Reuther to the UAW presidency. The strike was another tool for him in that drive. If my memory serves me correctly, he jumped the gun on everyone being the first to strike with a perspective looking to the best settlement in the basic industries. In the meantime with the auto workers still out, everyone else was settling for eighteen and a half cents. UE was still in the shop at its GM plants, assessing the situation. We moved cautiously so we wouldn't be caught with our people on the street and no voice in a GM settlement in auto. When we knew GM and UAW were deadlocked and we could be a factor in a settlement, we pulled our people out. Then after a one-month strike, we moved in to make the settlement which Reuther had to accept. Now, on the "open the books" issue. Reuther added that to his demands for PR purposes. No one felt he was serious about it being a make-or-break issue in a settlement. But what happened was that he was able to get huge mileage with the national community around that issue and in the end was left with a two-cent difference between him and GM and "open the books." The books issue caught on with the strikers so that it enabled him to hold them in line over a one-cent compromise. So in settling with GM and selling the settlement to the strikers, he blamed UE for undercutting him and withdrew the "open the books" issue but filed unfair practice charges with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) against GM. The important thing was he carried the strikers with him all the way and then to the convention. We weren't hung up on the "open the books" demand. We were interested in a settlement. It was a farsighted proposal because eventually that point did win; it became legal. The NLRB later ruled that it was a legitimate demand and companies had to open their books. I don't think Reuther was that serious about it when he first proposed it. But it made great PR. You have to understand how Reuther used the demand, "open the books." It never was a serious demand. When the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) leadership agreed on a common money demand, twenty-five cents, that was the number one issue--money. Reuther then came up with the "open the books" demand to put GM on the defensive. But as the other industries negotiated the eighteen and a half cents, Reuther

felt the ground being cut under him. So he kept the "books" issue alive. He did a hell of a PR job on it, and it helped hold the strikers in line and GM on the defensive. It won a lot of public support. He needed a good second issue to get a better wage settlement than anyone else. But GM would have folded before they'd cave in on that--at that time. So when settlement time came and he had to accept the eighteen and a half cents, he carried his membership by announcing he was running to the NLRB for justice on the "open the books" demand. On the other hand, the job he did in the strike, in my opinion, was what forced the NLRB to rule favorably. I think it's important to point up the significance of the General Motors strike to the changing complexion of the CIO. The UAW was critical to the right or to the left in determining the course the CIO would take. Reuther gambled in pulling GM workers out ahead of the pack and with goals that would exceed the other CIO unions in wages and benefits. Yet at the finish line, GM workers were on strike months longer than other industries, and yet had to settle for the same eighteen and a half cents which they could have gotten much sooner. Reuther, using the strike, became the foremost figure in the UAW and arguably even over Philip Murray as a popular workers leader in the country. He went on to the presidency of the UAW and, allied with Murray, weighted the power relationships so heavily against the left, so as to make possible the dissolution of the left in the next couple of years. We can speculate as to what might have happened if the left-wing and the R. J. Thomas forces in the UAW exposed Reuther's opportunism and challenged his strategy of the strike and negotiations and his use of GM workers in his bid for power and defeated him for the presidency. But they were paralyzed into inaction. The UE didn't go out on strike in GM until UAW had been out for several weeks or months and the signs of a settlement in the basic industries were already clear. Prior to UAW going out, Reuther contacted Matles to try to arrange for joint strike date. Matles was always wary that Reuther, Phil Murray, et al., would look for a way to hang us out to dry and that corporations would love to join them. Matles agreed to a joint strike and proposed a joint strategy and an agreement that neither union would settle without the other. Reuther refused this condition, so UE delayed striking until we could see playing an independent role instead of a tail to the UAW. In the meantime, steel, electrical (GE & Westinghouse), and rubber were settling. Reuther, as part of his drive to power in the UAW and CIO, seemed bent on the "best" settlement of any agreement that had been made. As UAW and

GM, moved towards a deadlock, UE finally made its move and went out. UE was out one month. GM needed to find a way to break its deadlock. UE and GM, like with UAW, moved to seventeen and a half cents and nineteen and a half cents. But unlike UAW, we were not set in concrete. UE, negotiating independently, proposed (Matles) to GM (Charles E. Wilson, GM president) a settlement of eighteen and a half cents. The two committees (UE and GM) met in Detroit and signed a tentative agreement. When it was announced, GM could then propose it to UAW. They had to accept. And Reuther could accuse the UE of selling him out. It was a bizarre situation with the settlement figure as plain as the nose on his face. I have to admit though that he handled it well with the GM strikers. He kept the support of the strikers behind him all the way and into the convention.] Of course, I have to say this for Reuther. It was a farsighted proposal because eventually that point did win; it became legal. The National Labor Relations Board then ruled that companies had to open their books to unions. \* Mr. Fiering added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

DONAHOE

I didn't know they ever got that ruling ever.

FIERING

Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

DONAHOE

Because I thought they just said, oh, no way, and then that was the end.

FIERING

No, there was eventually a decision by the National Labor Relations Board on that issue. So while it wasn't the issue that settled that strike, later on it stayed alive, and we were critical of it, you know. Our differences were politics, political--left and right politics. (It wasn't really right-wing politics.) But we sought to translate our political differences into union differences. So we pooh-poohed it and we said Reuther stinks, and he's selling out workers with this kind of demand and all this crap. And when he came out with the demand for guaranteed annual wage, we said the same goddamn thing, and here he

comes in with a 95-percent wage guarantee. This was the compromise, his guaranteed annual wage demand, I think in 1950.

DONAHOE

Which wasn't bad.

FIERING

Damn right it wasn't bad. Damn right it wasn't bad. But I feel foolish that we said he was selling out the workers with that kind of demand, you know. It was stupid, stupid.

DONAHOE

Well, it seemed at that time with Reuther that demand to open the books doesn't seem like it was a bad demand. I think it was pretty good, you know, that he was saying, "You say you can't share your profits, but let us see your profits." But later, around that same time with this management's rights clause really became--How was your feeling about that with UE?

FIERING

Well, again, what we--Now I understand the management's rights clause. At that time, all we could see was management's rights. And if Reuther was for it, we were against it, it was a sellout. When actually we today can understand management's rights, what it is. It's not that you are for it or against it. What essentially it is, is that when you open a contract negotiation--all of management's rights are on the table--everything that is bargainable by law. And you get whatever you're strong enough to carve out of management's rights. Whatever you can't carve out, remains management's rights. So they still technically have some "management's rights"--whatever you weren't strong enough to force them to give up.

DONAHOE

But over some very important things like profit investment and productivity.

FIERING

Well, so, if you're strong enough you can carve it out when you're in negotiations. Those are two bargainable issues. If not, you suffer for the contract period whatever it is that you had to concede. You are not strong

enough. Like any other bargaining, it doesn't make any difference, you didn't have to talk about management's rights. Some of the complications came in long before that time. Well, before the whole arbitration process became stabilized as to what the parameters were for an arbitrator too. But before that time it was kind of wide-open arbitration. An arbitrator could rule almost anything. And if there was no firm guideline in the contract to follow an arbitrator could go far afield and decide whatever he wanted on the basis of what he considered "equity." So that if you put in a management's rights clause and proscribed "management rights" as outside his purview, an arbitrator couldn't go outside the contract like he did before. The "arbitration clause" contained that limitation. But that was coming anyway; the arbitrators themselves were coming to that conclusion. So it was really another thing: Reuther said it, it's no good, it's a sell-out. And we were caught in this goddamn peculiar bind of every time these people say it's good, we say it's no good, it's a sell-out. We are more militant than them, therefore, we're not going to go that route. Of course, this 1s hindsight, you know. If you had to do it today, it would be done over. It would be different. Of course, Reuther would do his thing different, too, because--

DONAHOE

Probably.

FIERING

--he admitted he was wrong, he had made mistakes with his red-baiting.

DONAHOE

So, in other words, you're saying that there were times when you didn't examine the issue closely enough. You just kind of got clogged by what you thought was the right political path.

FIERING

There was no really thinking through. But there was not really that much experience either, you know. Everybody was in a learning phase. We were learning. Now, make speeches about management's rights in teaching stewards what it really is. It's an eye-opener to them. They see it in a whole different light, whereas before they were afraid of a management's rights

clause all the time because they thought it put them in a straitjacket. I teach them what it really is, and they love that education. Now they approach negotiations in a different way. They see management's rights is not an instrument to castrate the union, to leave them powerless. [recorder off]

DONAHOE

We will pause at this point and take up next time, I guess, still around the war years?

FIERING

Well, I'll start thinking about more stuff during the war years. It wasn't until after the GM strike that I went South.

DONAHOE

Okay, then we can get into the southern organizing campaigns.

#### **1.6. TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side One (August 28, 1987)**

DONAHOE

We're on the war years.

FIERING

The war years and the experiences I had in Ohio and Kentucky. And I used to get into upper New York state with General Motors [Corporation] and a little bit into Indiana, because it was very close to where I lived in Dayton at the time. This was symptomatic of the tremendous growth of both the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations], a continuation of what went on in the thirties, and particularly the UE [United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America]. And it sort of endorsed the type of organization the UE had--the policies and principles of the rank and file. It was a very much admired union, much admired union.

DONAHOE

Really based on rank and file participation?

FIERING

Yeah. It was a minimum of factionalism at the time despite the fact that there was a lot of red-baiting. But because of the atmosphere of the war and the fact that the U.S. and the Soviet Union were allies, it was minimized. It wasn't a big deal, but it reflected itself in the affection workers felt for the organization. But it stimulated a lot of rank and file activity, the kind the country had not seen before, not even in the thirties-political items. While we were active in a sense politically, it was the usual, I think now what we would call participation in the ordinary politics of the country--an attempt to emphasize the power of the unions which were seeking a bargaining position with the political parties. But it also stimulated a lot of rank and file workers, members of the union, to get into politics, run for office, which was new. Something that the country had not ever seen much of before. People just popped up who had talents--Not necessarily an organized campaign searching out people around you. People who had the talent got into the political arena, ran for office, and were elected. It was an unusual period. But talking about the no-strike pledge, there were stoppages of work. Employers tried to take advantage of workers. The position of our union, which compared to some other unions, was a lot different. We went in there and decided to try to resolve problems by settling the issue that troubled workers. We didn't do what some other unions did, which was go down there and order workers to go back to work. That kind of policy, in fact, was contrary to our policies. So the UE was looked upon in the community as an ideal union. The kind that people always wanted to have. And of course, it was reflected in its successes. What else can you say about that?

DONAHOE

So they actually were really integrated into the communities.

FIERING

Oh, yes.

DONAHOE

Because people were running for office.

FIERING

Oh, yeah, the union was well integrated. It was a factor. It's a funny thing. It was integrated into the community, well, it was integrated into the community. In the smaller communities, it was well integrated because there was not much competition with other labor unions because we were the big union. Usually there was a big electrical shop we organized. In the larger communities we--Well, I wouldn't say we operated separately or in isolation from the other unions. We didn't do that; we wanted to operate together with other unions. But other unions were a little bit afraid of us. They were jealous of us, too, by the way. We were not as totally integrated as we would have liked to be, but it was not entirely our fault. But I'll say, the leadership of the other unions kept us to some degree at arm's length, and also the red issue had an impact in their relationship with us.

DONAHOE

Yeah, like say about this time, you start hearing about the change in social unionism, where the union is involved with the community and social issues are important, and the transition to business unions.

FIERING

Yeah, well, but even what you call the business unionists, they still felt that they still played a role in the community. Their social vision wasn't what ours was. But the attitude of the leadership of the other unions--what you'd call a business union--was to a large degree a job. But they were felt a part of the community and tried to play a role in the community but not pushing the community on social issues the way we felt about social issues.

DONAHOE

So you took the lead kind of on that--?

FIERING

Well, we organized the union for bread and butter and realized that was the essential thing in bringing people together, but we had a perspective on the role of the union on the inside that other unions did not have. And, of course, that was where we drew the line between social unionism and business unionism. The ordinary business agent, for instance, of another union or leader looked upon his job as a job, and all you had to really be concerned

about was whether the workers had good contracts every now and then and, for himself, whether he was a part of the establishment and accepted by the establishment. Pushing labor's point of view, but in the establishment. It was a little--not a little--it was a lot different than the attitude the UE had in trying to remodel the society in a sense. That was kind of heavy in a way, but that was what we dreamed of, that was what we thought about.

DONAHOE

But there wasn't, like you said, a real concerted effort to get workers involved politically. They kind of did it on their own?

FIERING

A lot of it they did on their own. There was no-You didn't have to. Once you lowered the bars and you turned people loose, people were there to express themselves in all kinds of ways, and one of them was politically, running for political office. They were ambitious. They had opportunity, they had backing, they were willing to follow constructive programs.

DONAHOE

So it gave them some kind of confidence.

FIERING

Oh, yeah, sure.

DONAHOE

From the union.

FIERING

Their involvement in the union opened up new vistas for them that they had dreamed about but never thought possible until the union became established. It was quite a period. It was an exciting period. Now, of course, there were some social issues in which we took the lead on. One of which was equal pay for equal work for women--women's issues.

DONAHOE

That was very important.

FIERING

Race issues, because [James T.] Matles makes mention of the women's issues, the equal pay for equal work. He mentions specifically Westinghouse [Electric Corporation] and GE [General Electric], but there was also General Motors where I was involved. You see, he was there. We had a committee on each of these. We had our hearings at the National War Labor Board, and they represent the national setup. We had attorneys there, Matles was there--he participated. But it was those two decisions brought down particularly in General Electric and General Motors. The two that were implemented--the only two that were implemented. And one of them, my wife [Clara Wernick Fiering] was involved in General Electric in negotiating the results of the War Labor Board decision with GE. And I was the one negotiating in GM [General Motors].

DONAHOE

That was extremely important. UE was the one that really took the lead on that comparable pay.

FIERING

UE took the 'lead on it.

DONAHOE

I don't think the other unions picked it up.

FIERING

It's interesting. The UAW [United Automobile Workers], we used to try to work in tandem with them, and oftentimes, there may have been issues in which we had worked in tandem and we may have had a set of demands. And we may have had one issue that they didn't have. And if that was the case, they picked up our issues. And if they had issues we didn't have, we picked up their issues. This . was true in General Motors' case. And so we both appeared jointly at the War Labor Board. In one case involving skilled workers, I represented the UE and [Walter P.] Reuther represented the UAW. That set of skilled workers and special demands that they had. But it was interesting that on the women's issues, on equal pay issues, the UAW didn't pick it up.

DONAHOE

Now, during the war years, a large section of the workers were women and minorities employed in basic industries because of the war.

FIERING

Large, large numbers of women and for the first time large numbers of black workers.

DONAHOE

And they weren't by and large getting equal pay?

FIERING

Oh no, they weren't. As a matter of fact, I am thinking about-

DONAHOE

Hear about Rosie the Riveter and everything? [laughs]

FIERING

I'm thinking back on both cases, the GE and GM case, the principle was not just equal pay on the same job. The principal was really comparable worth, what we know today as comparable worth.

DONAHOE

Right, I keep using term comparable pay and I was thinking of comparable worth.

FIERING

They're two different issues. The equal pay for equal work on the same job is one issue. Now, there was an Equal Pay Act passed in 1963.

DONAHOE

'Sixty-three?

FIERING

'Sixty-three.

DONAHOE

And we're talking forties.

FIERING

This was the forties, almost twenty years earlier. Nineteen forty-four I think that was passed--that the War Labor Board decision came down. In 1943 the case was heard, so we're talking about twenty years. And, on the other hand, we are talking about another equal pay issue called comparable worth. Now, the issues involved in those cases twenty years previous were not equal pay for equal work on the same job. They were really comparable worth issues, which was like--what is this, the eighties?-forty years ahead of its time. Because it's just now that the union is beginning to crack through. Like the case up in San Jose with AFSCME [American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees] and SEIU [Service Employees International Union] cases. That's a whole different bag. You have to understand the difference. Do you understand the difference?

DONAHOE

No, you should explain it to me.

FIERING

The equal pay issue on comparable worth involves assessing different jobs on the basis of a same set of standards, see. Now, they're completely different jobs, but the same set of standards are used to assess their value. Now, equal pay for equal work on the same job-we're talking about the same job. For instance, you can have a laborer and a stenographer on a comparable worth issue. That's two different jobs. But the criteria for measuring the values of each of those jobs has to be the same. In other words, how much education is involved, how much labor is involved, how much skilled work is involved. Those are the set of values that you-

DONAHOE

Okay, so the equal pay for equal work, like say it's a man and a woman are both pipefitters. Then you're trying to evaluate them the same.

FIERING

And now, a woman would get less pay than a man for being a pipefitter.

DONAHOE

But then that was challenged.

FIERING

That's right.

DONAHOE

But comparable worth is a traditional woman's job would be evaluated with a traditional man's job and trying to use the same criteria for-

FIERING

Measuring the value of the job.

DONAHOE

Okay, I see the difference now. It's a much more advanced-

FIERING

Oh, far more and that is the big issue now in equal pay.

DONAHOE

I keep using them interchangeably, but I see the difference.

FIERING

The women's movement today--that holds a lot of promise for raising women's wages.

DONAHOE

That was the issue I think at Sears, and at Yale, and all these decisions.

FIERING

That's right.

DONAHOE

Yeah, okay, I see the difference right now. And you were actually--?

FIERING

What it involved was comparable worth as well as equal pay.

DONAHOE

Back in '44, right.

FIERING

For the same job. They took it all together; we lumped it all together.

DONAHOE

But it's interesting. Like you hear so much about the women and the minority workers during the war, and the steelworkers and the auto workers--they didn't take it up at all.

FIERING

Not at all, not at all. Of course, steelworkers didn't have that many women. They had some women in their plants. The basic steel industry has very, very few women, so they weren't pressured on the issue. Auto had considerable numbers of women.

DONAHOE

A lot.

FIERING

But UE had a hell of a lot of women. We had a lot of light work in the electrical plants. And so it was a big issue there. Not the comparable--well, the comparable worth issue was an issue but even more so, the immediate, the more glaring issue of doing the same work and getting less pay. But they were both issues.

DONAHOE

Now, what happened to these people after the war? Like I know in auto and steel, they had agreements that for the people that went to the war--the males--that their jobs would be waiting for them when they returned and you had the same kind of--?

FIERING

Oh, yeah. Everybody had that. That was law.

DONAHOE

Yeah, for returning vets.

FIERING

It was written in the contract, but it was also the law.

DONAHOE

Oh, I didn't know that.

FIERING

That a company had to hold a comparable job open for the male returning from the service.

DONAHOE

So did a lot of the women and minorities have to leave?

FIERING

No, as a matter of fact, we were all concerned there was going to be a recession after the war. When the war production would stop, the plants would close up and millions of people would be thrown out onto the streets. And I remember in Dayton we were trying to prepare for that. We tried to tie it together with an organizing campaign we had at the National Cash Register Company, which was the big unorganized plant there, and we arranged a meeting with some officials in the Pentagon to try to ease the conversion process so you would not have that-Guarantee this plant work. And I had led a delegation to the Pentagon and met with them--with some of the people in charge of war production to ease the situation. But as it turned out, there was such a pent-up demand for buying--there was so much money that people had saved up during the war, looking for ways to spend it--that conversion was relatively easy. And the war plants that had switched to war production from commercial products, consumer products, could hardly wait to get back to consumer products to take advantage of what was really out there. And so unemployment was minimized. It was minimal. There were some dislocations here and there. But on the whole, it was nothing at all like we had feared.

DONAHOE

But in auto and definitely in steel, the women and the minorities were kind of bumped out. That was just-

FIERING

Well, it wasn't true where we were. We didn't have much of a problem on that.

DONAHOE

Well, that's good. Well, you were probably a union that was more concerned.

FIERING

Well, I'm thinking of plants that I had to do with, the GM plants in Dayton-- Well, we had all three. In Ohio and there were a couple of areas in Kentucky we had big plants at GE and Westinghouse as well as a big concentration in Dayton at General Motors. And, shoot, we didn't have much of a problem at all. If you had that kind of problem, how the hell could you mount a strike like in '46, which was solid, solid. Of course, it reflected a lot of pent-up grievances that the workers had, but still, if there were large areas of unemployment, you would expect that people would be afraid because somebody would, you know, worry about what happens to my job. You didn't have that. When the plants shut down, they went down solidly. No scabbing. The company didn't even try to hire scabs because they knew it meant big, big problems for them. In fact, I think we had discussions about it before the strike at Frigidaire [Company] in Dayton about what were they going to do. And they said, "Well, if they walk out, we're just going to shut it down. Not even going to try to run the scabs through." They'd get big, big, big trouble for that. There was such overwhelming support for the strike that scabbing would be minimal and it would create havoc. So they decided to sit it out, the only thing they could do. And that's what happened in order. They didn't try and pull people out and keep plants from operating, because workers were on their muscle; they felt strong. And the companies were hot to get back into production.

DONAHOE

I bet. You know, it's interesting that the union really grew during the war years-

FIERING

Oh, tremendously.

DONAHOE

--with organization when it was still like so many of the workers were in the war. And yet, you were still able to organize these plants, and there was that spirit still. That's very interesting.

FIERING

Well, that reflected a couple of things. First of all, it was a carryover from the Depression and the upsurge in organization was very east[ern], that was one thing. And if there was work, it carried on into the forties, because there was work. And secondly, you had a good objective situation for organizing: plenty of work, and people were in demand.

DONAHOE

Okay, so after the war, then the strike broke out in '46 and all of you were out together, right?

FIERING

Everybody was out for a twenty-five cents an hour raise. That was the big thing--fantastic raise.

DONAHOE

And there was still a war labor board, wasn't there?

FIERING

In '461 No, there was no war labor board then.

DONAHOE

There was something because [Harry S.] Truman ruled something with the steel-

FIERING

No, that was something else. I don't think it was with steel though. I don't think it was with steel. It was with coal miners.

DONAHOE

I thought steel also. You said the steel companies, if they negotiated such and such a wage package, then they could only raise the cost of their steel a certain amount. They were arguing about that.

FIERING

Oh, that was--what the heck was that?

DONAHOE

It was Truman, I know, but I couldn't-

FIERING

It might have been a war production board or a wage price board.

DONAHOE

Yeah, there was something that seemed still in effect.

FIERING

I think it might have been a wage price board. That might still have been operating. But the War Labor Board went out of business in 1945 at the end of the war, as may have the War Production Board.

DONAHOE

Yeah, okay.

FIERING

But my memory might be somewhat fuzzy. I'm pretty sure there would not have been that strike if there was a war production board, but the same authority you had during the war. But everybody went out. All the basic unions were agreed on one approach: twenty-five cents an hour was the goal. Twenty-five cents an hour was like-

DONAHOE

A lot.

FIERING

Oh my God, undreamed of--that kind of a raise. And of course we settled, steel settled. I think we settled in GE and Westinghouse strikes. We couldn't settle in General Motors because of UAWi we had to go in tandem with them.

DONAHOE

They were out for like a 120 days?

FIERING

They were out a long time, yeah,

DONAHOE

I think steel was out for about a month. UE must have been out-

FIERING

We were out for just about a month, not more than that. About a month, yeah. And we thought there might be a settlement, so we hesitated going out. But the thing got complicated between Reuther and [Charles E.] Wilson, who saw that there was no alternative, Reuther had his own agenda. We couldn't afford to settle. First of all, we didn't want to appear to be undercutting UAW. We didn't have a settlement offer that was acceptable. In fact, I think--I'm just trying to reconstruct the damn period. think Reuther went out before anybody.

DONAHOE

Well, I think they started in November 1945. November they went out. November something--the middle of November right before Thanksgiving 1945.

FIERING

Yeah, I think steel settled on the way somewhere.

DONAHOE

They didn't go out--until I think January of '46, so auto was out by itself for a while.

FIERING

Yeah.

DONAHOE

But I'm not sure about UE and rubber.

FIERING

UE was out for a month in I think it was March or April. They all had settled for eighteen and a half [cents an hour]. And the gap narrowed between UAW and GM. And at a certain point, we saw there was going to be difficulties and we went out. And then, of course, when the gap narrowed to seventeen and a half, and nineteen and a half, then UE worked out the eighteen and a half settlement. So Reuther had somebody to blame.

DONAHOE

Said you undercut him?

FIERING

It really took him off the hook, because it was the most fantastic situation. I was in Detroit with the committee and Matles came in from New York. And I remember we were sitting there and we were waiting for GM to come in and start. The rest of the GM committee was in there and they're waiting for Charlie Wilson to come in. That guy looked like he had been through a wringer. You know you think these guys are cool and calm and they know what they're doing. He looked like he was punchy. Reuther really had him going. Of course, he probably had Reuther going too. But Reuther really had him going. He looked like he was punchy when he came into that negotiating session. And we sat down and worked it out in short order. Matles on the phone really worked the thing out as to how it was going to be and we went kind of through the motions, see. And so we got the eighteen and a half and everybody shook hands all the way around and then we had to wait and see what was going to happen.

DONAHOE

And Reuther was there while you were agreeing?

FIERING

No, he wasn't. Oh, no.

DONAHOE

Oh, okay.

FIERING

They were out. They knew we were meeting, you know. Matles had called Reuther to tell him UE was meeting with Wilson. It was really a courtesy call. But I'll never forgot that meeting. You think of these guys that run these big companies as cool and calm, like they know what they're doing. They don't know what the hell they're doing. They don't know where it's going to take them anymore than the labor union knows where it's going to take them.

DONAHOE

Really?

FIERING

This guy Charles Wilson--I will never forget the expression on his face when he walked into that room. He looked like he had to carry himself. He was ready for a settlement and he was glad somebody was there that might take him off the hook.

DONAHOE

So the UE felt that demand for nineteen and a half was--?

FIERING

Well, you had a ridiculous situation. Neither of them could make a move because of loss of face. It wasn't the two cents. It didn't mean much--or the penny. It was really a penny. Because they both knew eighteen and a half would settle it, but neither of them could propose it because each thought they would lose face if they proposed a compromise--Reuther if he had retreated from nineteen and a half and Wilson if he advanced from seventeen and a half. It was a funny damn thing, and here the workers were out on the street.

DONAHOE

Waiting.

FIERING

It's supposed to be a big matter of principle. Two principles--two cents. Or one principle--one cent.

DONAHOE

But what about the other demand? Like how did the UE view that at the time about the "open the books" demand that he was also holding fast on?

FIERING

Well, the UE, that was a funny thing about the UE and Reuther. Was the "open the books" demand in '46?

DONAHOE

Yes.

FIERING

Well-

DONAHOE

With the penny.

FIERING

The UE looked down its nose at that; it ridiculed Reuther for that. Why? Really because it was a more conservative position. We took a more conservative position than he did. Why? Because it was Reuther. See, we couldn't afford to let a social democrat be ahead of us. I know I felt that way, too. Though in the long run, he won the issue.

DONAHOE

No, he lost that one.

FIERING

Not there. But in the long run, later on he got a decision in favor of it. He pursued the issue and he won it. No, there in '46 it was settled at eighteen and a half and there was no opening of the books or anything. Well, he threw it in because it had a lot of appeal. But it turned out that he then grabbed onto it and held onto it, so it had some practical value too. It helped broaden the issues in the strike to hold the rank and file in line. It would have been difficult to do that if the only issue holding out 35,000 strikers was one cent or two cents. And so in successive years, that contract I think was in 1950, and I think it was as well that contract, the decision had come down from the labor board or the courts that opening the books was a justifiable demand. It was within

the realm of collective bargaining. But, hell, he was looking for that publicity and he did win a lot of sympathy with it. He was great on PRe You have to say that, the guy was great on PRe But we looked down our nose at it. We knew it was a ploy. Because when one penny is separating the party, what are you doing to do? Somebody's got to make the move then. So, anyway, that was a good experience.

DONAHOE

That was like the closest thing we've ever had to a general strike?

FIERING

General strike, yeah.

DONAHOE

All the basic industries were out and so many workers across the country.

FIERING

But the objective situation was just so favorable that it didn't take a hell of a lot to make industry pay them. And there were good contract terms in addition to the money.

DONAHOE

That were negotiated frOID this, yeah. And the involvement of the public was tremendous too. People were very sympathetic to the workers.

FIERING

And see, that was to a large degree, well, because labor was positioned well in the national community. And I've got to say it, Reuther did a hell of a good PR job. The "open the books" demand won a lot of sympathy and helped hold the workers in line.

DONAHOE

Yeah, GM was not looked upon as favorable.

FIERING

That's right. They had made a killing in the war.

DONAHOE

Yes. But that was so different in how the strikes were conducted in those days, like really involving the community and having rallies, picnics, and you know just-

FIERING

Well, it shows you another thing. See, look how the political differences served to split the unions apart rather than bring them together. What it did, it separated us further from UAW, which was really a sister union--the union closest to us. It gave ammunition to Reuther. It just intensified, used it to justify his red-baiting, so the UAW people could holler sellout. And it should have had just the reverse effect, if it had not been for the political differences.

DONAHOE

Yeah, because that was a point where there was a chance, like you said, to work really closely and start promoting a better unity and instead it--the steelworkers, don't think would have even gone along with it.

FIERING

Even where--You know, the thing about the Middle West, which was the industrial heartland of the country, you had UE, and steel, auto, rubber all within the same communities--close communities--and you couldn't get everybody working together in a strike at that time. They each did their own thing.

DONAHOE

Oh really? They didn't even work together in that way?

FIERING

There was no unified strategy in a sense. On the lower level there was no unity. I don't know to what degree there was on the top, but I think it was minimal. But there was certainly contact at the top because you had one CIO. And you might say that before Phil [Philip] Murray made a settlement, he probably called up everybody and said, "I'm ready to make a settlement on eighteen and a half. I'm going to make a settlement." He told the other unions. Just like Matles would have called Phil Murray and told anybody,

"Look, he's the president of the CIO." The UE would have done that just so we were sure we would have touched bases all around so that we can't be accused of going off and undercutting anybody. But that kind of thing was done. But I'm talking about the communities.

DONAHOE

Well, yeah, that's what I thought there was.

FIERING

You had no working together. You might have been thrown together in the Cla council and everybody was on strike there--you know, they had the delegates there--but in terms of like say one strike committee representing all the unions for the community-

DONAHOE

Well, see like in Los Angeles, which you know would be a different setup, but they were all out together here, and they did have joint rallies and more communication--the auto workers, steelworkers, UE-

FIERING

Not in '46.

DONAHOE

--in '46, yeah. Because I have the records that they had these joint rallies, but they had their separate strike committees.

FIERING

Well, you had to have strike committees anyway.

DONAHOE

Yeah, but they seemed like they worked together more than they ever did in later years.

FIERING

Well, you didn't have anything out here that affected anything in the Middle West or the East. Not as far as UE was concerned.

DONAHOE

Yeah, but I would think you would have so much-

FIERING

And not as far as [United] Auto Workers were concerned either. You had aircraft plants here, but was not the industrial heartland of the U.S. You had U.S. Motors here, but that had nothing to do with the national picture.

DONAHOE

Oh, yeah, but I just always thought that in that strike there was a lot of cooperation among the workers in the local.

FIERING

There may have been. The CIO setup here was left-leaning by the way. The CIO leadership here I think was somewhat to the left at that point in Los Angeles.

DONAHOE

So maybe they made more of an effort.

FIERING

But you see L.A., outside of the ILWU [International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union] and during the war years, the establishment of the aircraft plants--And, of course, you can't discount the machinists who were in the AF of L [Americ~n Federation of Labor]. They had no contract and they were competing with UAW. The coast was a farm area, an agricultural area. We didn't feel it. I don't know if there is anybody around from UE in that period. There were a couple of guys in the forties, but you didn't hear about California and UE back in the Middle West. There's nothing of significance.

DONAHOE

Oh, yeah, yeah. But the only point that I was surprised [about] was when you said that it wasn't a real concerted effort, that you didn't have that kind of cooperation. Because I thought in the forties it was different. Didn't UE make an attempt to reach out to other unions?

FIERING

Well, thinking back, my bailiwick was Ohio. We didn't because we didn't need to. Wherever we were we were the power. We were the big ones. Well, of course, in Cleveland you had everything. You had General Electric. You had General Motors, the Fisher Body plant for GM there. I don't remember--it's a long ago--if there was a Ford [Motor Company] plant there. You had a Fisher Body plant. [pause] That's the only big community I can think about where you might have had that kind of thing but I don't think that even there, there was the cooperation among the union management of each international. And where I worked--well, in Mansfield, Lima, Cincinnati, and Dayton, Ohio--there were big Westinghouse and General Motors plants. Warren, Ohio, a GM plant, we just ran our own shop. We didn't need anybody. So, you know, I'm not blaming them. There were political divisions that carried on all during the period when there was red-baiting, sharpened up during the war when Reuther became more and more of a factor in the UAW. But it helped to kind of make us feel self-sufficient. There was no need, put it that way. We didn't feel impelled to do it to survive. We were big enough to survive.

DONAHOE

But given your outlook-

FIERING

Take a town like Dayton--shoot, the whole population of the town was something like between three and four hundred thousand men, women, and children, and we had over thirty thousand out on the streets--thirty thousand workers. What do you need? We were a power in the town.

DONAHOE

But in terms of your outlook in promoting solidarity and all those kinds of things.

FIERING

We didn't think of--Well, that was one area of my own where I was very, let's just say unaware. I was really a, well you've heard the term, "economist." You know, that was me, really. My thing was bread and butter shop grievances, I didn't care too much for--Well, I supported it because I was the international rep in Ohio and all of that. But I knew my easiest way to go to protect my

union. And so I survived it. I just wasn't into the political thing. I did what had to be done, put it that way. Other people came forward politically with the political action. I helped them on whatever they needed to support them. But myself, I protected my union's economic position. That was my style. Other people went other ways. [pause] I regret it now, but-

DONAHOE

So in this period, like during the strike, each kind of union was just protecting its own?

FIERING

That's right. It had its own thing. And even though they worked in communities right adjoining each other or the same community, it did not happen. And, of course, it was a mistake on our part because we should have pushed for it. It would have gotten us closer to the other unions. It would have perhaps made our whole political relationship better too. We didn't.

DONAHOE

Okay, there's something else I want to ask you about that. Now how did this-

### **1.7. TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side Two (August 28, 1987)**

DONAHOE

So when did the southern organizing drive actually begin?

FIERING

Well, that began the middle of '46. Phil Murray was getting together the unions to penetrate the South. This was not long after the war, you know, and everything was on the upgrade and he figured that this was the time to crack the South. Thought that the South would receive the CIO the way the northern worker had received the CIO. So I was assigned by the UE to be part of the southern organizing drive. We had some budding key plants down there and some other industries down there. We had in Winston-Salem [North Carolina], not in Winston-Salem, but around the--Well, Western Electric was building some plants, one in Winston-Salem and one in I think it was Burlington, North Carolina.

DONAHOE

I was going to say North Carolina.

FIERING

And there was an RCA [Radio Corporation of America] plant in Virginia. There was the Union Carbide plant in Charlotte, North Carolina. There was the Singer [Company] plant in South Carolina. Some industry we had, but, of course, the idea was for cooperation among all the unions and doing everything they could do to organize. The main target was the textile mills. Murray assigned Van [A.] Bittner to head up the southern organizing drive.

DONAHOE

What's his first name?

FIERING

Van.

DONAHOE

Oh, that is his first name?

FIERING

Yeah.

DONAHOE

I thought that was his whole last name.

FIERING

I always thought that it was his last name, yeah.

DONAHOE

Van Bittner like Dutch.

FIERING

That's what he used to be called, Van Bittner like that was his last name. Somewhere I learned that Van was his first name. Bittner was his last name. This guy came out of the coal mines originally with [John L.] Lewis. But he

stayed with Murray when Lewis split with Murray. Lewis left the CIO. Oh, by the way, that reminds me. The guy whose name I [couldn't] remember--the guy who hired me in the CIO--his name was John Doherty.

DONAHOE

Okay.

FIERING

John Doherty. Later he moved to Chicago and became a member of the school board in Chicago. He has died since.

DONAHOE

So the CIO, their main emphasis was going to be to organize the textile mills in the South, but they wanted the cooperation of all the unions.

FIERING

They wanted the cooperation of the other unions too, but each of the unions had its own thing.

DONAHOE

Sure, sure.

FIERING

So I had a small staff down there with UE, four staffers and me. I was on the UE payroll, and I had a small staff with the UE. They brought in a couple of the natives, southerners. I was just a carpetbagger. So the campaign got going, but this guy, Bittner was just a lot of mouth. He just was lost for a guy to handle a campaign like that. His organizing abilities were really not up to it. He was just a narrow trade unionist, and that was not what was needed down South. At the time we needed somebody with real vision, a political guy who was of the caliber of Lewis if we really wanted to crack it. The South was just different. It's not the South of today. They tell me it's just completely different. When you crossed the MasonDixon line, you were in another country, just another country.

DONAHOE

Especially in those days.

FIERING

Having lived in the North all my life, the closest I got to the South was Saint Louis. And to go down there and see what they were doing down there, you know, the mores down there, the people down there--just another country. Not only did you have different kinds of people down there, you had the small-town southerner who was very narrow and bigoted. You had the hill people--the people who lived back in the hills who had a history all their own. It was fascinating history. It was just a fascinating experience for me, just a wonderful experience. I had some great experiences too. And so the UE was in the midst of organizing a plant that was a part of a big radio outfit in Chicago called Bassick-Sack, and there was a guy who had kept going from the North to the South, Will Bliss, who had already started organization there. I got there close to the time of an election so I participated with them. We won that election. The problem arose about--well, we negotiated the first contract for a year. What the hell was that radio company? It was a big radio company from Chicago. [Admiral Radio Company]

DONAHOE

You'll remember it later.

FIERING

Anyway, it was a subsidiary. And then we went on to Western Electric [Company, Inc.] where we lost. Well, the long and short of it was we lost the election at Western Electric. There were two plants involved--one in WinstonSalem, one in Burlington. The NLRB [National Labor Relations Board] ruled that both of them had to go together. We were strong in one plant, and we were weak in the other plant. To combine both is what killed us. We couldn't keep the voting separate. Then I was servicing this shop that we organized, a little metal plant that we organized in Winston-Salem, and traveling around to Virginia, Tennessee, South Carolina, Charlotte [North Carolina] and also cooperating with the Food, Tobacco, [Agricultural, and Allied Workers Union of America] workers, who were running into great difficulties 1n their contract negotiations, who had a contract with the [R. J.] Reynolds Tobacco Company which was running out. They were facing a very, very difficult situation. The FTA, which was also a part of the southern organizing job, had great difficulty in recruiting the white workers. You had a

plant--you know, they made Camel cigarettes--they had a plant with over 10,000 people, half of them black and half of them white. They finally got boxed into a corner and they called a strike and all 5,000 blacks walked out and about 128 whites. I'll never forget that number. Stalwarts, 128 whites. We played a role in that strike. When I say we, I mean my wife and myself. I did, my wife volunteered. But I played a role consistently because it was a part of the CIO. And we were a part of one of the most fascinating strikes I ever saw. People were organizing on the basis of their churches on their picket lines. That's how they held the picket lines for--let's see, how long they were out? They were out for at least a couple of months.

DONAHOE

That long?

FIERING

Oh, maybe more. They were solid, solid. Was my wife--? My wife was not on the staff at the time. And then she was put on the staff. She took over the servicing for that metal plant for a while. But, anyway, the strike was finally settled--the Reynolds strike was finally settled but a weak contract. The company gave them a contract and they figured it would take another year to tear them apart, which was what happened.

DONAHOE

Now, those other like almost 4,000 white workers-

FIERING

Five thousand white workers.

DONAHOE

Well, I would say that about 128 went out so-

FIERING

Minus 128.

DONAHOE

Yeah, whatever. Were they scabbing all this time?

FIERING

Yeah.

DONAHOE

And you still were able to stay out for a couple of months.

FIERING

Oh yeah. See, that's the peculiarity, because it was not just a strike. As far as the black workers and, well, the white workers, too, it was not just a strike over wages, hours, and conditions. It was a race-related strike, too. Racial issues ran very, very deep on both sides. What the black workers were fighting for was some measure of equality. And that's what kept them out. I tell you, there's no place I know that I would rather go on strike with a bunch of workers than in the South. Once those workers--either white or black--make up their minds, they really want to fight. When they make up their minds, they will starve before they go back. Anyway, the picket line used to bring people from miles around. The way in which they held those picket lines--And they were mass picket lines all the way through. During that period, Paul Robeson came down, Woody Guthrie came down. Well, they would come down just to keep our spirits up anyway in the South. But it assumed political proportions because of the black-white issue. I've got a picture of a picket line somewhere around here, one of the picket lines. The leading church elder or preacher would be in the middle of the picket line and the people from that church would hold a certain gate. That is the way the gates were held all the way around. And they would chant slogans or church songs which were oriented to union songs. It was the most moving experience. Not only blacks came down, whites came down from miles around to see those picket lines. But you couldn't budge the whites out. They were afraid more than anything. Not that they didn't realize the need for support for the strike, but they were afraid and it was the race issue that divided them. Well, anyway, they finally settled the strike.

DONAHOE

Even with the majority of whites staying inside?

FIERING

With the whites staying in. They got a contract. The contract was a weak one, and it really gave the company a lot of concessions which enabled them to make inroads into the union over a period of the next year or two, and eventually, of course, they destroyed the union. It is destroyed to this day. They never could rebuild it. But, meantime back at the ranch, the UE plant in Bassick-Sack was another kind of example of black-white relationships. We had a young president there who was white. Well, first of all the organizing of the plant and the formulation of the first contract was a real experience for me. It was different. Everything was segregated. That was the custom, segregation. As a matter of fact, even with the unions, they didn't meet together in one hall. The machinists, for instance, would have separate local unions for blacks and whites. The landmark decision on the, what do you call it, fair practices?

DONAHOE

Not the fair employment practices?

FIERING

Not the fair employment practices, but I forget and I teach the goddamn thing. I forget what it is, what the initials are. It came out of a fight, a decision in 1944 from the U.S. Supreme Court involving the machinists where they had separate locals for blacks and for whites, and separate seniority lists. The whole grievance setup was based on you had to be a white. If you were black from Local B then you had to go to a white steward in Local A to handle the grievance. As a result--the case was Steele v. Louisville National Railroad. The union was a machinist union [International Association of Machinists]. And Steele was a black worker who decided to challenge it, and he did and successfully. And in '44 there was a U.S. Supreme court decision which determined it was an unfair labor practice. If it wasn't corrected, the machinists were told they would lose their bargaining rights. So they integrated--nominally anyway. But that was the pattern throughout the South. Interestingly, that decision, the duty of fair representation, has had impact on the labor movement to this day.

DONAHOE

But the CIO unions weren't organized like that, were they?

FIERING

That's right.

DONAHOE

They were?

FIERING

Yeah. When we organized, we had a policy and that is, there's no segregation, no separation. If you want to organize with the CIO, everybody met in one hall, and everybody was in one local, and everybody was covered by one and the same contract. When we organized this Bassick-Sack thing--and then the same experience--and went into the contract negotiations, I was handling the contract negotiations by this time. Will Bliss had already gone back North. When we called meetings of the workers, the people would come in--and this went on during the organizing drive, but it really was a process--blacks would sit on one side of the room and whites would sit on the other side of the room. We didn't say anything, we just let people sit wherever they wanted to sit. We didn't make a point of saying--All we did was provide the hall. No segregation. But they segregated themselves. So you hold a meeting like that--this is an interesting process--you hold a meeting like that and you involve people in discussions. Minimal discussions from the black side, most of the discussions from the white side. In successive meetings, you'd gradually see the blacks would then move into the same section with the whites, but they would sit at the back of them. The whites would be sitting at the front on both sections of the hall. Gradually, over a period of time, the blacks moved forward and it became mixed.

DONAHOE

Integrated finally.

FIERING

It was a remarkable process for me to sit back and watch that. I had never seen that before.

DONAHOE

How long did it take?

FIERING

It took the period of the formulation of the contract in negotiations.

DONAHOE

It would be like months.

FIERING

Well, it didn't take months. I would say it took--during that period everything was telescoped--so it took about, thinking back, five, six weeks. Not too long, but you're holding meetings, you know, regularly. And you're throwing these people together much more frequently than they have ever been thrown--they had never been thrown together before, see. So we had a young guy who was the president of the local, a young white guy, by the name of Matthews. And, I would start to work on him on the blackwhite issue, very gently. I would get into discussions with him to get close to him, and I would use the occasion, whenever I could create it, to point out to him why it is that races are separated. The basis was economic, couldn't let that happen, it hurt them. I didn't push hard, just very, very gently. But I maintained good regular contact with him visiting him at his home. And we became rather close that way. And I would be doing a job with the management so and he was there. And he liked the job I was doing, so there was a certain degree of friendliness, you know. He accepted what I had to say. He didn't agree with me, but he accepted it. He found it hard to accept, but he listened to what I had to say. He found it difficult to accept. But I kept pecking away and pecking away. You never know what's going to happen. In the plant, we had another white guy who was the chief steward. This guy was the son of people who had participated in the Gastonia strike. Have you ever heard of the 1929 Gastonia strike, North Carolina? It was a terrific strike in the Gastonia Mills. It was led by the left wing, by the way, 1929.

DONAHOE

So really early, right.

FIERING

Yeah, and he was just a little kid at the time. But he remembers his parents' participation in that strike. And, of course, the left wing was very strong on

the racial issue. You never know how it is going to affect the kid. Now he has grown to manhood and here he is in this shop, he's one of our leading people, and he's elected chief steward. And he's telling me the story about Gastonia. We get to talking about racial issues and his attitude on the racial question is pretty fair, you know. But how do you know until you test it out? During the course of the enforcement of the life of the contract, an issue arose involving a promotion. Now, it was an almost unwritten law that no matter what a contract was like, when jobs opened for promotions, they were high-rated jobs that a white would qualify for the job and a foreman would appoint a white to the job. It was based on the condition set out in the contract which might have involved seniority and so on and so forth. So I also established good contact with a black guy who was the leader of the blacks, but he was a janitor. I forgot the chief steward's name, but I remember the black's name. Oh, I wish I remembered his name. He was such a beautiful gem. But the black guy was Robinson; he was a preacher. Very quiet, unassuming man. But he was a janitor in the plant like the other blacks who worked on the menial jobs. So a job opened up on the production line. I went to this guy Robinson and I says, "Listen, Robbie, why don't you file for that job? Go ahead and do it." [He was] very fearful about it. I kept pushing and pushing him. Finally, he did it; he filed for the job. So when he filed for the job, Christ, the foreman nearly went crazy. What does he do? Because he was in line for the job. I told him, "Look, you are in line for the job. The contract gives you the right. We don't have any discrimination in the contract. Why don't you try it?" And, with him, it was more than just trying it, because they had a lot to be afraid of as well as trying. And do you get past that fear? Anyway, he filed for the job. When he filed for the job, shoot, that foreman went nuts. So I had a talk with the chief steward who was the contract enforcer. And we had an understanding that he was going to support this guy. And the question was how do you support him. Well, once Robbie made the first move, then the foreman went around, and he got a petition up, and he went around to every worker in the department. The petition said we don't want this guy to work with us. He went to every worker in the department one by one and asked them for their signatures on the petition. And when he started to do that, this chief steward went with him. He wasn't asked, but he went with him. And as the foreman went to the guy to talk about putting his name on the petition, the chief steward says, "Don't put your name on the petition."

DONAHOE

So, he did come through.

FIERING

He came through.

DONAHOE

Strong.

FIERING

Very strong. Not only that, but he was so successful, the guy couldn't get one signature on the petition.

DONAHOE

That's incredible .

FIERING

And that settle d that issue.

DONAHOE

So Robinson-

FIERING

He got the job. The first breakthrough for-

DONAHOE

Wow, fantastic.

FIERING

--integration on the job. But that plant offered some-

DONAHOE

Some lessons.

FIERING

--real lessons on what could be done with people if you work closely with them. Then we went into the second contract negotiations. And it was a hot negotiations.

DONAHOE

What year are you in by now?

FIERING

'Forty-seven.

DONAHOE

Now you're up to '47.

FIERING

'Forty-seven. This was also the year in which the FTA strike took place. This was a hell of a year. The contract negotiations went around and around and around and people came in from Chicago, the head honchos from the main plant in Chicago, who were not hung up on discrimination really. It wasn't their bag, because Chicago was different. It was a northern city, and this was already the forties, and they had gone through the experiences of the war and everything. We wound up the contract one time I think it was four or five o'clock in the morning. The first shift was scheduled to go on at something like seven o'clock. The day before the workers had made the decision they weren't going into work the next morning. They were going to set up a picket line and they weren't going to start the work until they had a chance to vote on the contract. Well, the contracts wound up at five o'clock; we all stayed over for the next hour or two hours. As people came to find out what to do, we says, "We wound up the contract, but we told the management that nobody was going into work until one o'clock. So that gives us a chance to meet, review the contract and ratify it." And everybody was happy with that decision. We didn't have to start picketing. So about nine o'clock we went up to the FTA hall and we had our meeting and the contract was accepted. It was a good contract, but it didn't take long. It was a good contract so it didn't take a hell of a lot of debate. People then started to walk into the plant, you know, after twelve o'clock, twelve thirty, to start work at one o'clock. I went home and went to bed. I get a telephone call from this Matthews, the president of the

local. He goes, "Henry, we got some problems down here. We want you down here right away." I said, "What's the matter?" He said, "Come on down, I'll tell you about it." So I got dressed and went down to the shop. And I found out what happened was that everybody had started to work, but there were three blacks who had come in late and the company had fired them. So Matthews greets me and he says, "I'm telling you now we are not going back to work unless those three black guys go back with us." The whole plant shut down.

DONAHOE

And he wasn't black.

FIERING

He was not black. As a matter of fact, next to the Reynolds, he was a descendant of one of the largest slave-owning families in that area in North Carolina. So his racial roots ran deep, they ran deep. I should have mentioned that before. This was a guy who had deep feelings about the race issue, and here he is telling me we are not going back to work unless they go back to work. See the issue was not really just the blacks then. It got mixed up with other issues. It was not just his responsibility to all the workers, which he had and which he felt, it was a question of his own integrity. He was the leader of the union, and the company was doing this not just to the blacks, but they're doing it to the union of which he is the president, see. So those issues get mixed up, and, in this case, in a beneficial way.

DONAHOE

Oh, I know, it's good.

FIERING

See. But he's telling me we are not going back unless they go back with us. Okay, I accept anything he tells me. I says, "Okay, let's go back in there and have a meeting with the management." (And people from Chicago were still in town.) So we go back in--the whole committee--and we're talking to the management and I just turned it over to him, and he lays the law down to the management: they're not going back unless these guys go back. So everybody asks for a caucus. The company wants a caucus, we say, "Okay, we'll go outside and caucus." We come back in the company says, "Well, okay, I'll tell

you what we decided. Instead of them being fired, we will give them two days off." We said, "That's not good enough." We said, "They're going back with us." So we fight some more and argue some more and it went back and forth. And the company says, "We'll take another caucus." We come back in and the company says, "Well, we decided we are going to take them back, but we are going to give them the rest of the day off. That's their penalty." They came back somewhat drunk, by the way; that was the other thing. People had nothing to do, you know, they had nothing to do the rest of that morning, so they went into a bar. So he says, "We're just going to give them the rest of the day off without pay. That's their penalty." So he [the local president] says, "That won't do. They got to come back the way we came back if you want us to come back." So we went at it again. Another caucus. And finally the company caved in. It was a tremendous victory. Tremendous victory.

DONAHOE

That is. That's incredible for such a short period of time.

FIERING

That's right. That's right. But it shows what can happen, what you can do with people. And I send that up as a lesson to people about southerners.

DONAHOE

So you had some very successful experiences.

FIERING

This was in the forties. Now, it just served to entrench our union all the better in the shop. In '47, in that year, there was an election in Winston-Salem for the city council. A black ran by the name of Williams for the city council.

DONAHOE

For the city council, boy.

FIERING

We succeeded in getting the whites involved in this election campaign, women and men. My wife did most of that. She was a poll watcher. And she got some of the women involved in poll watching for this guy--and some of

the men--and he was elected. It was the first black elected to a public office since Reconstruction in the South.

DONAHOE

Now, what town was this?

FIERING

Winston-Salem.

DONAHOE

Winston-Salem, that's a pretty big place.

FIERING

Yeah, the first black since Reconstruction. That to me was a historical event and that we participated the way we did and that we got these whites to participate.

DONAHOE

Wow. Now, how long were you there all together?

FIERING

I was there two years.

DONAHOE

Just two years.

FIERING

Yeah, because there wasn't much for us in the electrical industry down there. We had lost the Western Electric shop.

DONAHOE

Yeah.

FIERING

But then we went through another experience. There was a--Oh, I traveled around. South Carolina, I went down to a little town called Pickens. Now, you know, Pickens is named after General Pickens of the Confederate army, which is

right outside Greenville, South Carolina. There was a Singer [Sewing Company] sewing machine shop down there, which was a subsidiary of Singer Sewing in Cleveland. And we, one guy or two guys, had written our national office a letter about UE, so I went down there to check it out. And I got down there, it was just very shortly like a matter of less than two weeks after a lynching had taken place. And that's another thing. You walk into a town where there's a lynching and the atmosphere is just thick, just thick, a horrible experience. It was a lynching that made the papers nationwide. I forget the name of the guy who was lynched, but it was in Pickens and the atmosphere was just indescribably heavy, it was very heavy. So I went in very quietly and unobtrusively, made no noise, you know. I made contact with one of the guys whose name had. He came to see me and I gave him the name of the second guy and they said they were going to let me know, they were going to get back in touch with me. I stayed at the hotel. They came back, I think it was one or two days later. They says, "Oh, we were contacted by the Ku Kluxers [Ku Klux Klan] and they sent you a message." They said, "Pack your saddle bags and get out of here right now." I had no base there. They advised, "Get the hell out. Get out." So I did. I had no base, nothing to fight with. I wasn't about to make any noise or be a hero by myself, so I got out. But that's an experience, I just had to relate that in. The way he carried the message to me: "Pack your saddle bags. Get out." I won't forget the phrasing.

DONAHOE

And didn't say carpetbagger?

FIERING

He didn't say carpetbagger. I can't forget the phrasing that he used. "Pack your saddle bags." Anyway, we had another plant we were organizing up in--what do you call it--Pulaski.

DONAHOE

Pulaski?

FIERING

Virginia.

DONAHOE

Oh, Virginia.

FIERING

That's in the western corner of Virginia.

DONAHOE

I was thinking of Michigan.

FIERING

If you know anything about that country, that's the hill country. Fascinating people, fascinating country, beautiful country. RCA [Corporation] owned that plant. They were using the plant to build cabinets, radio cabinets, because we didn't have TV yet then, see. So I had a guy in there, and he started to make a break in there in signing some people up and the organization started to move along. The thing about the area was it was an agricultural area, and it was set in a walnut forest. That's what was being used to make cabinets; they were making walnut cabinets. When we got along to filing a petition for an election, we filed the petition for an election. But before we filed a petition for an election, while we are struggling to get to a majority--It was right over the hill, right over the Blue Ridge Mountains from, you know that cuts off Virginia from the Piedmont section of North Carolina. Well, I was in and out of the place in the organizing drive. Finally, one day I get a call from this guy who was in there helping. He says to me--he lived with me in Winston-Salem also--no, it wasn't from him, it was one of the workers who called me at home on a Sunday. He says, "You better get in here. I says, "What's the matter?" He says, "Well, we just got a copy of the Sunday newspaper and there's a big article about you in it." I said, "Okay." I got an idea what it was about if he said it was about me. I hightailed it in there and I take a look at that paper. It was a full-page ad put in by some rump group with my name right in the middle, a big box, and [it reads], "This man is a well-known communist. He is in our town now." A whole page.

DONAHOE

Ad?

FIERING

Yeah, it was an ad. It was in the newspaper.

DONAHOE

Sounds like a wanted sign.

FIERING

It was, but here's this-

DONAHOE

Not a picture?

FIERING

And not a picture. They didn't have a picture of me. What do you do? This is a town which if you know--do you know anything about the hill people in the South?

DONAHOE

Just that they keep to themselves and they have their own set of rules.

FIERING

Very much. They have their own set of rules, keep to themselves--Well, you know where they're from. They are people who were descendants of indentured servants who escaped. They ran away from the East and hid back in the hills where nobody could find them. They raised families generation after generation there since the period before the reVOlution. And they have their own mores, their own code, you know.

DONAHOE

I know. They don't even recognize the laws of the government.

FIERING

They are highly individualistic, highly independent and keep to themselves. Difficult to get next to. But if you ever win their loyalty, they will absolutely do anything for you. But winning their loyalty is very important. They are very suspicious of outsiders, let alone being a northerner--very suspicious. Anyway, so here's an area whether you are either--there's no middle class. You are either very rich, or you're very poor. That's where I learned how to drink white lightning.

DONAHOE

Is that the homemade?

FIERING

That's homemade brew. Also, homemade beer, too; they make their own beer too. I've never drank it before. But I developed a certain loyalty among the members, because we had a pretty good campaign going.

DONAHOE

You were by yourself?

FIERING

Well, I had this one guy who was with me who was on the UE staff in the South. He also went in there, but the responsibility was mainly mine. It was not my assignment, I took whatever--This was a key plant, so I had to take it on by myself. But I was responsible, and I was the one attacked when the attacks came.

## **1.8. TAPE NUMBER: V, Side One (August 28, 1987)**

DONAHOE

Did the workers call you in?

FIERING

Yeah. This was after the war. A number of the people had become a little more sophisticated and recognized there was an outside world. I think somebody there made contact with our national office and that's how we got our first contact in the plant. I don't think it was a case where the national office knew of all the RCA [Corporation] plants and sent us in cold. I don't think that was the case. I think we had a connection there, somewhere to start with.

DONAHOE

You went there. You must have contacted somebody.

FIERING

Sometimes you didn't. I've gone into towns where I didn't know anybody and walked up to a plant--during the war--walked up to a plant, made my contact right there and then, and went from there. When I walked away, there was a contract in the shop. I've had that kind of experience too.

DONAHOE

But this is so unusual. I mean these kind of people.

FIERING

These kind of people--it would be unusual, yeah. We must have had a contact that had been sent to us.

DONAHOE

So you remember working with some of the people?

FIERING

Oh, yeah. Well, we had to build a union. Wherever we started from, we had to do it with the people. We built an organization a certain way. You get the people together. You get a committee together. You start organizing. You develop your committee; you develop organizational departments. Build as you go. But the area itself was a typical hill country area. The community itself--the area was either rich, and you had enough money, or poor. Workers were paid miserably. The plant manager had previously owned the plant and sold out to RCA. In return for which he got not only money for the plant, but he got a guarantee of a job as manager of the plant for a number of years, which later became a pattern in a lot of industries. Interestingly, when this son of a bitch came into town, people had to get off the sidewalk to make room for him. Now, that's literally true. It sounds ridiculous today, but literally true. People were scared to death of this guy.

DONAHOE

He was like nobility.

FIERING

That's right. He was the nobility. And you had a Republican and Democratic Party that were controlled by the same people. It didn't make any difference. Same people controlled both parties. So they had a monopoly on the

situation. We had to confront that one time. We had a meeting talking about that. Of course, by the time we got through with that bastard, he was afraid to come into town. But that's another story. We'll talk about that later. Anyway, here I am. Suddenly, I get this telephone call to come in, so I came into the town. See, I'm not trying to politicize this much at all. I'm just really giving you my own personal—I'm aware of that. I don't know if that's really—

DONAHOE

No, this is good because it's giving me specifics, too.

FIERING

So this was a Sunday, April 12. God, I remember that date. Because I'm thinking about what the hell can we do to counter this thing. This was Sunday. We had to counter it right away, because the guy told me that it's having an effect throughout the area, throughout the town. When you holler "communism," they didn't know how to spell it. But they knew the word, you know, and it created all kinds of feelings among them.

DONAHOE

This is the ad.

FIERING

This is the ad, right. And I had to do something immediately. So April 13 was Jefferson's birthday. That's how I remember. It was April 12, the phone call from Pulaski; it was my daughter [Maxine Fiering DeFelice]'s birthday. I had to leave her birthday party. April 13 was Jefferson's birthday, and Jefferson was a hero in Virginia. He still is, he was always. So I immediately rushed to the radio station and logged on some time the following day. It was the first opportunity I ever had to answer. I stayed there that day and wrote a speech that I was to deliver on the radio the next day. The speech centered around Jefferson, Jeffersonian democracy, the fight against colonialism, the role of big corporations in the North coming down to the South and raping the South of their wealth and taking profits back to the North while they were paying workers in the South low wages. The impact of that speech is one have never experienced before and haven't experienced since, and I don't know of anybody that has. There was only the one radio station in the area. They were

telling me after it was over that people in the restaurants, people in the poolhalls, people everywhere, whatever they were doing, they stopped doing it to listen to the speech. It was one of those unforgettable events in my life. Whatever they were doing, everything stopped in the town to listen to that speech. When I got through and I left the radio station and started walking through the town, everybody in the town was going like this [raises a clenched fist].

DONAHOE

Really?

FIERING

[laughter] Honestly to God. It was the damnedest thing I ever saw. Damnedest thing I ever saw. Christ, there wasn't enough they could do for me. It just struck such a responsive chord. From that time on, we just kept rolling. We got a majority, and we filed a petition for an election. During the course of the hearing with the [National] Labor [Relations] Board examiner I pulled a ploy--a stupid mistake. I decided to put some pressure on the company and on the examiner and suggested to people that they slow down and start moving towards the hearing room to put pressure on to get an election right away. Because the company was going to stall us while they were going to tear us apart. If you know anything about labor board procedures at that time, they didn't have to consent to an election. They could delay it. In order to ask for a hearing--The hearing takes time. In the meantime, they were tearing the hell out of the union. We wanted to avoid that. We felt by putting pressure on, we could get them to consent to an election immediately. Well, that was really a blunder. The result of which was the company decided they had the sympathy of the examiner, because she wasn't about to be pushed around either. And they saw that, and they fired 163 people. So here I am with 163 people fired, and the examiner didn't even continue to hear the meeting. She adjourned the meeting. So, we didn't have a hearing either.

DONAHOE

Why did they fire them?

FIERING

Because they left their jobs without permission.

DONAHOE

I see.

FIERING

It was a stoppage of work. Unauthorized. In a way, of course, I suppose it could have been considered legal if they had walked out. But we weren't in a position to fight that issue at the time because nobody was thinking of a strike. So we had to do something with 163 people. Well, what could you do? The only thing you could do--it was all or nothing. So we called a strike. The rest of the people said we've got to support those people. The only way they could support them was to walk out. If we hadn't, we would have lost the plant. The plant employed almost 1,000 people, which was a big plant at that size.

DONAHOE

So you were backed into that action.

FIERING

I was really backed into a corner. So we played the militant role, and we say we're going to go out to support them and all of that, and we did. We walked out; we shut the plant down. After a couple of days, however, the company was working, and these people had got frightened and some of them started to go back. Within about two or three days, they had about 300 of those people back at work. We had everybody out, see. They had about 300 of them back at work, and I had to make some decisions. Because if it was going to go on as it was, the whole strike was going to deteriorate. Break up and the union with it. But fortunately, the way we had built our union, we built our union on a good solid basis, the way you organize. You set up an organization, you get leadership and a department, another organization with a leadership, and tie them together. You wanted to know how you build a union. [It] stands you in good stead under all circumstances. Inside the shop and out, you can fight anytime, see. You don't just sign people up on cards, but you're fighting for conditions at the same time. That's how you build a union.

DONAHOE

An involvement.

FIERING

An involvement. That's involvement. How else can you win?

DONAHOE

Exactly.

FIERING

So we had a good solid organization. We had about forty stewards in that shop. I called a meeting of the stewards. I says, "Look, let's try this strategy. If we continue on the outside, we're going to lose this thing. The only way we can fight is on the inside." I suggested the following. I says, "You guys who are the key guys should go back into work. After you guys go into work, we'll send the rest of the people back into work. But, before you guys go back into work, we're going to clean up some of these guys who scabbed. And they had Virginia police allover the goddamn--Virginia State Police, you may have heard about them. You don't hear about them today, but they were rough, rough, rough. We had some arguments on the picket line. Christ, they'd come with shotguns. They don't just come there with their pistols in their [hands]. They come with shotguns. And they collar a couple of people. I come running over, and I want to defend those people. So they took me down for--first of all, they threatened to kill me. Pointed their goddamn shotguns. Then they took me in for about fifteen minutes, and they released me soon enough. But they let me know quickly if I stepped out of line once, that was going to be my finish. And they could get away with it. At that time, it was like the Pennsylvania Coal and Iron Police in the thirties and the pre-thirties, they could kill anybody with impunity.

DONAHOE

Right.

FIERING

They were rough. It was frightening. Anyway, so we got the thing set up so that when these stewards went back in, we had shown some strengths. We cleaned up on some of them so that when our people went back in they went back in on a high note. I also advised the stewards to be friendly to everyone

and build bridges. And then the next day, we called everybody together and we says, "NOW, you guys go back in. We're going to carryon this fight inside the shop." And everybody marched back into the plant, see, except the 163 people. But it was upbeat, see, because of what they had done the day before. We had our leadership all set as to what to do, and they carried on the fight from the inside and the company continued producing. But they couldn't ,get anything satisfactory off the end of the assembly line. People went in. They used knives for one reason or another, and they had some other tools. And as those cabinets came down the line they were smashed to bits, and the company used to sell them for firewood. They couldn't use them; they couldn't produce. This went on for about two or three weeks and the company was tearing its hair out. They finally approached the union for a settlement. They wanted to settle. They agreed to reinstate the 163 people, and they agreed to an election. [laughs] With that bit of news, our guys went back. The 163 people went back, and we had a consent election a week or two later by the labor board. No hearing. And we won the election 839 to 3.

DONAHOE

To 31

FIERING

To 3. And nobody figured there was even going to be three people against the union. And they found out who the three people were because two of them had to sit there and represent the--When you give out ballots and count the ballots, you have to be on both sides of the fence: one representing either a neutral party or no union, and one representing the union. They found out one of them that way, and then they found out in the shop who the other two were. The next morning after the election they met them at the door coming into the plant, gave them their walking papers, turned them around, and sent them home. But that was the election, 839 to 3. However, before that, we had to take on both political parties. We thought we could at least work with the Democratic Party in there. But the Democratic Party was no different than the Republican Party. They were controlled by the same people. We tried to get a meeting hall. They had a community center that was built by--I forget whether it was donated by the Republican or Democratic Party. I think it was the Democratic Party. We thought we could get that. So we made arrangements

for that for a meeting hall during the course of this whole organizing thing. We get up to the meeting hall and we found out somebody had come there earlier and had asked for the key. Said he was from the meeting and absconded with the key and had put an announcement on the radio that the meeting was postponed. And we're there and hardly anybody shows up. What the hell do you do? So we had tremendous sympathy in the area because of that radio speech. That radio speech was just-mean, I'm telescoping things and moving events one ahead of the other. These instances, they rise in my mind. They're so memorable. We had one old guy who was the father of one of the workers who went up and down--what do you call the "hollers" [hollows among the hills], the hills hollering--He had a general store. Picture a general store with a little potbellied stove in the middle. A little potbellied stove there and all the candies, groceries, and everything around it. And he went up and down those hills hollering [that] there was going to be a union meeting tonight at "my general store." And finally, he got a meeting together for us. It was very helpful organization--to talk to people just before the elections. It was one of those memorable events. By the time we got through, that plant manager-- Oh, one of the conditions of the settlement here was--Like I told you when they settled my strike in my plant, they wouldn't have me back. One of the conditions RCA insisted on imposing when the election was over and the contract was going to be negotiated, I would not be in the negotiations.

DONAHOE

They wanted to get rid of you.

FIERING

They wanted to get rid of me. The international-

DONAHOE

But you wouldn't be part of the negotiations.

FIERING

I would not be a part of the negotiations. The international agreed to that. They found it very easy to agree to that.

DONAHOE

How did you feel?

FIERING

I felt lousy about it.

DONAHOE

Especially negotiating the contract.

FIERING

There was nothing I could do about it.

DONAHOE

Did you work with the people who negotiated? Did they allow that

FIERING

Of course. I worked with them. I still was working with the local union, but [1 was] going in and out of Pulaski.

DONAHOE

Because you knew the people.

FIERING

I knew the people. But that didn't [matter]. I wasn't down there much longer after that anyway, and I had other places I had to go. Anyway, I made a lot of friends there. It lasted for quite a while.

DONAHOE

One thing, I just wanted to ask. Like these are really memorable experiences. You really made tremendous breakthroughs with all these different examples. How do you think they were able to sustain a lot of these things. Were you able to find out afterward? FIERING Yes, yes. I think where I built the union, I can say this, where I built the union, where the plants survived, the union survived. Pretty much everywhere that I built a union.

DONAHOE

It seemed like you were building things with the idea of you leaving and them being able to carryon after you left, which is the strongest way to build it.

FIERING

I think I can say wherever I built a union, the union survived. Now, it may not have always been the UE [United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America]. A lot of the unions took off after the split on the red-baiting issue.

DONAHOE

That's true. That happens later.

FIERING

This was one of those plants. Matter of fact, on the racial issue, this was an all-white area, all-white manned. I understand a couple of years later they brought some blacks into the plant. A few people raised an awful rumpus. But that was not even an issue when I was there. There was not a black in the region.

DONAHOE

Because they were all people that lived there.

FIERING

That's right. So I said that plant manager who was king before this all started, he didn't show his face at all in town when it was allover. People would walk up to him and spit in his face. People who were fearful. What a change in the people.

DONAHOE

Well, did they make any impact with the political parties after that?

FIERING

I don't know. That I don't know. Because by that time I was gone. They probably had an impact. But it would be speculation somewhat, of course. They were a strong, strong bunch of people. When I got through with them, you could imagine what the experiences they had been through, the struggles. What a strong bunch of people. Focus, perhaps a little narrow, but it was inevitable when you're participating in a community that you're not going to be involved in from the community level. We succeeded in recruiting some CP [Communist Party] people out of it. But how lasting that was, it's hard to say. I think in a couple of instances it was lasting. A couple of people took off from there, moved to other places. Otherwise, it's hard to say.

DONAHOE

So, when you left this town, were you still in the South?

FIERING

Yeah.

DONAHOE

So you just moved on. FI~RING: See, I'm picking some of these experiences which were particularly memorable.

DONAHOE

They had many important lessons.

FIERING

: But, not necessarily in order. One other experience I had in the plant in Tennessee--Bristol, Tennessee. A plant where we also had one contact. Somehow, we got his name. I went and I organized the plant. It was a small plant about seventy-five to one hundred people.

DONAHOE

What kind of plant was it?

FIERING

It was an electrical [plant]. It made some metal-

DONAHOE

It wasn't like RCA?

FIERING

No, no it was not a big plant. But the employer when he first heard the union was coming, that was UE, he really took out after us and he conducted a vicious redbaiting campaign. My name was involved. I became the target of that campaign. The question was--Then all of a sudden he felt strong enough, as we were approaching the election--as we were approaching the period when we could have an election--to issue a public challenge to me to debate him in front of all the workers. What do I do? I knew how he had built up to it,

had built a terrific redbaiting campaign. He figured he had people all ready to hang me. So the only thing I could do was accept or else run away, one of the two. I said I'm not going to run away. I'm going to meet him on his own terms, something I hadn't done before, but I figured anything goes in this case. So he's sitting there, he and I in front of the whole shop and the workers, and he's saying to me, "Well, do you want to speak first, or do you want me to speak first?" I said [to myself] I'm throwing down the ground rules so this guy can't--"I'll speak first." So I got up and I spoke. And, I did the reverse red-baiting job on that son of a bitch. That bastard, he could barely crawl out of that goddamn meeting. I just tore him up. I'd say it was not a positive approach. On that issue, it was a negative [approach]. It was kind of reverse red-baiting. When we had the election, we just won it hands down. After we won the election, this guy was so humiliated he closed the shop. [laughter] He closed the shop. That was an experience. But, on the other hand, there was a radio subsidiary [Magnavox Company] in Johnson City, Tennessee, where the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] had signed up some people, and then I learned about it and I wanted to go in there, because it would have belonged to the UE had I gone in there. I confronted the management, I say, "I'm from the CIO." He knew the difference between the CIO and the UE. He stalled me, on the understanding that I would be back. When came back, he had his workers all organized, and they met me in front of the shop. That was an experience where I learned that I could run backwards as fast as I could run frontwards. [laughter] I had to talk my way out of that one to get out with my skin alive. That was a rough experience. But I survived it. And we lost it; we didn't even make it. In fact, that plant then remained unorganized until after 1950 when the IUE [International Union of Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers] eventually organized it.

DONAHOE

A long time.

FIERING

A long time, yeah. This was the beginning of 1948, end of '47. Then we had another bad experience. The same goddamn thing with us in the Union Carbide [Corporation] plant in Charlotte, North Carolina. The CIO filed a

petition when we weren't ready, and that was another plant that should not have been lost.

DONAHOE

Under what grounds were they organizing, under the general CIO? Didn't you have to have a specific union within the CIO?

FIERING

Not necessarily.

DONAHOE

Oh, I didn't know that.

FIERING

You could sign them up on CIO cards, and the CIO could file, or any union with the CIO could file on behalf of the CIO.

DONAHOE

I didn't know that the CIO-

FIERING

Or they filed on the behalf of us as the CIO. On this particular thing-

DONAHOE

They filed on behalf of the union.

FIERING

And it was accepted by the NLRB. But you see the schism had already been growing at that time. And this guy by the name of [Bill] Smith was the regional director for [Philip] Murray down there. He was arrogant as hell. When I found out, I called [James J.] Matles. I remember Matles was furious. I called him up, but he couldn't do anything. He [Smith] told Matles to go to hell.

DONAHOE

So they were doing that on a regular basis.

FIERING

They did it with me in that case.

DONAHOE

In Tennessee, too

FIERING

Well, I don't know who they were doing it with. In Tennessee, they didn't do it to me. It was a bad situation. It was getting worse and worse and worse. Well, on the whole, the UE stake in the South was minimal, and we thought it was going to grow, because we thought there was going to be a big shift in industry in that period in the South. There was, but it came later. It was a little premature. There was a large shift in industry. Matter of fact, a big shift came I think in the fifties when General Electric [Company] opened up a big appliance plant in Kentucky. That was the beginning of the shift. It was a little premature in the forties. It wasn't as big a stake as we thought. There wasn't that much there in terms of anything that was basic to us. What might have been basic might have been--Well, the RCA plant was important. That was important because it was part of our national RCA setup. And the Western Electric [Company, Inc.] plant might have been important. But we didn't have--By the way, Western Electric would have been a break for us in the Western Electric chain. It would have given us a foothold in AT&T [American Telephone and Telegraph Company]. I think the IBEW [International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers] was the big union in Western Electric up until that time in the North. We thought if we had gotten down there early, we might have been able to block out the IBEW, and we might have been able to make some mileage.

DONAHOE

But then you never did?

FIERING

We did not. No, we didn't get it.

DONAHOE

Later it became CWA [Communications Workers of America].

FIERING

It probably may have become CWA, yes. CWA and IBEW, that's right, controlled the Western Electric section.

DONAHOE

Was that Joseph Bierne?

FIERING

Joe Bierne. That's right. I forgot about their role in this thing. They were not on the ballot, I don't believe. I think it was a yes or no. But, in any event, we didn't get it.

DONAHOE

Yeah, that's why I was surprised when you mentioned Western Electric, because I didn't know you had tried.

FIERING

Yeah, it would have been our first under Western Electric.

DONAHOE

That would have been great.

FIERING

Yes, it would have been.

DONAHOE

It seems like a lot of the industry didn't come until the fifties and the sixties.

FIERING

That's right.

DONAHOE

Even the sixties.

FIERING

That's right. 196

DONAHOE

And then it seems that a number of the unions, or the UAW [United Automobile Workers], I think they dropped their southern campaigns pretty much.

FIERING

Well, they followed--Yes, I don't recall them as a factor at all. As a matter of fact, the unions that were a factor were the Textile Workers Union [of America]. They were the big factor. If they had been able to make it, then it would have opened up the South to everybody, because textile was the dominant industry. There was more and more of the North in [the] textile industry moving down to the South, too.

DONAHOE

From New England.

FIERING

Yeah. The next big industry was, interestingly, woodworking--the [International] Woodworkers [of America]. The [United] Furniture Workers [of America] tried to penetrate and did to some degree. They made some progress down there. The woodworkers were in the deeper South--the central South states particularly. But the furniture workers had something in North Carolina. And, I'll tell you, there's another interesting thing about that. Now, take a union like that where you had no discrimination in employment, you had a mixture of black and white in those plants from the very beginning. Those plants were organized that way--black and white. And they stayed black and white. When the unions took over--when they became unionized--they were black and white. There was not the separation of the races or the segregation I talked about in Bassick-Sack or in other industries. Of course, in the cigarette industry, the tobacco industry, you did have separation. No question, the blacks got menial jobs, not only that, but even where they work on the same jobs with whites, they got lower pay. And they were the--They did the heavy labor. They did the heavy labor.

DONAHOE

So the woodworkers were the only-

FIERING

But the woodworkers were the only union that I know of where you had a normal integrated set up like we knew in the North, which was an eye-opener for me.

DONAHOE

Yeah, but the textile [industry] was horrible.

FIERING

Textiles--the blacks only worked on menial jobs. But the South was different. Everything there was different.

DONAHOE

Well, you made some major breakthroughs.

FIERING

Pre-civil rights.

DONAHOE

Pre-civil rights.

FIERING

Pre-civil rights.

DONAHOE

Well, it certainly was.

FIERING

Premature.

DONAHOE

But, even in textiles, J. P. Stevens wasn't settled until what, 1981?

FIERING

Yeah.

DONAHOE

That late.

FIERING

That's right.

DONAHOE

And that was a major breakthrough.

FIERING

Yeah.

DONAHOE

And look how long they had been working there .

FIERING

Of course, many of the young blacks who came back from the war had high expectations. They were quickly dashed. In fact this lynching in Pickens was an indicator of that, see. They dashed those hopes. Just like after World War I. [In] reading some of the history of World War I, the blacks came back from the war then also with higher expectations. In World War II, they had perhaps more rights; there were more of them involved. But they were quickly taken to task, hopes dashed.

DONAHOE

That's when you had a lot of migration up North.

FIERING

Yeah, you had a lot of them, yeah.

DONAHOE

So, I think they realized the limitations.

FIERING

That's right. But we were--that's one thing my wife [Clara Wernick Fiering] and I are very proud of--we had already moved to Los Angeles. This was back in the early fifties. The blacks in North Carolina, in WinstonSalem, who were involved--particularly those blacks in that strike--were the leaders of the black community. Not only in Winston-Salem, but in a large section of North

Carolina, because it was a very influential group of black community leaders, the core of which was the FTA [Food, Tobacco, Agricultural, and Allied Workers Union of America] leaders, the largest organization of black people in Winston-Salem, which was a very influential town.

DONAHOE

A big town.

FIERING

And the people who worked in the plant were very influential people. The blacks put on all kinds of pressure for me and my wife to come back. We were the only whites who were asked to come back in this town.

DONAHOE

And you had been gone a while.

FIERING

Oh, we had been gone three or four years. They put the heat on Matles-- heavy heat on Matles to get us to come back. But we weren't about to.

DONAHOE

You didn't want to or--?

FIERING

No. It was really an injustice to my kids.

DONAHOE

Oh, I was going to ask--Let me just backtrack on that. When you went to the South, in mid-'46, the whole family went.

FIERING

Oh, my whole family. My baby was six weeks old. Matter of fact, I came down here, and my wife was about--not far--she was a couple of months from giving birth. A month or two. Her mother [Dora Wernick Bohn] was out here. She came out here.

DONAHOE

California?

FIERING

Yeah. To stay with--because I had to establish a home down there. So I went out there to stay for a while. When she came out here, I went down to WinstonSalem and was looking around and bought a home. In the meantime, she was getting close to delivery time. So I came out here for my vacation period, just at the time she was due to give birth. She gave birth just forty-one years ago Sunday to our youngest, Bobbi [Roberta Fiering Segovia]. She stayed with her mother for six weeks, and meantime, I established a home there--bought a house and sent for her. The baby came down when she was six weeks old with my two other kids. One was three and a half and one was eight and a half. DONAHOE That was your oldest daughter.

FIERING

Yeah.

DONAHOE

And your wife had agreed that it was a good move to go to the South.

FIERING

Well, she was willing. That was the thing. My wife never objected. We didn't spend much time discussing. When the UE made a demand on us, we-

DONAHOE

So you had gone together as organizers, too

FIERING

I wasn't thinking clearly, but it was foolish. But that was my conception of being loyal to the UE and to the movement. It was stupid.

DONAHOE

No, it was not a bad move to go there and do the things you did.

FIERING

All I can say for it, I had had some memorable experiences. Matter of fact, my daughter Maxine is still in touch with some of the black women who were in

the leadership of that movement, that strike movement down there. A couple of years ago, she took a trip to--she wants to write a book about her mother--she took a trip east to visit some of these places we lived at. She made contact with some of the women who were leaders in the strike. She's still in touch with them--those that are still living.

DONAHOE

But your wife did organizing, too.

FIERING

She did organizing, yes.

DONAHOE

She helped you at every step of the way.

FIERING

Yes, my wife did organizing. In fact, she handled an arbitration case for the FTA. Strange arbitration case. She related it, not like up North [though]. The guy who was a lawyer for the company, for the [R. J.] Reynolds Tobacco Company, walks into the arbitration hearing and they sit down and begin the case. And here you present your case like you do in a court room. This guy didn't mince any words. He just told the arbitrator, he says, "If you want to continue being an arbitrator down here, you know the decision you have to make." [laughter]

DONAHOE

Boy, blatant, huh.

FIERING

That's the way it was. He was an influential guy, this guy who was representing them.

DONAHOE

So the whole--And then the Taft-Hartley [Act] thing broke out while you were in the South.

FIERING

While I was in the South.

DONAHOE

Okay.

FIERING

And the race for [Henry A.] Wallace broke out while I was in the South.

DONAHOE

Oh, that's right.

FIERING

The other thing.

DONAHOE

Well, I'm going to stop this now, and then we could pick up next time. And that would be like a natural break.

## **1.9. TAPE NUMBER: VI, Side One (September 1, 1987)**

DONAHOE

You had told me that as early as '46 and the forties there were beginning to be divisions within the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] that early while you were down in the South. Could you elaborate on that a little bit?

FIERING

Well, of course, there was red-baiting going on inside the CIO all through the years. You might say from the conception of the CIO, the CIO as a whole was red baited. And then specific unions were singled out, like the UE [United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America]. But it didn't amount to much because red-baiting just didn't take in those days. In the forties, it was exacerbated; red-baiting was exacerbated. It still didn't take because of the war, and everybody was united behind the war, so they couldn't single out any organization for any reason. After the war, it took on greater and greater proportions; it was intensified. When I went down South, could feel it in my relationship with other unions there, but specifically, the way it was exemplified was in the specific experience that I had had when the CIO

regional director, Bill Smith, [who] was running a part of the CIO southern organizing drive, unilaterally decided he was going to file a petition for a plant that I [said] we were organizing. But [we] were not yet ready to file it, not by a long shot. We weren't prepared for any kind of an election. When I found it out and confronted him, he in effect told me that there was nothing I could do about it. I called my national office, [James J.] Matles in particular, and Matles was incensed. He [Matles] called him [Smith] and in effect, he told Matles to jump in the lake. To have pulled the petition out would have ruined the drive because it would have discouraged the workers after all the publicity they had put out that we had filed a petition, which meant we were ready for an election. So it would have signaled a backward step. We were afraid it was going to demoralize the people. So we went ahead, but we lost the election. We expected to. But there wasn't much we could do about it because we would run into a big fight with the CIO, so we backed down. But from there on we tried to keep them at arms length with respect to things we were doing.

DONAHOE

The CIO.

FIERING

The CIO, right. And we got into whatever we wanted to get into. We got into a thing with the FTA [Food, Tobacco, Agricultural, and Allied Workers Union of America] and the [R. J.] Reynolds [Tobacco Company] strike, and that was our participation. The CIO hardly helped them as a matter of fact, which is significant. Now, that was a left union. It was a key strike in the South. As a matter of fact, I think the Reynolds plant was the biggest shop in the South. It employed over ten thousand people.

DONAHOE

Ten thousand? Oh, was that the one with the five thousand--?

FIERING

With the five thousand. Five thousand were in, and five thousand were out.

DONAHOE

Except the 12"8. [laughter]

FIERING

Five thousand blacks were out, five thousand whites were in with the exception of 128 whites.

DONAHOE

I remember that figure too.

FIERING

I'll never forget that number. They were stalwarts. To this day, I admire the courage of those people.

DONAHOE

But they managed to get a contract. You said that-

FIERING

Well, they got a contract, but the contract was the easy way out for the company. The strike had gone for a couple of months, at least a couple of months as I recall. [tape recorder off] Let me go on, on that strike. It was the biggest industrial plant in the South. It was key to anything that anybody would have done. If they had lost that, it would have been a tremendous setback. If they had won that, it would have been a tremendous asset in terms of any organization anywhere, especially in that area which was the center of the textile area. Winston-Salem [North Carolina] was not just a tobacco area, it's the center of the textile area in North Carolina. Huge mills all around that area and all the small towns around that area.

DONAHOE

That's a big plant by any standards--ten thousand.

FIERING

And in terms of CIO support, absolutely nil.

DONAHOE

Really?

FIERING

Nil. I can't recall any kind of support. They may have shoveled them a little bit of money. But you would think they would send people down, they would send forces down, you know, experienced people. Not one, not one because it was the FTA.

DONAHOE

And that was considered a left-

FIERING

Oh, the FTA was a left union.

DONAHOE

Now, who was the--You were involved.

FIERING

I was involved heavily; my wife [Clara Wernick Fiering] was involved heavily.

DONAHOE

That's what you told me, but yet, you were UE.

FIERING

I was UE. That's why I was involved heavily.

DONAHOE

Because UE wanted to support [them].

FIERING

UE would support, sure, UE would support them.

DONAHOE

But not with the approval of whatever, anything with the CIO. You just kind of did it on your own.

FIERING

We did it on our own, that's right.

DONAHOE

Because I remember you told me how involved your wife was and how involved you were.

FIERING

Yeah.

DONAHOE

So this was like a real indicator that the CIO wasn't that interested.

FIERING

Not only not interested, but also an indicator [of] how shallow the leadership of the CIO was not to have seen the significance of the strike at that time. This was a product--you're talking about a product that a company makes which makes the company vulnerable.

DONAHOE

So what other indications were there, too, that there were divisions within the CIO. Political divisions, assume you mean, too.

FIERING

Well, it starts with political divisions. On occasions we would be called to meetings of the staff, all the CIO staff. We would sit down and listen to a lecture by Van [A.] Bittner. But--First the objective situation was a difficult one. The caliber of the leadership didn't begin to measure up to even an average situation, much less the objective situation, like the South presented, [which was] a difficult situation. And so more and more we--well, like most unions since the southern drive started to turn things around in the South, the deep South, in every way, each in his own way.

DONAHOE

Well, I actually remember reading things like the CIO wasn't really serious about this southern organizing drive because they didn't really follow through like they could have.

FIERING

Well, they were serious about it. They didn't know what the hell to do about it. They didn't have the kind of people to give it the leadership it needed. \*[At

this point, we were well into 1947 and the Taft-Hartley Act non-communist affidavits. I haven't thought about it for a long time, and it was a period when events followed up on each other rather rapidly. So I can't accurately detail the day-by-day developments. But as I recall, initially, both the AFL (American Federation of Labor) and CIO refrained from signing. That lasted a relatively short period. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) granted a "grace period" when confronted with a united labor movement. That was the "graceful" way out for them, because if the labor movement had hung together, I don't think there's any question they would have killed the affidavit issue. But that was not to be. The AFL saw an opportunity to upstage the CIO and go after them. So I think early in '48, they capitulated and decided to comply. Now, that was a pretty important principle involved, but nobody could accuse the AFL leadership at that time of letting a matter of principle stand in the way of advancing--as they saw it--some narrow, self-serving, interests. They saw a chance to split the CIO--wholesale raiding of the CIO--and they opted for that course. Inside the CIO, on the surface at least, everyone hung fast, though you knew there was anxiety and discussion and a lot of wavering. Finally, Walter P. Reuther kicked over the traces saying he intended to defend the United Automobile Workers (UAW) against developing raids; he also became a raider, going full blast after the FE, the United Farm and Metal Equipment Workers of America, a sister union of the CIO. But the left wing kept shouting, "It's a principle. We won't sign," while its unions were being torn apart. For my part, I followed the line unquestioning. I was shocked into reality when UE decided to join the crowd and file its own affidavits. By that time, we all realized there was no way out, except to walk away from it. That's like being a Monday morning quarterback. That was by convention action, at the '49 convention. But the decision had a somewhat traumatic effect on a number of us. You looked at this "principle" from a different perspective. We'd come through a period of explaining to our members why we wouldn't sign. Now you agree to concede the principle, and if you do it now when they're kicking the hell out of you, why didn't we do it when we were better able to fight to save ourselves? Think about it. It was the left wing they were out to destroy, and we fed their fires until we were almost consumed. We were on the defensive in the eyes of our members from the word go. If we had moved in following the UAW's move and said, "Hell with them, we've got to defend ourselves," we would have looked differently to

our members. But who knows. Feelings about that period run deep. And there is ambivalence. It's forty years later. Would it have made a difference?] \* Mr. Fiering added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

DONAHOE

What's the UEMDA? That's the precursor to the IUE [International Union of Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers]?

FIERING

UEMDA is UE Members for Democratic Action, [James B.] Carey's faction in UE. They became the core group for the IUE.

DONAHOE

Let's see, there's something else to ask you. Okay, so initially [Philip] Murray-- FIERING: This was the [Communist] Party's doing, by the way. Everybody's following the party line.

DONAHOE

They're saying don't sign.

FIERING

It's the principle, you must not sign. You must not sign. \*[I don't mean to downplay the philosophical importance of the affidavits. It runs to the whole question of union democracy, autonomy, and the myriad issues that flow from that. But any chance of survival demanded a retreat.] \* Mr. Fiering added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

DONAHOE

So the unions where the left had great influence didn't sign.

FIERING

We really didn't have to be afraid of anybody. We had, in my opinion, the best organizing staff in the labor movement. And I'm not saying that being subjective. There was no staff that any union had to compare with ours in ability. If we had done the things we had to do to protect ourselves when we could have protected our selves, things might have been different. There was

a lot of discussion and argument and concern as we watched our position deteriorate. I didn't get into the argument. I followed the official line. There were some personal things involved with the relationships with some of our top officers with other unions that made it difficult. I was going to be a UE person. I was either going to go up with it or go down with it. I wasn't going to desert it. Anyway, we tried to survive. Along with that, of course, was the Henry [A.] Wallace campaign. In the South, that was a very, very difficult campaign. This was in the middle of the southern organizing drive, as difficult as that was. And we got involved in the Henry Wallace campaign. Couldn't get involved very, very deep because there wasn't very much of us to get involved. Now, of course, there again the UE didn't endorse Wallace technically. Technically, that's so, but the natural fact [is] the UE supported Wallace. And we were all told this is our line, this is the line: support Wallace. And shoot, we got almost nowhere. I got my house stoned for my troubles.

DONAHOE

Oh, wow.

FIERING

But that was small potatoes. We survived that. Before the Wallace campaign was over, before the elections, moved back to Pennsylvania. That was the only assignment open that I could get.

DONAHOE

You wanted to leave at that point?

FIERING

I wanted to leave; I was ready to leave. It was not really doing my kids a hell of a lot of good living in that atmosphere.

DONAHOE

The difficulties, you mean, of living in the South?

FIERING

Living in the South with the prejudices there and the kids trying to conform, finding it difficult to conform because of us. And there were just two families like us with children. One was an FTA organizer, Jack Frye, who now lives in

Massachusetts, and us. They had three kids at the time, and we had three kids. And it was difficult for the children. We were the only white families that we knew of that socialized with blacks, too. And our homes were the only homes, white-owned, that blacks could come to that were open to them, which is one of the things, I guess, that contributed to the stoning of the house. But it just wasn't worth the sacrifices that we were making. I wouldn't mind it for myself, you know, but for the kids, it was not good.

DONAHOE

But what about the Taft-Hartley, how did that affect you and your family while you were in the South?

FIERING

Well, how did it affect us? It didn't affect us. Well, let's see, the NLRB election in RCA [Corporation] in Pulaski, Virginia, was in '47, so Taft- Hartley did not affect us yet at that time. Nobody had signed it and there was a grace period, so we could use the board then. We didn't have elections in '48 that I recall down there. We might have been stymied from an election. I can't remember. There was some organizing going on because we had some staff people down there. I had a staff of at least three--oh, there were four--four people I had on the staff with me. And so there was organizing going on, but I just can't remember what some of the problems may have been. I can't remember that Taft Hartley played any kind of a role. When I moved out of there, it was already the middle of the year, in '48. I don't remember any more just what the status of what organizational campaigns were, what we had on underway, can't recall. If we had been stymied by Taft-Hartley I think I would have remembered that. However, I don't remember much about that era, that section. I do know I wanted to get out of there because there wasn't much I could do. I just felt there wasn't much I could do, I was wasting time, the family was paying a price; I just had to get out.

DONAHOE

Also there was more red-baiting, like you said, in the Wallace campaign.

FIERING

Yeah, there was a lot of red-baiting down there. But you see, our circle was kind of a closed circle. The plants we had, which weren't many--there were a few plants--but where we were, we were solid. Nobody could attack us; no matter what anybody said, we couldn't be attacked. So it wasn't that, but outside that area, that sphere, we didn't move much in the community. Except, we moved among some of the native progressives from the South (some of those were admirable people) and the black people, particularly people from tobacco. There, of course, we felt very warm and comfortable. But that wasn't satisfying enough, I mean, we weren't paying back; we weren't contributing much. So we had to get out of there. So when we went out, Matles didn't give a damn if I went anywhere; he didn't care. By that time, he and I were somewhat on the outs. Well, I took an assignment in Pennsylvania, up in Williamsport--North Central Pennsylvania is what it is called--and there we did some organizing. We had some plants up there, we did some servicing. I lived in a little town called Muncy, fourteen miles from Williamsport. A little town about twenty-five hundred people. Beautiful area, I'll say that for it. It is just west of the Poconos, beautiful country. We had some plants, and we did some servicing there--tried to do a little organizing. We did some organizing. We had one other staff guy there besides me. I was in charge of the area, and I moved around from there, servicing the shops we had in the area, grievances, contract negotiations, etc. Once in a while they asked me to go down to the southern part of Pennsylvania to help out with something, go on to the Pittsburgh area to help out with something, because there wasn't that much work. And so I moved around there, but essentially I was based up in Williamsport. That was in '48 and then, of course, in '49 came the big blow up.

DONAHOE

Okay.

FIERING

But there were some stories about that area with--We were the only Jews 1n town. [laughter] We stood out like a sore thumb, everybody-

DONAHOE

Oh my God.

FIERING

People that were not used to knowing what a Jew was. You have to know that about small, isolated towns like Muncy and a number of places where we lived.

DONAHOE

Sure.

FIERING

People were, well, parochial. But we were, as it turned out, quite well accepted. \*[we had a local union in this small community which I serviced. I was very close to our membership. All our neighbors. And you work at and earn the privilege of being well accepted. Well accepted and protected.] When the raids came--Well, first of all, in '49, one of the big companies there, Rayovac, decided to take on the union and bust it. And we had a bitter strike for, God, it want for almost two months or four months. forget exactly. \*[The company first opened the plant to scabs. They didn't get many. So they called in the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) to solicit scabs from among the strikers. There was some violence involved and three of us were convicted under an ancient. Pennsylvania law taken over from when the state was an English colony termed "riot and affray." It was originally intended to be used against the colonists who were protesting British occupation. It permitted a maximum sentence of three years. We were looking for help and asked the Cla council leaders to send a delegation to the judge to intercede for us. They interceded, but against us. They asked the judge to give those "red bastards" the full three years. So much for brotherly love. The judge gave us six weeks. It was an interesting six weeks, however. Some years later, I wrote a short story about it which my "creative writing" instructor at Valley College tried to sell for me in New York on a trip he made there. Much humor and pathos. A hunger strike led by the three of us. A sheriff stealing money allowed for inmates' food with which he threw big feasts for local politicians in a race for mayor. A huge man, named Shmucker, appropriately I thought. And from intense intimidation against us until our hunger strike; in one day, the most marked improvement in the quality of the food to a big feast for all the inmates on the morning of our release, eggs and ham, bacon and all the trimmings. First eggs were served in the ninety-year history of the jail. It was an interesting experience. For everyone it became very touchy, because we

had the aura of political prisoners. The irony was I wasn't even involved in the violence, but as the judge put it, being the leader of the union, I "could have stopped it." So I was culpable. Anyway, I got away from the point of the story about my relationship with these people in this small town of Muncy. We were confined in the county jail of Williamsport. During the whole period, my wife and children were treated as warmly as if we had lived there all our lives. Not one child mentioned, even once, to my children the fact that their father was in jail. Not till the day after I got out did they remark, "We're glad your daddy is home." I am touched to this day. This was, I think, end of August or first of September, 1949. Because shortly after that, I was at the UE convention where we again outgunned the Carey forces (UEMDA); the national officers were building their case justifying the coming split with the CIO. The following month, October or November, was the CIO convention. The CIO took action to expel us along with the other left unions. The UE executive board claimed it had acted first to withdraw from CIO. I can't lay claim to any great heroics. I was carrying the line for the UE in the trenches--all the way. We stayed very close to the rank and file, trying to keep everyone focused on shop issues, and pointing up the kind of union UE was, its autonomy, rank and file control, caliber of its contracts. Nothing fancy like the Marshall Plan, foreign policy. By this time, UE had filed the affidavits, the Taft-Hartley noncommunist affidavits. That caused some soul-searching and trauma. Like Monday morning quarterbacking. It really was a matter of high principle, but if we could sign now, why didn't we do it sooner? We waited too long. We should have foreseen events. We should have done it when UAW did it. Instead Murray had us in a box. We were given the argument, "How could we sign, if Murray hadn't signed." This was the Communist Party line. And Murray knew this. Of course he didn't have to. But we were being torn apart. Murray signed after the CIO convention, and we were suckered into delaying until it was obviously in the eyes of our rank and file, a defensive act. We were pushed into it. We tried to make the best we could of a very difficult situation. After the CIO convention, Murray chartered the IUE, the International Union of Electrical Workers. They started sign-up campaigns, and the companies, GE (General Electric Company), Westinghouse (Electric Corporation), and a host of others, came to their rescue by filing petitions for elections with the NLRB, claiming the split in the CIO made it impossible for them to know who to bargain with, UE or IUE. The IUE had sent in formal notice demanding

recognition even though they didn't meet the requirements the NLRB set out for qualifying for an election. Not enough cards, for instance. The NLRB obliged by changing its policies and accepting the petitions as valid. At any rate, it was a busy and desperate time. Matles asked me to go down to Dayton to take on the raids at the GM (General Motors Corporation) plants, Frigidaire (Company), and Delco Products (UE Locals 801 and 755). Anyway, Lou Kaplan and myself were assigned to 30,000 people. And both these locals were cornerstones in the anti-UE fight. When I went to jail, Matles asked Clara to service the Sylvania Electric Products, Inc., plants. When I went to Dayton, Lloyd Lutz, another staffer, who had been in jail with me, took charge of the area, though Clara still handled the Emporium Sylvania plant. One bitter note I want to record here is when I went to jail, Matles decided to stop paying me because, as he said, "Clara was being paid." Unheard of in the labor movement. I eventually got my money, but a big clue to Matles's character and attitude towards people and especially staff members. Of course, if I were smarter, I would have left UE then. By the time, I remember, I got into Dayton, the IUE had a running start. We made a fight out of it, but history records we lost. We tried to pull together what had been in other years a strong, supportive core. But people were frightened by the anti-red hysteria. It was too little, too late. From Dayton, I went to Sharon, Pennsylvania, to help with the Westinghouse raid, but that was lost. I can relate a couple of victories. By the time I got back, the Sylvania Company had moved to decertify UE in its two key plants, Lock Haven and Emporium, Pennsylvania. handled Lock Haven, and Clara was assigned to Emporium. Matles also persuaded Ruth Newell to work with Clara. She came out of retirement and was exceptionally capable. But the stakes in both plants were four to five thousand workers. It was a great sacrifice for Clara and me. Emporium was too far from Muncy to commute everyday. I had hardly been home in two or three months. In the South when we both worked, we had a housekeeper looking after our kids. We called on her and she agreed to come up from North Carolina to help us out. Clara would be away five out of seven days, and I would be home two or three nights a week. Yet of all the places we lived, this area is the one of which my children have the fondest memories. Another interesting item. Once in a while Clara would take our youngest, Bobbi (Roberta Fiering Segovia), who was four at the time along with her. And Ruth would bring her youngest, Amy, with her. She was three. Today Amy Newell is the national secretary-treasurer

of UE, or what's left of it. That's no reflection on her. She's a brilliant and able leader, I hear. Trying to reconstruct, Sylvania was probably waiting for the anti-UE momentum to build up, so we would fall down dead when they moved against us. We had a pretty solid pro-UE leadership in both plants. I'm trying to recollect whether IUE was on the ballot. I think they tried, but failed to get enough cards. But the campaign to decertify us was under way. We paid a whole lot of attention to shop conditions, and one day while I was handling an arbitration case, I get a tap on the shoulder from a hotel employee (where we had rented a meeting room for the hearing) saying someone outside in the lobby had to talk to me. So I called a short recess and walked into the lobby and a stranger walks up and hands me a piece of paper. I asked what it was, and he says it's a subpoena from the House UnAmerican Activities Committee to appear at a HUAC hearing in Washington, D.C. I was stunned and swallowed hard. I took it off. I could see the next morning's headlines. I went back into the arbitration hearing and made short work of it. When we adjourned, I called the radio station and arranged for paid time the first opportunity that evening. The town was going to hear it from me first. I think that was the first time--used many times after that- that the CIO, IUE, and the companies, used HUAC during these raids to fire up the red-baiting attack against UE.] It was a [radio] program in which 1--I was the one who made the report that I was subpoenaed [by HUAC]. I didn't wait for the newspapers to do it. I got there before the newspapers and I put it out the way I wanted to put it out. And that's what stuck, see. And that saved our butts. It had a hell of a good impact. It put us on the offensive against the subpoena. Then they could holler all they wanted to about the subpoena. It didn't matter. It had the impact we wanted and we sailed on the offensive from there on. Election time came and we just drowned them in votes, in both plants [Lock Haven and Emporium, Pennsylvania]. \* Mr. Fiering added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

DONAHOE

What did you say? Like when you-

FIERING

I forget exactly what the hell I said, but it was good. I took the politics, the red issue out of the fight, and kept the conflict between the boss and the workers, bread and butter.

DONAHOE

You said, "I've have been subpoenaed and--"

FIERING

I've been subpoenaed, this is the reason for the subpoena, and this is why I was subpoenaed: because the sons of bitches are helping out the company and are using the government agency as an instrument to beat the union.

DONAHOE

So you related it to trade union struggle and what was going on there.

FIERING

I related the whole community, the whole community to the union's fight for survival. Now, we had a guy from the international sent in who was a good-- who did some follow-up work on radio on that, a PR guy, Allen-forget his last name. Then we had a whole series of radio programs, that first one was so good. And the general manager of the plant was a guy by the name of O'Reilly- I'll never forget this [laughs]--and our PR guy started a series of radio programs playing on the theme nOh, really? No, O'Reilly." [laughter] We drove that son of a bitch crazy, we drove him nuts. But of course the payoff was in the vote. We just drowned them in votes. I recall now we beat them by four or five to one, and the plants had almost two thousand people in that one plant. The other plant, which was Clara's assignment, we drowned them too. That was the Emporium plant and even larger.

DONAHOE

These were the Sylvania plants.

FIERING

These were the key Sylvania plants, yeah.

DONAHOE

And you won the elections overwhelmingly despite the fact that you had just been subpoenaed by the-

FIERING

Subpoenaed by the House Un-American Activities Committee, yeah.

DONAHOE

And despite the raids.

FIERING

And despite the raids. That's right.

DONAHOE

Did you feel at this point that you were getting the backing of the international?

FIERING

Yeah. Yeah, I was getting the backing of the international, sure. What the hell, why not.

DONAHOE

Well, were you kind of like having differences?

FIERING

Well, I had differences with the line they were following and the whole question [inaudible] with the affidavit [Taft-Hartley communist disclaimer]. I didn't like that, but I wasn't too vocal about it. See, I wasn't taking on the national office. That's following a line. But I know how I felt about it was why aren't we not only doing this, but I felt the same way about the Marshall Plan. What are we fighting these bastards about--we aren't that significant in the life of the country--when we have a chance to save this union. And that to me was the most important thing. Because if we had saved the goddamn union to fight another day, I think we would have made a hell of a difference in the whole labor movement.

DONAHOE

So in other words, you felt that you should have just signed the affidavits in the beginning.

FIERING

Sign the goddamn affidavits-

DONAHOE

Back in '48.

FIERING

--and if Murray says we are supporting the Marshall Plan, shake your heads and say, "Okay, Murray, we are supporting it." So what.

DONAHOE

But by this time you had already signed it.

FIERING

By this time they had signed them. That's how we could appear on the ballot, that's right, see. But a lot of damage had been done by this time. As a matter of fact the damage was done--This was part of what I did. I had gone down to Dayton, Ohio, to the General Motors plant then, prior to our signing of the affidavits. And this was also in late '49, just after the convention. It was just before Sylvania or after Sylvania; it was before Sylvania. I traveled allover. I traveled to the GM plants, I traveled to Westinghouse plants fighting off raids. But it was too little, too late. By the time, remember, I got into Dayton, the IUE had a running start. Now, these are plants that I helped organize.

DONAHOE

I remember.

FIERING

I had status in those plants. Not only I, but so did Lou Kaplan who was with me. Tremendous status in the town and in the plants,-among the workers. We had fought for them, they had supported us. And we had to callon the loyalty of many of them who deserted us, because they just were afraid by that time. They didn't want to have anything to do with the label "communist." But we had already sacrificed any chance we had to cover ourselves on that label by

waiting so long with the filing of the affidavits. So anyway, we went through the 10sse8--I'll tell you everybody admitted we made out a hell of a lot better than anybody thought we would in Dayton with the General Motors shops. From there I went to Sharon, Pennsylvania, to help out in the raid on the Westinghouse plant, where I knew some of the players from 1940 and '41. There we were surrounded by steel and everything, where I was also in on the initial organization. And I know a couple of other places I went. Then I wound up back again at home, in my home base which was Williamsport, the northern tier of counties up in Pennsylvania. With the victories at least in Sylvania, after that, I took a leave of absence. I had had it. I was running around hardly sleeping. And [pause] geez, I'm trying to think of some incidents--good and bad both but, you know, exciting anyway. Fighting all the time.

#### **1.10. TAPE NUMBER: VI, Side Two (September 1, 1987)**

DONAHOE

Let me just ask you. It seems at this time that the UE is fighting on so many different fronts all at once, you know that there is the whole government with the HUAC, the Smith Act, and the McCarran Act. Then there's the CIO with all the raids and kind of, you know, really-

FIERING

Not only the CIO, you had the whole government.

DONAHOE

--AFL, everybody. Well, I'm saying the government, the CIO.

FIERING

The government, the AFL, the CIO, and the companies, and the whole establishment, newspapers, etc.

DONAHOE

Right, and the companies. So it's like on all- everywhere you turn.

FIERING

We had everybody. Everybody. We were surrounded.

DONAHOE

And do you-

FIERING

There was tremendous- If you can think of a more complete opposition, I can't.

DONAHOE

No, I can't either.

FIERING

And we staved them off in many cases, and that was interesting.

DONAHOE

Which was amazing, like you were saying, how you won these elections in two plants despite all this. Because this was right in the heart of it all.

FIERING

Yeah.

DONAHOE

I just want to go back for one second. Do you feel that, way back in 1947, if the UE had just taken the position of just signing the affidavits and going along with different things and just working on building the union, that a lot of this could have been avoided?

FIERING

\*[Perhaps. Remember this is forty years later. I'm not sure it could have been avoided. It's interesting to think about the different set of circumstances it might have created. To speculate like that is like playing with yourself. You have to deal with the realities of that moment, and that is difficult forty years later. You can't deny the principle of autonomy. I don't know to what extent that was really an issue. Anticommunist policy and the Cold War were really the issues. Survival of the union is a principle. Looking back on it after filing the affidavits and the fight we went through, I think we should have related the issues differently. Reality at that time was: the Communist Party line was "no

surrender." The hard core of the party people in UE, at that time, were incapable of a split with the party. That included me, despite difficulties I had had in the past. Our response was to circle the wagons. To us, the party could do no wrong. It didn't dawn on us until too late that these so-called experts on trade union policy didn't know a hell of a lot about trade unions, certainly not as much as us. In fact, many of them never worked in a shop much less in a trade union. And they were making trade union policy. I was carrying it out. There were fires to put out allover the place. No time to sit back and think.] I told you once before, I'm a trade unionist--I used to have people (we would sit in meetings, party meetings), and I'd be criticized by some of those bastards. And this was not once, but over a series of times that I did this wrong, I did that wrong, I did the other thing--I didn't think it was wrong, because the workers accepted me. See, they followed me. It began to gall the hell out of me: What the hell am I doing here with these people and who are these people? It began to dawn on me these goddamn people don't know a goddamn thing about the labor movement, and here they are trying to determine policy for the labor movement. \* Mr. Fiering added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

DONAHOE

They weren't people that had been involved in the labor movement at all?

FIERING

Many of them never worked in their lives, never worked in a shop in their lives.

DONAHOE

And they're making trade union policy?

FIERING

And they were making trade union policy. And there they are running into conflict with me, but I am a loyal guy, you know. Like I used to call up every morning and say what's the line today, see. But it began to grow on me and I began to resent it, you know. I didn't like being attacked, but it took time for me to finally realize what I was dealing with here. But, in that process, I begin to think too, how important is this so-called principle, and what is the

principle. I have always thought that the main principle was keep your organization alive. You've got an organization, you've got something to fight with. Keep it alive. And I can't see a great big thing about making a concession, either to Murray or to anyone else either about affidavits or about any other thing. Of course, this is all post-mortem, after the fact, another case of a 20-20 hindsight.

DONAHOE

You mean they signed?

FIERING

Not only signed, but they merged with the butcher workers.

DONAHOE

Because I thought they were destroyed in the end.

FIERING

First they signed--the [International] Fur [and Leather] Workers [Union] merged with the butchers [Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America], see. Oh, that was a little later. But everything was kosher, everything was fine because they merged. Because the leadership of the fur workers remained intact, see. So what is a principle? And then it begins to dawn upon me who are these people who are being critical of me. What do they know, never having been in a union, how the hell a union should be run.

DONAHOE

And they wouldn't listen to the people that were involved in the daily struggles in the world.

FIERING

Nobody could tell them. Listen, you know how they operate: they got their own committee, their own setup. They determine the policy, then they call you in to discuss the policy.

DONAHOE

After.

FIERING

After. Even if they talk to you about it, they'll still dominate a union, and they'll make the policy.

DONAHOE

So it's like the top union.

FIERING

Jesus Christ. And I just stood for that shit and didn't realize that for all those years. I could kick myself. Well, there was a whole process with me, honestly. Then, of course, with the raids and running around half nuts took some of the steam out of me. You could picture that period in between the latter part of '49--this was after the convention of '49--and the middle of 1950. I was seldom ever at home; I was always moving. I spent time in Dayton, I spent time in Pennsylvania, and I spent time in southern Pennsylvania, time in northern Pennsylvania and they sent me here-

DONAHOE

You were allover.

FIERING

They sent me allover the goddamn lot on the raids. Raids are much more difficult than an organizing drive.

DONAHOE

Terrible.

FIERING

A terrible beating we take, terrible beating.

DONAHOE

That seems it was one of the worst things that was happening.

FIERING

Oh, our people took such a beating then. That's why some of them cracked.

DONAHOE

What was the CP [Communist Party] position on that?

FIERING

See, as long as you were alive, the CP position was--They weren't even clear, and you'll see how this develops. Because in some instances they told the unions, they told some UE people go into the IAM [International Association of Machinists] or go into the IUE, wherever you can get in. You know they did do that.

DONAHOE

Yes, I know.

FIERING

Then in 19--I forget if it was 1954 or 1956--I am sitting there at a meeting with the top fractions of people, without mentioning names. Two of the very top UE people were party people. Came back from a meeting with the party leaders and they--I'll never forget this--they walked into our meeting (and we were just a small group of us; this was the top fraction, the top group of them) and we says, "Well, what did they say?" And they shook their heads and they said, "They said we should dissolve the UE."

DONAHOE

That was '55.

FIERING

Either '54 or '56. '55? If you have it in '55, then it must have been in '54.

DONAHOE

Right. But that was the position: leave the UE and go into the IUE?

FIERING

Go into the IUE and the IAM. Some people did, see. That's where sections of the union broke off right there and then.

DONAHOE

That was the left split.

FIERING

The left split, right. Then I understand at another point they made a decision to stay and maintain the UE. And here these people are making these decisions. They don't know a goddamn thing. They don't know what to do, and they are transmitting it like it's a directive.

DONAHOE

Yeah.

FIERING

And here we've got people who are knowledgeable, who are involved in the struggle, who are listening to these jerks.

DONAHOE

And they really didn't have the say-so like the top leaders of the union.

FIERING

I tell you, it's amazing to me. I'm thinking of these two people particularly-- highly sophisticated people--coming back in and they took it like little kids. Like little children, you know. To this day, I can't figure it out. And I'm sitting there stunned myself.

DONAHOE

But in the earlier period when the party must have seen what was happening with the raids and how the CIO was behind the raids and everything, and they didn't take a position on this, saying that--?

FIERING

Well, the party position--Well, that's a very interesting question. I made note in what's his name's book that I read. The party position was as long as it's good for the USSR [Union of Soviet Socialist Republics], it's okay. Because the most important thing in the world is that the Soviet Union must be protected.

DONAHOE

Then, how did they get to that point?

FIERING

Because the unity between U.S. and the Soviet Union was very important. So anything that would help maintain or promote that unity and anything that would provide discord would tend to dissolve that unity. Because if you antagonize Murray, he would go out on a red-baiting binge, you see.

DONAHOE

So Murray-

FIERING

And after all that he would turn it against the Soviet Union. Everything that was determined was what is good for the Soviet Union. Of course, the argument that is made that the party was just an arm of the Soviet Union in my opinion is absolutely true. They had no identity of their own; that's what they were, see.

DONAHOE

So it was pretty far-fetched-

FIERING

The worst thing that happened to us was our linking ourselves at all up with that outfit in terms of a union. Took a goddamn good union--could have been the best fucking union in the country--and destroyed it. I can't forgive myself because I was just as stupid as most of the idiots.

DONAHOE

Well, you didn't know.

FIERING

I didn't break. I didn't break, and I should have. Shit.

DONAHOE

But at the time it sounded right.

FIERING

Well, listen, more loyalty than right. That's what it was. You felt you would be a deserter, a traitor. Couldn't do that; you have to be loyal. That was terrible, terrible.

DONAHOE

Well, probably you believed in the principles at that point.

FIERING

And principles, yeah.

DONAHOE

But that's what you believed in.

FIERING

But there were no principles. The only principle was survival.

DONAHOE

So when they finally did sign the affidavits, what was the basis of that? How did they switch their position?

FIERING

They switched their position because that's the only way they could get on the ballot. .Because everybody else was eating them out from the-

DONAHOE

They didn't need an argument?

FIERING

No, you didn't need an argument. Everybody else was eating them out from the inside. And either they could stand on the side and watch themselves being eaten to death or else sign the affidavits and make a fight of it--some kind of a fight. But 'by the time they did, though, see, the enemies of the UE already had a huge chunk of it they had digested. They had their base and a hell of a lot of good people who were cussed like hell by those who should not have cussed them. People like Leo Jandreau and others in Schenectady [New York] and from other plants who did make the jump were absolutely justified in doing it. Because how the hell can you listen to a leader, to take leadership from outfits like this or from individuals like this who didn't know a goddamn thing, and sit there and take a beating. Take a beating. And I tell you, you can't visualize what it was. The pressures were enormous. Enormous. Enormous to

sit there. These people did the only thing that made sense. And they are cussed to this day by some of these people. Can you imagine? I'm talking about people who, I would say, caved under the pressure. Not just caved under the pressure, it was the only thing left to do. And these were people who built the union, who put their lives into the union, you know. They weren't looking for anything for themselves.

DONAHOE

Self-sacrificing, really.

FIERING

Yes, all their life. All their life. Son of a bitch.

DONAHOE

Now, were you at the convention-

FIERING

Yeah, in '49.

DONAHOE

--when they were going to charter the IUE and everything?

FIERING

Yeah, I was at the UE convention in '49. That was before the national convention of the CIO when the big split took place, when the motion was made to withhold per capita. I thought, hooray, they're going to withhold per capita. Why pay the bastards when they are fighting you, shit.

DONAHOE

So you all left, or what happened?

FIERING

No, we stayed. I mean, it was our convention; it was the UE convention.

DONAHOE

Oh, okay.

FIERING

The others walked out. They knew where they were going. We didn't know where they were going. They knew where they were going.

DONAHOE

What about the CIO convention?

FIERING

Well, I wasn't at the CIO convention.

DONAHOE

And that was when, at the 1949 UE, you decided not to go to the CIO?

FIERING

Look, in 1949 they made the motion to withhold per capita unless the CIO agreed to call off the raiding.

DONAHOE

Okay. Because that was really, really getting out of hand, you know. [pause] So that was like most of the people voted for that?

FIERING

Oh, yeah. That's one thing we could do: we could control UE conventions, see. We always thought we controlled the rank and file because we controlled the conventions. That wasn't the case. We controlled that convention, but we didn't control the rank and file.

DONAHOE

So they were going to the IUE?

FIERING

They were going. They were going allover the lot.

DONAHOE

To everything, okay. So then by that time, did you know that the IUE was being chartered?

FIERING

No, we didn't know it. I don't think at that time we knew it. But it was right after that that the IUE was chartered. At the CIO convention, the left unions were kicked out and the UE officers had their talk--or it was before that they had their talk with Murray, because the UE leadership didn't show up to the CIO convention. That was another thing that UE was criticized for. He should have gone to the convention and made an argument at least.

DONAHOE

But you didn't; you boycotted it.

FIERING

Don't say I did. US did.

DONAHOE

No, I meant UE boycotted it.

FIERING

The executive board boycotted it. Well, I can understand what they were afraid to face there, but they should have gone. Harry Bridges was never afraid to go.

DONAHOE

But he was expelled. Wasn't the ILWU [International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union] expelled at that convention?

FIERING

Expelled, yeah.

DONAHOE

And twelve others or eleven others. Quite a few.

FIERING

I didn't--there were ten other unions. Harry Bridges was at the convention anyway. He had the guts to go in.

DONAHOE

Oh, I think he did go and fight and they expelled him.

FIERING

Yeah.

DONAHOE

And then they expelled all the others. Now, the furriers? The furriers, the International Fur and Leather Workers Union, were saved?

FIERING

No, the furriers were expelled too at that time.

DONAHOE

That's what I thought.

FIERING

Everybody was expelled. The furriers didn't merge with the butchers until later, in the early fifties.

DONAHOE

I forgot all the names.

FIERING

When they saw they were losing out, they made the smart move; they went in. And the butchers union, the Amalgamated Meat Cutters of North America, turned out to be a pretty good union. Now they're part of the United Food and Commercial Workers [International Union].

DONAHOE

Yeah, a lot of problems now.

FIERING

But it's not a bad union.

DONAHOE

Then.

FIERING

They're taking good positions. It shows you history does tricks with you.

DONAHOE

Well, you can't make-

FIERING

What is principle therefore? What is principle?

DONAHOE

Reality is more important.

FIERING

Well, anyway, what I did was after the Sylvania elections, it was a good time to take a vacation. I was whipped. I took a six months' leave of absence.

DONAHOE

That's the first one you took in years.

FIERING

That was the first one I ever took.

DONAHOE

Because you had been going all through the thirties, the forties, everything.

FIERING

I'd take a vacation once in a while for a little while for a week or so.

DONAHOE

But not six months.

FIERING

But oh no, never six months.

DONAHOE

This was 19501

FIERING

1950. I took a six months' leave and came out here. I did get my pay, at least for this period.

DONAHOE

Oh, you came out to California.

FIERING

Yeah, my mother-in-law [Dora Wernick Bohn] was out here yet. I needed a place to come to. Didn't do her much good, taking on five people: three kids and a couple. I went to work in a shop here, Domestic Thermostat.

DONAHOE

You were coming out to move or to-

FIERING

I just came out to rest. Just came out to rest. I had no intention of staying out here. I just wanted to get away from everything. By that time I was completely exhausted. When I was out here--Let's see, I'm trying to think of some other incidents that I went through back then.

DONAHOE

Well, you-

FIERING

Everyone of these things--You see, I remember the things I was most intimately involved with.

DONAHOE

You went through the trial, you were called in front of HUAC back there.

FIERING

Oh, that's right, August 30, 1950, in Washington.

DONAHOE

And, say, that's a big one.

FIERING

Oh, I'll tell you about the HUAC. That comes in right now as a matter of fact. Well, here I had the subpoena, yeah, but they kept postponing the date on me to appear. In the meantime--this was while I was living in Pennsylvania--in the meantime, I decided to take this leave and I came out here. I was completely oblivious to the subpoena; I had forgotten about it. Finally, I get a notice from the HUAC: you've got a hearing date, August 30, 1950. And I'm living out here. I got to go, so I made arrangements to drive in with a car--party of a carpool, used to drive east. So I made arrangements. I'd drive a car with some other people and I saved a fare for myself because I didn't have any money anyway. So I got to Washington and I get ready for the hearing. I go to the hearing, and the guy in front of me, who testifies in front of me, is Lee Pressman.

DONAHOE

[gasps] He had been the attorney for the [United] Steelworkers [of America], right?

FIERING

By that time he was not anymore.

DONAHOE

They had dumped him.

FIERING

They had dumped him. The scuttlebutt was that he had made some kind of an agreement with Phil Murray that if he would testify favorably to HUAC and Murray that he would get to handle a case for them at a pretty good-sized fee. That was the scuttlebutt, but I don't know how true it was. Anyway, I'm looking at this guy testifying and listening to him crawl in front of that committee. It was disgusting, guy of his stature. Jesus.

DONAHOE

Brilliant man and everything.

FIERING

I'm trying to think, was Larry Parks there that day? I don't think so. Lee Pressman was the guy I remember the best; he was right in front of me. And then they called me and I stood on the Fifth Amendment most of the ways. I

wasn't about to open up any doors, I wasn't challenging anybody. I just wanted to get the hell out of there. We had a lawyer there too. (The national office had an attorney.) So I just took the Fifth, and the Fifth, and the Fifth, and the Fifth. "I'm sorry," I said, "I take the Fifth." I forget who that chairman was at that time, but [Richard M.] Nixon was on my committee. He was there. He was there.

DONAHOE

For HUAC?

FIERING

Yeah.

DONAHOE

I thought he was just the California-

FIERING

No, no. Nixon was not on the California HUAC ever.

DONAHOE

I thought he was on that Senate investigation committee.

FIERING

You're thinking about [Jack B.] Tenney, the state senator. The Tenney committee [California State Legislature Joint Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities]. Nixon was not a state official ever, he went right to Congress in his first election. In 1950 he was still in Congress at that time. Then he became a senator. He was running for the senate against Helen Gahagan Douglas. That election wasn't until November. This was in August.

DONAHOE

And he used red-baiting against her.

FIERING

He would red-bait. Oh, yeah, that's how he got elected. But he was on the HUAC committee at that time. And I remember him sitting there, and walking around. forget who the name of that chairman was [J. Powell Thomas]. He

was a mean bastard. Anyway, he was telling me, "You don't have to be sorry. You can answer our questions." I said, "Okay, I'm not sorry. I'll take the Fifth." Because these were the early hearings where the First [Amendment] was not established with the status it was in later years.

DONAHOE

That was like in '53 or something?

FIERING

This was '50.

DONAHOE

No, I meant when the-

FIERING

Yeah, that was three years later.

DONAHOE

--when the Hollywood Ten did the First Amendment.

FIERING

Well, the Hollywood Ten did it not long before me. It was the late forties. It was similar to whatever the line was. It was the same kind of a line.

DONAHOE

But then later they decided to test the First Amendment.

FIERING

Later they started to test the First, yes, that's right.

DONAHOE

And they all went to jail for it too.

FIERING

Yes. So I did my turn. When I went out I had talked to a guy by the name of Louis Russell, who was an FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] agent assigned to the HUAC. He was the guy who was handling all the arrangements, you

know, bird-dogging all the people. I went to see him about--I said, "Who will I see about my expenses?" So they sent me to him. I went to see him about my expenses and he wanted to give me thirty-five dollars. I said, "What the hell are you talking about thirty-five dollars? I came all the way from California." He says, "I'm sorry. We can only give you expenses from the point at which we gave you the subpoena and return." I said, "Bullshit." We had it around and around. Oh, I was making noise there in the offices back there. I wouldn't take his money. So when I got back (it was a couple weeks later) I got a check for three hundred bucks. And anyway, I lived in Los Angeles for this period, and I was just relaxing. And then I went to work in this shop which was bought by Minneapolis-Honeywell [Regulator Company], called Domestic Thermostat. And then I ran into some of the UE people too, down in the UE office. The guy who was in charge there asked me if I could try to arrange for a transfer out here.

DONAHOE

This is in Los Angeles, right?

FIERING

Yeah. So when my six months was running out, wrote Matles and told him, "Say listen, I want to get a transfer." He said, "Nothing doing." So we went around and around about that for a few months, and I finally told him, "It's either I'm going .to get a transfer or else I'm going to quit."

DONAHOE

He wouldn't let you transfer on what grounds?

FIERING

Because they needed me in the East.

DONAHOE

Why couldn't they use you in the West?

FIERING

California was never much on UE. When you're talking about UE, you're talking about everything up to Iowa. He needed me to help fight the raids in the East.

DONAHOE

That's it?

FIERING

That's it. Anything west of Iowa just didn't exist. They had a couple of shops out here, but it was never much of a factor. So I told him "I quit," and I left it at that. So he sent me a wire back [saying] that he'd give me a transfer. But then we had an understanding that I would get a transfer here, which meant I could move my family here on the condition--they were here, of course, but I needed to set up house--on the condition that I would troubleshoot in the Middle West and the East.

DONAHOE

You mean travel back?

FIERING

Back and forth, yeah, which I did for six years just like it was across town.

DONAHOE

So even though you moved out here, you were still traveling more than ever.

FIERING

Yeah, because there was continual raiding going on.

DONAHOE

Yeah, but which is even worse.

FIERING

So I was in Indiana, in Illinois, Michigan, Ohio--raids in all of those places. Wherever there was a problem, I was there. Some we lost, some we won. I earned my money I'll tell you. I was organizing and troubleshooting Sunnyvale [California], Seattle, Oakland, and so on, here, just before that. That's when I started to organize and [found] this plant called Standard Coil on the east side of Los Angeles, Soto Street and Valley Boulevard. This was a plant of about eight hundred women, almost entirely Chicana, the only one of its kind making electric parts.

DONAHOE

Were they English-speaking or all Spanish speaking?

FIERING

They were both. Bilingual, yeah.

DONAHOE

Both.

FIERING

Yeah.

DONAHOE

So they were like second-generation.

FIERING

Most of them second-generation, yeah. Most of them young ones (they were young) and most of them second-generation. The older ones, if they were first-generation, having come from areas close to the Mexican border where you spoke nothing but Spanish like Arizona, Texas, lower Texas--particularly Arizona, the Arizona mines. We started a movement there, and it was a dilly. We built a UE organization just like I described to you; we built a UE union. And of course, from my view, I'll tell you if you're going to get into a fight with a company and you have your druthers, the first ones I would choose to be on my side would be women. When you convince them, there's no better fighters, no better fighters. They're harder to convince but once they're convinced-

DONAHOE

Well, they have more problems with families and husbands and everything.

FIERING

But once they make up their mind, they are fighters. And, of course, the experience I had with the hill people from the South were somewhat similar. So we built the union on the inside. Joe Houseman, a UE staffer, worked with me. We acted like a union from the word go and we got our hands on the first

group of people. Taught them how to solve grievances, how to fight grievances while they were building the union. And we did it in such a way so that they protected themselves; they had an organization. They learned how to work with that organization, how to move it on the lines. We carried on slowdowns, and the boss didn't know who was responsible, how it got started. We taught them how to deal with a boss while they were in this kind of a situation. Then the IUE came into the picture.

DONAHOE

Oh, they were out here, too?

FIERING

They were out here. They were called into that picture really by the CIO.

DONAHOE

Had they been that active out here before?

FIERING

They had not done a thing here.

DONAHOE

Until they started-

FIERING

Until the CIO created them. And why did the CIO create them? Because everybody became alarmed at the progress we were making with these people. They knew if we had a union of that kind, the UE would be really a special kind of a union. It had strong political implications. And we had against us editorials in the L.A. Times, in the Hearst paper, L.A. Herald. We had speeches in Congress about it. We had the L.A. Chamber of Commerce issuing resolutions, hitting the daily press. We had the [International Brotherhood of] Teamsters involved in it, and they weren't even in the campaign. We had the AF of L [American Federation of Labor] involved; they were not in the campaign. The Cle was involved. We had everything on us, everything, and the Cla was actively involved. Boy, they used to come with sound trucks to the plant gate, and our people would tell me, "Just stand aside, stand aside. We'll take them on." Those women used to just tear them apart. But, of course, it

became divisive with the CIO in there, particularly since we made the great mistake in starting off by championing the cause of two people who had been victimized because they were Chicanos, one of whom was a Cla worker. And he comes out with a blast against us-Tony Rios. He's still around, by the way we're pretty friendly today. Of course, time does a lot of things that you appreciate. Later we wound up on the same side in another kind of a fight.

DONAHOE

He was CIO then.

FIERING

And he was working for the CIO. As a matter of fact, he was really deputy to what's his name, the congressman. [pause] Mexican congressman from here.

DONAHOE

[Edward R.] Roybal?

FIERING

Roybal. That's when Roybal was on the Los Angeles City Council, first Chicano on the city council. Roybal created the eso, Community Service Organization. Tony Rios was the head of the CSO, and Roybal became the city councilperson. And then Tony Rios went to work for the CIO. You see, it was both. We made the mistake of singling him out to defend him. Then, of course, he used that to attack us. Then he brought in the IUE, and it became divisive. And together with all this opposition we were facing, they established a foothold there and was getting pretty close and we had filed for the election. In the first election we came in with a top vote, but we didn't get a majority, so we had a run-off. And in the second election, which I should have foreseen, but I didn't, 1 went down to the plant gate on election day to give the workers a shot in the arm. And right when I'm standing there--there's crowds of people, gates open up and the people go in, there's crowds of people there--all of a sudden out of nowhere pop up photographers and reporters and a guy from the House Un-American Activities Committee gives me a subpoena. And everybody's taking pictures.

DONAHOE

In the middle of the whole thing?

FIERING

In the middle of this whole thing, the morning of the election.

DONAHOE

Oh no.

FIERING

And everybody, the company and everybody made their moves then.

DONAHOE

This is your second subpoena?

FIERING

Yeah, this is my second subpoena.

DONAHOE

And what year was this?

FIERING

This is '52.

DONAHOE

'Fifty-two. Oh no.

FIERING

And we lost by thirty-two votes. It was heartbreaking, it was heartbreaking.  
But here again-

DONAHOE

That's not bad, considering.

FIERING

That was not bad, considering. It would have been better if we'd won.

DONAHOE

Of course.

FIERING

But here again, you see, I made the mistake. wanted to do something for the so-called progressive young people, so I suggested to the party they colonize Labor League Youth members in the plant; they start sending in young people; Anglos, Jewish. And before I knew it, I had an opposition which I really didn't-

DONAHOE

In the plant?

FIERING

From these people.

DONAHOE

The young, political people were building an opposition?

FIERING

They didn't like the political line I was following and it became my opposition. Funny thing, wasn't even following any political line.

DONAHOE

So these were young leftists.

FIERING

And they're tearing these people in the plant apart in a debate about whether they should support the IUE or support the UE.

DONAHOE

At this point?

FIERING

At this point, before the election. That's how I make trouble for myself.

DONAHOE

But they didn't discuss it with you?

FIERING

No. I had learned about it after I got hit. Son of a bitch. Anyway, that's some of my troubles. And with all of that, here again, I'm meeting with some of this criticism--you know, that I am a lousy trade union leader. The politicos are telling me I'm a lousy trade union leader. Where did they ever work? Who did they ever organize? Never, nothing. But they're telling me. Same thing went on in the South. They're coming down telling me the contract negotiator, the UE negotiator, was no good. Why was it no good? Didn't get enough money. It was the most we could get under the circumstances, the best we could get, as good as anybody got or better. But they said it was not good enough, because they always had to be more militant, see. It was, I'll tell you, a marvel that I put up with it. Something wrong with me?

DONAHOE

This one is very strange. I mean, you call these people in and instead of working with you-

FIERING

They attack me.

DONAHOE

So naturally the workers are totally confused.

FIERING

Well, the workers didn't make choices between-The workers only hear the union's no good, the union's following the wrong line, or I'm following the wrong line, see. Therefore, they ought to consider joining the IUE. They may be better. And you had this kind of a debate in the middle of a hot organizing fight, you know, with all these forces against you. What the hell does it do to the workers?

DONAHOE

Right.

FIERING

Anyway, I have to blame myself for being a fool for so long before I finally recognized what the hell was going on.

DONAHOE

This is the-

FIERING

But you know, "What the hell do they know about a union?" I asked at that point. "Where the hell did you get your credentials?"

DONAHOE

Did you ever take this up with not just them, but say the party itself?

FIERING

Well, I did. Matter of fact, I saw a guy last night who was the last guy I talked to before I finally took off. And at that time I says, "You know, the best thing you guys can do," I told them, "I'm taking all this criticism from you guys, from these people who never worked, for Christ's sake, telling me how to run a union." I says, "You know the best thing you could do--" And I won't tell you his name. He's an olq man by this time. I says, "You know the best thing you can do is go to work in a shop to see what it's like, and join a union." Many years later he did that.

DONAHOE

Really? That's a surprise.

FIERING

The first time in his life he went into a shop to earn a living, an honest living.

DONAHOE

But I mean at that time, did you bring this up with say the party policy and say, "What are you doing? This is the strangest campaign."

FIERING

Yeah, I'd argue with them. Oh yes, yes, I raised hell about it. But they'd try to justify it. Or shrug their shoulders.

DONAHOE

And then in the middle of this when you were served by HUAC, I mean, it seemed like you weren't getting any support.

FIERING

Of course, what it does, it makes me try to guess at what point wasn't the CP even run by the FBI, see. Because it has all the earmarks of that. I mean, even naive people couldn't be that goddamned naive. And I have to think at what point weren't they run by the FBI.

DONAHOE

Just blinded by loyalties like you said.

FIERING

Well. Anyway, it took me a long time to wake up. Well, finally in that period from '51 to '56, I was organizing; I did some servicing and trouble-shooting. My wife went to work as a business agent for the UE local here, by the way.

DONAHOE

It seems you were doing this on your own a lot because-

FIERING

What?

DONAHOE

The organizing.

FIERING

Well, no, you know, I was an organizer. Whatever there is to organize, I organized.

DONAHOE

But you took a lot of initiative on your own.

FIERING

Oh, yeah, yeah.

DONAHOE

Because like you said, you went to this plant, Standard Coil.

FIERING

Well, my job was to build a union, look around where you can build a union.

DONAHOE

Like how did you get to this Standard Coil in the first place? How did you, did somebody-

FIERING

How I got to it? It's probable that we were contacted by somebody in the plant. We did it with maybe one or two people. That's really all you need.

DONAHOE

Yeah.

FIERING

Then you go out and look at the situation and you see is it ripe for something or not. And if it is, it's my job, I want to build the union. I can't sit still. It's right-

DONAHOE

You really were an active organizer.

FIERING

It's like nature abhors a vacuum. I can't stand an unorganized worker. You've got to organize.

DONAHOE

So you came back to California for a little breather and look around and see what had to be done.

FIERING

Anyway. And then, of course, during those years we had problems with raiding up in Westinghouse in Sunnyvale and I went up there and we saved that thing.

DONAHOE

Northern California--oh yeah, okay.

FIERING

There's a strike in Westinghouse also and I had to go up to Seattle, to Emeryville [California] and Sunnyvale--particularly up to Seattle. Walked into Seattle and there's a bunch of people starving to death. And that was a union town. And people had union inbred in them.

DONAHOE

Seattle, Washington?

FIERING

Seattle, Washington. There was a Westinghouse shop there. And these people had absolutely no support, no contact with anybody in the East. Didn't know what to do themselves, had no money coming in, and literally living on bread and water. And I walk in there--I was asked by Matles to go and just to look and see what it's doing--I walk in there and these people are going literally hungry, and their families are going hungry. And I asked them, "Are you getting any money?" They said, "No." I says, "What kind of help are you getting?" "We're not getting any." "What are you getting for food?" "We're not getting any. We're not getting nothing." "How about your rent?" "We're not paying it." Jesus Christ, for the UE to run something like that- really it was just not UE. But I called up Matles and told him the situation and he sent some money out immediately. He helped set these guys up so that--And they saw their way through the strike. We wound up the strike, settled it, and negotiated a good agreement there. But then there was a nationwide strike at Westinghouse which I was participating in. Also out here-

DONAHOE

What year was that?

FIERING

That was '54, I think.

DONAHOE

I keep thinking something happened in '53.

FIERING

It was '53 or '54.

DONAHOE

When the IUE really took off or--FIERING: One of those years, yeah. Well, eventually they lost the Sunnyvale plant and that-

DONAHOE

To the IUE?

FIERING

I don't know. I don't know if it was IUE. wasn't in on it. I was in the East then, particularly from the beginning of '54 when there was a whole massive raid and defections started again against UE. And I was on one of my tours back to the East. I was there between '51 and '54, maybe once or twice. But then '54 really went full blast for a long spell. And then in '56 I went in for almost the entire year. During '56 I was in Chicago and was staying over at Ernie DeMaio's, the UE vice president from Chicago, and it was that day that the newspapers broke [Nikita] Khrushchev's speech [about Joseph Stalin and the purges]. Have you read that speech? Wow. I was up all night thinking to myself. I reviewed everything I'd been through with that.

### **1.11. TAPE NUMBER: VII, Side One (September 11, 1987)**

FIERING

I want to add this little piece about the proposed pact that [James J.] Matles made to [Walter P.] Reuther about no separate settlements. [tape recorder off]

DONAHOE

Okay, we are going to begin with a few things from last time that you wanted to bring up.

FIERING

One thing, I want to put in this so it fills in the missing part of a record, particularly, because of the importance of those strikes and the fact that the

three biggest unions in the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] were out at the same time.

DONAHOE

Okay.

FIERING

As much as it meant to the continued existence of the CIO. When GM [General Motors Corporation] was out, Reuther, as the leader of the GM strike, was not harassing but at least he was accusing UE [United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America] of undercutting the UAW [United Automobile Workers]. Because we were still at work at that time. We had not yet taken a position on striking our GM plants. We were waiting to see what happens. GE [General Electric Company] and Westinghouse [Electric Corporation] were out. During that period while he was undercutting the UE because the UE was still working, Matles made a proposal to Reuther. He says, "We would be willing to go on strike with the UAW." He said, itA condition of such an action would be that the UAW would agree with UE that there would be no separate settlement." That if both unions went out together against GM (and he was talking about the UE section of GM which included about thirty-five thousand people) that neither union would settle by itself--settle alone and go back without the other having settled too. So the idea being that if they go out together, they go back together. This was in response to Reuther's demand that UE pull its people out in its GM plants. And Reuther refused to accept that, so we had to play the game ourselves. We had to adopt an independent position on how we would approach our negotiations with General Motors. Eventually, of course, we went out, and the settlement that was arrived at was the compromise between the GM proposal to UAW and the Reuther proposal to GM. But it did fit in with the general agreedupon settlements in steel and elsewhere of eighteen and a half cents. At that point Reuther was stuck on nineteen and a half cents and [Charles E.] Wilson of GM was stuck on seventeen and a half cents. We agreed to a settlement after about a thirty-day strike of eighteen and a half cents, which was accepted by GM. I remember our being in Detroit where the proposal was made, where the settlement was arrived at, and we went back and got it ratified by our members. Shortly after that, of course, the UAW settled on eighteen and a half cents. But it left

Reuther an out just in case he was attacked for keeping people out for five months and being hung up on a penny. He could point to the UE and say they settled for eighteen and a half cents and steel settled for eighteen and a half cents and he had no alternative but take the monkey off his back.

DONAHOE

Right, I see. So he didn't want to go out together?

FIERING

The important thing to fill in history was this-Where he was attacking us, we did make a proposal for unity--a unified strike action. The condition being that both unions agreed that neither would go back unless the other had settled and was ready to go back too. The principle being we go out together, we go back together. Reuther refused to accept that.

DONAHOE

Which would be real solidarity.

FIERING

That would be real solidarity.

DONAHOE

Okay. That's important.

FIERING

I thought Matles's role was very commendable.

DONAHOE

Last time we had kind of ended at the point of [Nikita] Khrushchev's speech in '56 [about Joseph Stalin and the purges].

FIERING

Yeah, I was over at Ernie [DeMaio]'s house; I had stayed over his house that night. I happened to get into Chicago on some union business and so he and his wife [Mary DeMaio] invited me to stay over, which wasn't unusual. We were pretty close. That was the day that that speech broke in the papers. I remember at three o'clock in the morning--I didn't sleep that night--I kept

reading and rereading that article. Three o'clock in the morning, I remember Ernie walking 1nto my bedroom because the light was on. He wanted to know if anything was troubling me because I wasn't sleeping. We had discussed the article a little bit, and I told him this was it, and I was very, very upset about it. His concern was that something may have been troubling me to keep me from sleeping. Ernie and I always got along very well. But that thing, of course, was the final straw because I had become gradually more and more disillusioned with the [Communist] Party and its role in the trade union movement anyway. Especially, I think I told you about their attitude towards UE, and finally, finally I realized I was dealing with people here [who] know nothing about a union. Never worked in their life. Trying to dictate policy for a trade union movement, and they were leading it right down the sewer. Coupled with this latest thing on Stalin, it just left me totally disillusioned. Then I attended a caucus meeting in New York. These two people came back from a meeting with Jack Stachel, a Communist Party leader, and we asked them, "What's the word, what's the line?" And they told us. They said they were stunned, could barely talk. They said, "We were told the UE should dissolve, let everybody go wherever they could get in." Terrible. It was terrible.

DONAHOE

I remember that, yeah. So that was the party policy, to disband the UE and to join "the mass."

FIERING

They switched positions. One time they would say disband; the other time they'd say fight it out. That time they said disband. I forgot whether it was in '54 or '56.

DONAHOE

Well, according to-

FIERING

I think it was '56.

DONAHOE

Matles's accounts and everything he's saying that that was in '55--that maybe it came out in '55, publicly-and he calls it the left split.

FIERING

Well, yeah, there was a big left split in '54. Must have been '54. There was a big section of the New York-New Jersey group that took off at that time to join the [International Association of] Machinists (IAM) and some the IUE [International Union of Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers]. But I think this meeting was in '56, my last meeting of that kind.

DONAHOE

It just must have played such havoc with the union because you have everybody leaving.

FIERING

You have no idea what-

DONAHOE

The whole core is gone.

FIERING

The fact that we survived physically--I won't say anything about emotionally--physically is a marvel.

DONAHOE

Because this comes right on the heels of the government attacks, the HUAC [House Committee on UnAmerican Activities], the raids and everything.

FIERING

Years of it. Years of it.

DONAHOE

And now this.

FIERING

Just picture the CIO unions, not just CIO, but the steel union, the auto union, IBEW [International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers], IAM--any union that could get a piece of us was in there. The companies just arbitrarily recognizing the IUE or challenging our right to represent. The government with its HUAC

going from community to community, like in 1950 where I was confronted with a subpoena, which they did in collaboration with the IUE and Sylvania, and which then immediately hit the papers, on the experiences I had in '52 here in Los Angeles. They had cameras and newspapers down there. The IUE organizers all knew what was going to happen, and here comes the HUAC people with the subpoena to serve me in front of the gate. That experience is being repeated all around the country.

DONAHOE

Couldn't have planned it better.

FIERING

And the newspapers and Congress. It was a hell of a time. It was a hell of a time.

DONAHOE

Well, how could they justify this? Why disbanding the UE? Why couldn't they see this is a good union [and say] we should really try to salvage it and build it?

FIERING

Because the UE was falling apart. That's what they could see: the UE was falling apart. There was no way it could be held together. Part of the organization has held together--a small part--has held together through the years since then. And of course the atmosphere has changed; it permits them to stay alive. They're no longer being victimized the way they were, see. But how could they come to that conclusion? Well, these are people that don't know anything, they are not grounded in anything. They have no mass base. What do they know?

DONAHOE

See, that's very puzzling also that none of the leadership people had any work experience or could be making policy for situations that they didn't even know about.

FIERING

But they presumed to know about it. They all thought they were geniuses, that they were the vanguard of the working class. Because they had a title.

That made them the vanguard, and because of that title they, therefore, knew more than anybody.

DONAHOE

But what about the people that actually worked there or people that were heading the union. They didn't really have a say-so as far as this work?

FIERING

Yeah, they had input.

DONAHOE

Input, I guess.

FIERING

Sure they had input. But I'm remembering some meetings I went to like in Ohio. We'd have a fraction meeting and I had input; after all, I was the head honcho in Ohio. After I had my input, I was properly put in my place and almost, in effect, censored for daring to question anything that the party guy would say [that] this was the way it ought to be done. Looking back on it, it was just unbelievable that I could let myself get stuck in a situation like that. It wasn't like me because I'm more an individualist and a maverick, maybe a disciplined individualist. But anyway I did.

DONAHOE

And then, like the top UE leadership didn't agree with it either later. Matles disagreed; he didn't disband, he stuck.

FIERING

Well, I don't want to--Matles gave his oral history to this guy [Pennsylvania State University Oral History Collection]. I'm not going to contradict that. That's his oral history, and, as far as I am concerned, he spoke what he saw was the truth.

DONAHOE

No, but I mean the UE did survive.

FIERING

Well, the UE survived, but every year it was less and less of a UE that was surviving, see. It wasn't finally stabilized until the sixties really. In fact, to this day they have great difficulties winning a strike in small shops. That's an extraordinary situation. And they have some very talented people. There are some things they carry through which are very credible, very commendable. A lot of brainy, young idealists militated in that direction. Some of them are there now. They are still carrying on the fight. I have my own feelings about what they could do that is best for the union that's left and for themselves, but very few people have asked me. Whoever has, I have told them. But nobody listens.

DONAHOE

So, about at this point like around between '54, '56, you had felt like it is a losing battle.

FIERING

I said, "This is ,a losing battle. I'm wasting my time, I'm wasting my life. I'm sacrificing, and because I'm sacrificing, my family is sacrificing. I'm going nowhere with it. It's time to get out. Time to get out." I didn't know where I was going, I didn't know what I was going to do. I had nothing. I had no trade, I had no job. I had nothing. I had told Matles, "I'm getting out."

DONAHOE

Now, you had moved to California in '51.

FIERING

In '50 I first came out here, in August.

DONAHOE

You were sort of-

FIERING

Well, I had this agreement with Matles that whenever he wanted me to go East to troubleshoot I would, and I did. I spent a considerable amount of time--In fact, all of '56 was spent in the East--the whole year. In between '51 and '56, well, I spent time here--had that shop I was organizing. I was here in '52. I spent part of the time in '53 here. In '54 my time was split between here and

the East. I spent a lot of time in the East on some troubleshooting there in Michigan and Indiana and in Ohio. And then, of course, in '55 and '56 I spent there. 'Fifty-six I spent practically the entire year there. And in January '57, that's when I told Matles that was the end for me.

DONAHOE

But it seems from what you say that even when you came to California in '50 you were getting kind of-

FIERING

Well, when I came here in '50, I had been through a very, very rough period. My wife [Clara Wernick Fiering] and I both because she was also on the staff. We needed a rest. And we had been through an extremely rough period. That was the height of the raids, when the biggest raids took place in General Electric, Westinghouse, Sylvania [Electric Products, Inc.], and General Motors. I was involved in both the Westinghouse and General Motors raids. She was involved in GE and Sylvania. Interestingly, we won the Sylvania plants. After that in June of 1950, after Sylvania elections where we had at least registered some victories, I said I just had to get a rest. I just had to take off. So we agreed on a six-month leave with pay, though the pay was never any great big shakes in UE. There was always not much money. And my mother-in-law [Dora Wernick Bohn] was out here and we came out here--my wife's mother. And I went to work in a shop while I was here. I got tired of just hanging around the house resting. That's not my thing. So I went to work in a shop, and it happened to be a UE shop that was under raid at the time. I didn't get there in time to win it. We lost it--the election. During that period, the people here asked me to try to effect a permanent transfer to stay here, which I did. Matles had refused it at first and then I told him it was either that or I am quitting, one or the other. I didn't want to go back East anymore. I took to California and my kids liked it here. My wife was close to her mother. So he agreed on the condition that I-

DONAHOE

Be the troubleshooter.

FIERING

--be a troubleshooter.

DONAHOE

So what I was saying is that as early as '50 you were getting kind of disgusted with things. Kind of worn-out.

FIERING

I was worn-out, physically I was worn-out and emotionally worn-out. We are talking in terms of plants that employed many, many people. Like the GM plants with thirty thousand people. You know it was a big fight. The Westinghouse plant was about five thousand to seven thousand people, the one in Sharon [Pennsylvania]. And the Sylvania plants were a couple of thousand people apiece, you know. We're talking about big shops. And there's all a lot of little stuff going around at the same time and you're running around like mad every place trying to hold things together. It was a pretty rough period.

DONAHOE

So it's like all these years of organizing and building-

FIERING

I had gone without a stop.

DONAHOE

--collapsing.

FIERING

Collapsed. And that was the thing--you see.

DONAHOE

And you see it in front of your eyes.

FIERING

See, everything you've done, that you take a look at--you have worked your tail off, you know. You have accomplished things. People have loved the union. You fought off attacks from the factions in the union who were

attacking it from the inside. And then, everything came crashing down. It comes crashing down and it leaves you a little bit kind of dazed.

DONAHOE

Yeah.

FIERING

You don't know what the hell to think. But again, it appeared to me that was the direction that everything was going to go. Because when you see GE going that way, you see big GM plants going that way, and Westinghouse, you know that's the heart of the industry. If that goes, the UE is not a factor in the industry anymore, and, therefore, not a factor in the basic industries.

DONAHOE

So you feel that if they had just initially signed the clause and had been done with it that they could have salvaged a lot of this.

FIERING

Of course, at that time I still followed the line. But even during that period I did wonder why, why did we have to stick that close to this kind of policy when if we did bend, see, and sign, we'd have some way to get in there and at least defend ourselves. The thought crossed not only my mind, it crossed other minds too. But this was the policy, by golly, so we followed the policy. You try to justify it. You try to justify to yourself first so you could at least justify it to everybody else. But in retrospect, all these things that were troubling me, I can see now I should have pursued them. I should have pursued them--been more openly critical. But anyway.

DONAHOE

When you are living through it you are not quite sure what it is exactly. You know you just try to do the best you can. Well, what do you think--I mean the effects on your family life must have been really terrible. All those years of organizing and being away.

FIERING

Yeah. Of course, it has an effect on my marriage too. Because whatever problems there are in the marriage are exacerbated. And it had its impact on

the children. The marriage had its impact. The fact that we were constantly on the go had its impact. And it created some problems for my children which stayed with them. They all survived, but we all could have done better. We all could have done better. Anyway, it can't be undone.

DONAHOE

Oh, sure. You were gone a lot.

FIERING

Oh God, yes.

DONAHOE

You were hardly ever home. You told me [about] all those times when you were gone.

FIERING

There was a period there when I used to come home maybe once every six weeks for a weekend and I'd take off again. I'd be travelling the whole Middle West. That period lasted from--Well, as a matter of fact during the period of the Sylvania affair, we hired a housekeeper. It was the same housekeeper we had in the South. She agreed to come up and take care of the kids and the home. My wife used to take my youngest one with her to the Emporium, Pennsylvania, Sylvania plant, and she was away all week, and here I was away all week. That kind of thing went on for--Let's see, I went back to Dayton in '49, the end of '49 when the raids started--and this thing didn't let up until June of 1950. I was rarely around--and my wife away too. Fortunately, we lived in a small town and I told you about the experience when I was in jail.

DONAHOE Yeah.

FIERING

The people there were very nice, very nice. It made it easier for us. It could have been worse considering what the local Williamsport [Pennsylvania] newspaper did try to do with me. It could have been a lot worse.

DONAHOE

Oh, really. I can imagine. Do you think it was easier when you moved out to California because the grandmother was there.

DONAHOE

Oh, yeah, sure.

FIERING

Was your wife home more then?

FIERING

Well, she didn't work when we came out here; she didn't work at first. I didn't work either, you know, for the UE. She didn't work either. And she didn't go back to work for the UE for a couple of years. I think not until '53.

DONAHOE

So she was mainly home even though you were traveling allover and doing organizing.

FIERING

Well, yeah. Yeah. Well, most of the organizing I did was around that shop on the east side.

DONAHOE

The Standard Coil, yeah.

FIERING

Standard Coil, which was in town at least, you know.

DONAHOE

You went out a lot. You went out of town a lot.

FIERING

I went out of town on occasions, yeah. So that was until about '53 she became a business agent of the the UE. She didn't work either. And she didn't go back to local union here. [pause] No, she was asked to take on a special assignment up in Oakland and Emeryville [California] where the IUE was raiding us in a Westinghouse and General Electric plant.

DONAHOE

So she went up there?

FIERING

She went up there, yeah. I don't want to make a big issue about our personal feelings. We were kind of taken advantage of because the guy who was up there who should have been able to handle it--because we didn't have a terribly big union in California--was "able to finagle something else. But that's another story. In any event, she went up there, she did the job. She won. She succeeded in winning out against the raids. She was a very special kind of organizer.

DONAHOE

And you and the children stayed behind.

FIERING

The children were here, of course, yeah.

DONAHOE

And then after that, were you both mostly home?

FIERING

Well, she was home. She then went to work as a business agent for the local down here. I continued to move around and did some work here including negotiating contracts. Anyway, that plus these other factors produced the situation where I decided I had to get out. I didn't know where I was going or what I was going to do. I just had to get out. I didn't know. As I say, I had nothing to go to. I should have been a little smarter than that. Should have at least tried to line up something to go to. Some of the other guys did; they lined up a job in another union.

DONAHOE

Really?

FIERING

Oh, sure.

DONAHOE

People that wanted to leave the UE?

FIERING

Yeah. I couldn't do that. I just couldn't see myself doing that.

DONAHOE

You felt it was disloyal.

FIERING

I felt it would be selling out the UE, selling out my principles about the UE. But most of the other guys who did take off, they took off with understandings with other unions or at least had something to go to--they lined something up.

DONAHOE

Was this at the point where the position was to disband the UE? That people decided they were going to leave and go other places?

FIERING

There was no position to disband. Individuals or groups just took off. They either went to IUE or they went to the IAof M.

DONAHOE

Did they get backing from the party to go to any of these places?

FIERING

Yeah, sure. In fact, they were encouraged. Anybody could go wherever they wanted.

DONAHOE

Oh, I thought maybe they helped-

FIERING

No, it was not a party decision. The party, if asked, was patting them on the back, [saying] go wherever you can to survive.

DONAHOE

But they didn't help them in any way.

FIERING

No. They couldn't. They didn't have the means.

DONAHOE

The party didn't have any kind of connections where they were going.

FIERING

What did they have? They had no connections any place. They had nothing. Who the hell could they help? But, as if they could help, they would pat them on the back as if they really had some authority, you know. They were a--what's the word?--they didn't make any difference. There's a word for it, irrelevant. But, shoot, we had some goddamn good organizers, and other unions were glad to get them. Some of them thought they could make a deal and they went and made a deal and brought their membership over with them. And then they got fired and the membership stayed with the union that they transferred to. That happened too, by the way. The machinists union particularly. To some extent the IUE. They made a good deal. They thought they had a good solid job lined up, took all their people with them, and then they got fired after a few months. They deserved it.

DONAHOE

Well, I was curious that there was this position to disband the UE and go to other unions, but say a person like you didn't agree with that.

FIERING

There was no position. More like anarchy. I was not going to sell myself, sell my membership for a job. That's really how I felt.

DONAHOE

Oh, right. No, I agree with [you], but you know, I'm saying but then you decided to leave the UE anyway.

FIERING

I decided to leave the UE, just leave it. I wanted to leave it, so I left it. But I wasn't going to sell my membership for a job someplace. I didn't know what I was--I had no job.

DONAHOE

Oh, right. But you didn't think there was any point in staying in the UE anyway.

FIERING

That's right. I thought it was a waste of time. It was just hard on the nerves. I was paying too big of a price for it at that point. And I just said, "Well, I will make my own individual decision for myself; I'll get out." And I got out. And I just felt contempt for these guys who bought a job. Looking back on it now, I don't really blame them that much. I'm not that critical of them. But time mellows a lot of things really, that's what it is. I could not see myself doing that. As a matter of fact, a couple of years later I got a job offer from the IBEW. I met with them and I agreed to go to work for them. And then on my way home--this was on Friday and I was to go to work on Monday-

DONAHOE

To work for the union.

FIERING

For the IBEW, yeah. It's a good union, you know.

DONAHOE

Yeah.

FIERING

It's just that I happened to have a lot of fights with them during the period when the UE was growing; UE used to raid them. The reason I went to jail was because they broke a strike that I was leading in Pennsylvania-Williamsport. But, anyway, so we had the j~b set and on the way home I got to thinking why do these guys want me. They didn't ask me for anything, they just wanted me. I said maybe after they have me--and this was kind of screwy thinking--maybe they'll insist that I raid the UE. So when I got home I called up the guy who was the head IBEW international guy here, Larry Townsend. And I said, "Listen, one point I just want to get clear with you. I want to go to work for you. I agreed to it, that I want to work for you. But I want one thing understood: I'm not going to be asked to raid the UE." When he heard that he said, "Forget it."

DONAHOE

So he did want you to do that.

FIERING

No, doesn't mean that. But who the hell was I to start laying down conditions of any kind. He didn't ask that. It was very foolish on my part, because I could have always said, "I'm not going in for that" if they had ever made a demand like that on me. And I would not have done it. So, here I want to be the-

DONAHOE

Principled.

FIERING

[laughter] The principled guy. What a stupid thing that was, because if I had gone to work for the IBEW then it would have--now that I know the IBEW now, I know them here and I work with them here--it would have been a great thing. I could have done a lot of organizing, a lot of organizing. In fact, they would have given a job to my wife because my wife gave them a stiff pain in the ass. She challenged them in a number of places and she beat them, or else. if they did win, it was a hell of a tussle. And they had a tremendous amount of respect for her too. She wasn't involved in the consideration for a job then; she was working for the UE. But the Fiering family gave them one hell of a problem. They had a lot of respect for us as organizers. So that was stupid.

DONAHOE

Well, what about the people that stayed in the UE? What did you think about--did you just feel that they were wasting their time?

FIERING

I felt they were wasting their time. I didn't think they were going anywhere, but-

DONAHOE

But you didn't feel any hostility towards them like you did towards the other ones, yeah. Right.

FIERING

Oh, no. No, these were people I worked with and struggled with and sacrificed with for so many years. I felt very close to all of them. Jesus, they were a big part of my life. There was none of that. No, there was none of that. And my feeling about them was, look, you know, you make your decision, you want to stay, you stay. It's not up to me to make up your mind for you. So I made up my mind for myself. That's all.

DONAHOE

But what about your wife? It seemed like she didn't leave.

FIERING

No, she stayed with the UE until '63 when her heart went bad.

DONAHOE

So she stayed for almost ten years more.

FIERING

Ten years, yeah. Six years after I left. In '63 she had to quit because of her heart. I went to work knocking around trying to decide what direction I was going to go and decided I was going to stay with the working class. Stay close to the trade union movement. Which I don't know, I don't know if it was a smart decision. Probably. Maybe. I might just as well have decided to look for some way to make some money, because we didn't have any.

DONAHOE

She wasn't being paid?

FIERING

She was being paid, but you have to know the UE.

DONAHOE

It's not enough, right. I can imagine.

FIERING

You have to know the UE. We mean we used to follow Matles boasting that we got the lowest wages in the trade union movement, you know. We were doing it because it was an ideal, it was a cause, which was Matles's idea which

he convinced us of and which was his way of getting away with paying low wages. Because he never really thought too much about the individuals on the staff. They didn't really mean that much to him. Which I didn't realize until later how little. A year after I quit they put in a pension plan. I'd put in twenty years in that union. And a year after I quit they put in a pension plan, and they wouldn't even make it retroactive for the one year so I could at least be eligible for a pension sometime or another.

DONAHOE

So you got nothing.

FIERING

Got not a nickel. And I'm not the only one.

DONAHOE

Yeah, there are probably a lot of people in your condition.

DONAHOE

There are others like that too. Put in the best years of our lives and that son of a bitch, Matles--Not only that, but when I was in jail, Matles cut off my pay because I wasn't working. Can you picture that? Can you picture that?

DONAHOE

Oh, my gosh. Just like the boss.

FIERING

I resented that terribly.

DONAHOE

I can imagine. Especially when your family needs it the most.

FIERING

His rationale was that he put my wife on the payroll. She worked, therefore, he was justified in cutting off my pay.

DONAHOE

But a lot of times you both worked and you needed two incomes.

FIERING

We needed it. Anyway, when I quit I made a big stink about it and let a lot of people know about it, and he couldn't take that. So he paid me that money back.

DONAHOE

Oh, from when you were in jail?

FIERING

But that was already seven years later, seven and a half years later--or eight years later.

DONAHOE

But they never gave you a pension?

FIERING

Never gave me a pension. No pension rights.

DONAHOE

That's what happens to a lot of good organizers?

FIERING

I outlived him anyway. That's one satisfaction I got.

DONAHOE

And went on to do other things too.

FIERING

The thing that grabs me most is I used to think so highly of the guy, you know. Of course, he was still a terrific organizer and negotiator. He's not the trade union leader I used to think he was now that I reflect back and I know a little bit more. But his attitude towards people--the people on the staff--was inexcusable. I'll never forgive him. [I started out protesting the evils of the Depression, its dehumanizing effects. I was propelled towards socialism as the solution. The route and hopes had may have been unrealistic, but I still think socialism is the answer for those looking for a more just and humane society.

The conditions I saw in my youth--the hunger, misery, unemployment--prompted me to look for the reasons millions of people could be ground down, unable to help themselves. They lacked power. The answer was empowerment. Union organization was empowerment and the instrument to improve their lot and control their futures. I've organized tens of thousands of people. I've taught them that lesson. To have power, stay organized. Wherever they are today, they still have a union, maybe not UE, but a union. That, to me, was time well-spent. That gives me a sense of satisfaction.]

DONAHOE

Was it hard then on your family when you had two different positions like this when you had made the break with UE and your wife was still on the staff?

FIERING

She was working, and of course we had to adjust to her salary. Mr. Fiering added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

DONAHOE

But I mean you had different outlooks sort of?

FIERING

No, no, no. My wife was very sympathetic with anything I wanted to do, that's one thing I could say. She was very sympathetic to everything I wanted to do, and when wanted to quit, she agreed that I should quit.

DONAHOE

And you agreed that she shouldn't quit if she didn't want to quit.

FIERING

Yeah. And she didn't want to quit anyway.

DONAHOE

But that didn't make it hard like having a difference.

FIERING

Oh no, no. No problem except financial problems.

DONAHOE

Yeah, I can see that.

FIERING

Because I was without a job. One of my kids, let's see, she was in college. One was in high school, and one was just entering junior high.

DONAHOE

That's when you need money the most.

FIERING

That's when we need the money the most, right.

DONAHOE

Boy.

FIERING

So I ran into some people who told me about-Well, I decided I'd go to work instead of trying to become rich. I didn't know how I was ever going to become rich. But instead of trying to look for ways to make money, I decided I'd go to work in a shop, which I suppose down the road saved my life. Hard physical work was what I needed. After some little period of kicking around at what I was going to do, some people acquainted me with the fact that the sheet metal people--There was a lot of work in the sheet metal industry and the construction industry.

DONAHOE

As a worker.

FIERING

As a worker.

DONAHOE

Not an organizer.

FIERING

No, as a worker. So I went down to the sheet metal union [Sheet Metal Workers International Association] and tried to get in, but I couldn't because I didn't know the trade. You had to have an apprenticeship training and a full record of having worked in the industry. But the guy who was the dispatcher did tell me that if I could get a welding certification he might get me a job--get me into the union and then a job. The dispatcher is the guy at the window at the union who dispatches people out to the work. Because the hiring is done through the union hall. So how do I do that? I asked around and so a couple of guys who I ran into told me that the thing to do would be to go to--Well, one of them tried to teach me the damn trade out of a book to prepare me for an exam which you have to take. I just couldn't get anywhere with that book; my mind just wasn't with it. Another tried to teach me some welding, and he didn't get very far with me. So they suggested I go to Trade-Tech [Los Angeles Trade-Technical College] and take a welding course there. I signed up for the course and 1--First you sign up and they give you a qualifying test or an IQ test or some damn thing, and I came out very good and they asked me what the hell do you want to get into this for with what talents you got and so on. [I said] "I want it. I have to have a job." So they said, "All right we'll send you up to the guy. You show him this." And they gave me my papers and all of that and they sent me up to the instructor of the welding class. He was a hell of a nice guy. He was a former ironworker himself, and he put me to work and watched over me. And then weeks went by and I was getting edgy. This is a two-year course we're talking about. After about eight weeks, or seven weeks, I went up to him and I says, "Listen, this is for the birds." I says, "I've got three growing kids. I have to have a job. I've got to be able to pass an exam immediately. I can't hang around." He says, "Give me a few days, and I'll work very closely with you." And he did. Then I told him, "Well, I've got to take my chances on that exam." So they have state-certified agencies that test you for these so that you qualify to work in construction. (Because everything is subject to building codes, you know.) I went down there and I took the test. And I was having a very difficult time with it because I really didn't know what the hell they were talking about. I had to play it by feel. And finally, the guy who--after two and a half days of working on this thing (it should take a half a day, and I am struggling with it for two and a half days) the guy who was in charge of the place came over and he says, "What's the problem?" He says,

"Let me see." You know how welders have a--I says, "Listen, I have a job. But, I've got to have that piece of paper."

## **1.12. TAPE NUMBER: VII, Side Two (September 11, 1987)**

DONAHOE

So you are telling the man that you have to speed this process up.

FIERING

I said, "Listen, I can't wait. I've got a job, but I need this piece of paper." So, he says, "Let me see what you're doing." There are several different kinds of welding that you have to pass in order to get what's called a certification. There are different kinds of certifications: one for working in the sheet metal trade and one for working in the heavy construction trade, you know [where] you see them putting up these steel structures. And I was going for both of them. So he takes a look and he says, "Give me that." And he takes the tool from me and he starts doing this thing for me. When he gets through he says, "Let's take 'him' [the steel plates] over and get 'him' checked out." He would take them to a test place and they would check the stress to see whether it will stand the stress. And they stood the stress test, and he says, "Well, that's okay now." And he took me over and he gave me the piece of paper.

DONAHOE

Just like that?

FIERING

Just like that.

DONAHOE

And this was the man from the class, the instructor from--?

FIERING

No, no. This was not the instructor. This was the guy from the state agency that gives you the test-DONAHOE --that you were down there doing for two and a half days.

FIERING

That I had to pass. He was my test taker.

DONAHOE

And he gave you a certificate?

FIERING

He gave me the certificate. So I went back down to the union hall and I saw the dispatcher and I says, "I've got that paper." (This was eight weeks later.) He says, "What the hell are you talking about." "You told me to go get this welding certification and you would have a job." He says, "What are you talking about?" And I started getting very excited, you know, and angry. And he says, "Okay, okay, okay, let me see it." He sees it and he says okay and he sends me out on a job.

DONAHOE

Do you think he was putting you on when he said go to Trade-Tech, because it was a two-year program? You wouldn't be back for two years.

FIERING

No, he needed welders. All he said to me was get a welding certification. He thought I was a welder. I just didn't have the certification.

DONAHOE

Oh, he didn't even realize-

FIERING

I had never welded a thing in my life. I never saw-

DONAHOE

It was probably unheard of that you did this two year in eight weeks and got a certification.

FIERING

That's right, that's right. He thought I was a welder and all I needed was to pass the test and get--I didn't know-

DONAHOE

It's like somebody who was a teacher and had to get a California license or something like that.

FIERING

That's right.

DONAHOE

You never had a day of experience.

FIERING

I didn't know welding from apple butter.

DONAHOE

So he sent you on a job.

FIERING

So he sent me on a job. Once he sends you on a job, you fill out the union application form and you are a member of the union.

DONAHOE

Automatically?

FIERING

Automatically. That's the most important thing: to become a member of the union. Doesn't matter if you don't know anything. And I didn't; I didn't know anything.

DONAHOE

Well, there was no initiation period or anything like that?

FIERING

Well, you pay your initiation fee. But you can stagger the initiation fee so you pay it off so much a month. The initiation fee at that time was \$324, I remember. It was a hundred hours' pay. The rate of pay was \$3.24 an hour, which was high. That was good money.

DONAHOE

Was there a probation period?

FIERING

No. There's no probation period there.

DONAHOE

There couldn't be.

FIERING

Because you must be a journeyman to get into the union. It means you served your probation when you served your apprenticeship.

DONAHOE

That's it, right. But you skipped everything.

FIERING

I skipped everything.

DONAHOE

Nobody ever knew.

FIERING

Of course, later on many of the guys who I went to work with on the job used to come over and say, "How much did you pay and who did you payoff to get this certification?" I couldn't convince them that I didn't pay off anybody.

DONAHOE

It was a real fluke.

FIERING

It was a fluke, right. I didn't realize until later how lucky I really was.

DONAHOE

And you had such a good-paying job.

FIERING

That's right. Of course, I had to know the job though. So they sent me out on a job. First job I lasted was about five to six days but it was the kind of stuff I picked up right away and I could last. But then when they started asking me to do something different and I didn't know what the hell they were talking about, they saw that quick enough and I got fired that day.

DONAHOE

Oh, no.

FIERING

So I went from job to job. So what do I do? go down to the union and get back on the list, and [if] there's a lot of work, you get sent out right away because there are plenty of jobs. They put you on the bottom of the list if you come in and then you work your way up to the top of the list. But with the number of jobs there were that was nothing. It was a matter of a day or two, see.

DONAHOE

So they had a lot of jobs.

FIERING

Oh, they had a lot of work. That was a very busy period in construction, yeah.

DONAHOE

It was mostly construction.

FIERING

Oh, it was all construction. Sometimes in a shop, but mostly out of a shop.

DONAHOE

The union couldn't do anything like if you got fired off a job, they wouldn't penalize you in any way and say, "You don't know what you are doing. How can you be in this union?"

FIERING

Oh, no. They don't know whether I was fired or not.

DONAHOE

Oh. They don't know anything about it?

FIERING

Because see in that industry, you don't have to be fired, you can just quit a job. Go down to the union and say, "I didn't like that job. I want another job." So they put you on the list, you wait your turn, you go up, and then they send you out on another job.

DONAHOE

You never have to do any explaining to them.

FIERING

Nothing, nothing.

DONAHOE

So they would have no way of knowing that you were learning on the job.

FIERING

They had no way of knowing. And they didn't care. They didn't care.

DONAHOE

Which is good. You went into a good industry.

FIERING

I was very, very lucky. It was a good union, too, besides. It was a good union.

DONAHOE

Now, what is the name of that union?

FIERING

The Sheet Metal Workers.

DONAHOE

The Sheet Metal Workers, yeah, of course. And they hire them-

FIERING

Local 108.

DONAHOE

--Oh, of course. Not too many unions have that kind of hiring policy.

FIERING

Well, all the construction unions have it.

DONAHOE

They do have that.

FIERING

Oh sure. That's typical of the construction trades. Sure.

DONAHOE

Did you have benefits?

FIERING

Oh, well, I didn't need any benefits. No, I didn't stay long enough on the job to get benefits. You have to have so many hours to get benefits. I didn't have the occasion to because my wife had benefits on her job. Or did she? I'm not even sure. I don't even remember back then whether she did or not. I think she did. And whether I had them, I don't think I worked enough hours. Of course, in the beginning, I didn't have them I'm sure because I didn't have the hours in. I think later on I did have the hours in to get medical benefits, but I never got the hours in to get vacation pay or pension rights. But, anyway, so I went down and they sent me out to another job. So I'd last on the job a day or two days and they'd find me out and they'd fire me. You've got to do a head trip. You've got to steel yourself to that kind of thing. I went through about forty or fifty jobs in a year.

DONAHOE

That many?

FIERING

That's right. Job to job to job. And every place I'd go, I'd pick up a little bit, see. I learned how to install air-conditioning. I became an expert welder. In fact, I became a foreman, too.

DONAHOE

So you had to view it as a learning experience.

FIERING

That's it exactly. You just got to steel yourself that this is what you are going to go through, or else you get demoralized.

DONAHOE

Yeah, right, [from] being fired all the time.

FIERING

I said, "This is my training." That's all. So people were very nice too. They helped carry me--workers on the job. I wasn't hard to get along with; I was, you know, pretty amiable.

DONAHOE

And you were older too at this time.

FIERING

I was middle-aged. I was forty-four years old.

DONAHOE

So that wasn't easy.

FIERING

That was not easy.

DONAHOE

Learning a whole new trade, right.

FIERING

Especially after not having done any physical work for more than twenty years. It was not easy. And that's heavy work, heavy. It's metal, you know. And you're lugging around metal all day, lifting it and carrying it, and some of those piles which you carry are heavy. I used to fallout of my car when I'd come home at night and crawl into the house and into bed. It was rough. So I stayed

with it until 1964. But during that period there were periods of unemployment. Or the UE would call me and say, "Look, we've got a hot situation, and we would like to know if you can help us." Either with organizing or--That's another time I went up to Sunnyvale-Westinghouse. Or locally in Los Angeles, Western Wire, with some negotiations they needed some help with.

DONAHOE

So this was like between '56 and '64 this is all happening.

FIERING

Nineteen fifty-seven.

DONAHOE

'Fifty-seven. Okay.

FIERING

I went to work in sheet metal in--let's see, I quit UE in January--I went to work in sheet metal in April or thereabouts in '57. Then the UE would call me on and off. They would call me in 1959 for a spell and in 1961 they called me. But then I'd go back to work in sheet metal, see. Or if there was an extended period of unemployment, I went to work in an oil company--Baker Oil-out here. I went to work for--I used my welding certification as a maintenance mechanic, which I knew nothing about either. But it got me into the shop. My welding experience got me into the shop. I became a shop chairman in that oil company and I became a member of the oil workers union [Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers International Union]. I was the shop chairman of that particular thing and negotiated contracts. John Day got me in there. I don't know if you know him.

DONAHOE

No. From the oil workers or is he a--1

FIERING

Yeah, he was working in that shop. But I had known him for many years. I knew him in Saint Louis and then when he came back here. But then most of the time I worked in sheet metal. Whenever work picked up, you know, I went back because it paid a lot more.

DONAHOE

It seems like this a long period of transition. You were learning a trade and still-

FIERING

Doing organizing.

DONAHOE

--and still doing organizing. But still not clear what were you going to move in terms of organizing.

FIERING

Well, gradually and then I got the itch to go back. I wanted to get back.

DONAHOE

But not to UE.

FIERING

No. Not back to UE.

DONAHOE

But you really didn't make a break with them.

FIERING

I don't think Matles would have wanted me back in the UE by that time, because I wasn't too friendly when I walked out. I just walked out, you know.

DONAHOE

But you said the people still called you to do organizing, West Coast people.

FIERING

Oh, yeah. As a matter of fact, it was Maties who asked me to take on a part-time job. He didn't mind that, see. But he didn't want me around him permanently, I don't think, anymore. But that period is kind of vague in my mind--a little hazy. But I did go back at the urging of the international--that

means Matles--to take on a specific negotiation or to help out in organizing like going up to Sunnyvale. That I could only do if Matles asked me to do it.

DONAHOE

FIERING

So it wasn't like a total break. No, it wasn't a total break. But I just couldn't get the trade union movement out of my system (never really did), and I began to get the urge to go back after a few years.

DONAHOE

To organizing, not just working.

FIERING

Yeah, that's right. And I laid low in my union-the sheet metal workers union Local 108. As a matter of fact, they went on a red hunt while I was a member of it while I was working in the trade. But they missed me because I was very quiet. But they were after a number of other guys whom the [Jack B.] Tenney committee [California State Legislature Joint Fact-finding Committee on UnAmerican Activities] had fingered.

DONAHOE

The late fifties?

FIERING

Yeah, the Tenney committee got them. And once the Tenney committee named them, why the local people checked them out and they just raised hell with a lot of lives. I mean, the local union went on a red hunt. Because these guys were noisy in meetings, you know. They were trying to carry the line in meetings. They were still in it--that is, they were still making a revolution.

DONAHOE

This was still a bad time, yeah.

FIERING

But I was very quiet. I was not on the California list. I was on the HUAC list. They didn't look at the HUAC list. They only looked on the Tenney list. So they didn't come across my name.

DONAHOE

That Tenney committee, was that--what do they call it?--the senate investigating committee?

FIERING

The state senate investigating committee.

DONAHOE

State senate.

FIERING

Senator Tenney, yeah.

DONAHOE

John or Jack?

FIERING

I think it was John Tenney--Jack Tenney.

DONAHOE

Yeah, I remember that one. That's the one I thought [Richard] Nixon was on, and I just got confused with that, yeah.

FIERING

No, no. Nixon was on HUAC. He was on my committee.

DONAHOE

So you survived that.

FIERING

I survived it because I was very quiet. These guys would get up at meetings and raise hell, and my attitude was the hell with that shit. I'm not there for that.

DONAHOE

Had they been there for a while?

FIERING

Well, they were in there longer than me. Yeah, they were in there longer than me. But that's not what I am here for. I'm here for a job. I'm not here to make any kinds of revolutions.

DONAHOE

Were you interested then in working more in the union itself just as an organizer with the Sheet Metal Workers?

FIERING

Well, the opportunity never came up. I don't know. As I look back on it now, I know more about the building trades; I would have enjoyed it. I don't think I would have enjoyed it as much as the basic industries--mass production industries. That was really my meat, see. Being a business agent in the building trades union, it's a different kind of an industry. A different kind of job, different kind of organizing. So I did learn one thing. I learned, by God, that despite all those things I had said against business agents in other unions, it was all a lot of crap. People are essentially, the people in the trade union movement-- What I was talking about was my attitude towards other business agents and unions, which came about as a result of this elitism in the UE which was used to fortify us. That we were the best and the only and so on, which was just so much crap. So I learned a lot about business agents and other unions. By and large, I'd say that the people in other unions worked just as hard and were just as honest, just as dedicated. Have a different point of view, that's all, than people in the UE. But they are good people. And they could work for me anytime. They work very hard, and I admire many of them. I admire many of them for what they put in. They've made sacrifices.

DONAHOE

So it was an eye-opener.

FIERING

It certainly was an eye-opener to me about the rest of the trade union movement.

DONAHOE

You had really been isolated a lot.

FIERING

Well, we isolated ourselves. We isolated ourselves. God damn it--a lot of things to regret. But that's what I learned about these guys in the sheet metal union and then, since that time, people I have worked with. Learned about them. The general run of people that are working for the workers are damn good people.

DONAHOE

So you just started kind of looking around or thinking where did you want to go into the trade union movement.

FIERING

Well, what I wanted to do is get back in. So what happened was I applied for a job. I had heard that AFSCME [American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees] had been looking for a business agent or somebody to handle grievances. I didn't know AFSCME from a hole in the ground. I didn't even know what it stood for at the time.

DONAHOE

That was such a change, yeah.

FIERING

They told me it was a union in the public area. So I applied for the job to the district executive board and was interviewed by them. As I was walking out of that office, the guy outside in the waiting room there says to me, "You're Henry Fiering, aren't you?" And I said, "Yeah." "And your wife is Clara Fiering." I said, "Yeah. Who are you?" He tells me his name is Ed Lingo. "Who's Ed Lingo?" He says, "I'm the assistant director of the Los Angeles-Orange County Organizing Committee, the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations] here." Didn't mean anything to me. I says, "Yeah, yeah. How do you know my name?" He says, "Well, that's a long story." "Yeah,

but how do you know it?" "Well," he says, "you remember you used to work in the South. I used to work in Bethlehem Steel in Scranton, PA. And in 1950, the CIO asked me to go on their staff and asked me to go South." (That was two years after I had left the South already; I left in '48.) He says, "And it just happens that I went to a lot of the places you used to work at and I heard a lot of stories about you. They were very, very interesting and I started collecting a lot of material about you and stuff that you had put out--material you had put out." So he says, "I do know something about you." He says, "I'm glad to run into you. You just applied for that job didn't you?" I says, "Yeah." He says, "Well, you are not going to get it." Well, what I later learned was that I was on the blacklist. The AFL-CIO was not going to hire me.

DONAHOE

That late?

FIERING

Yeah.

DONAHOE

It was because of your politics.

FIERING

Yeah, because of my past history. In that I had to be cleared--I don't know, they had a machine that they had to clear you all the way up to [George] Meany's office, or some crap. Anyway, he says, "You are not going to get it. But I would like to see you back in the labor movement." So I said, "Well, I want to come back." The next thing I knew, I got interviewed by the IBEW. I got a call from the IBEW. So I went down and talked to them. I don't know whether you put that story I told you before on the tape. I wasn't talking on tape at the time.

DONAHOE

No, I don't think so.

FIERING

So I went down and saw the guy, Larry Townsend, I think it was, the international rep for the IBEW here at the time [who] did the hiring. It was for

a field rep's position. He interviewed me and he offered me the job. And I said, "Fine." He said, "You start Monday." It wasn't until I was on the way home that I got to thinking, you know, what I was telling you.

DONAHOE

Oh, okay.

FIERING

Why do these guys want me? I was suspicious that they wanted to use me for what I thought was a nefarious purpose, which was against my principles. And so I got home and I called him up and I says, "Hey, that offer of a job is pretty nice and I want one thing understood. I want it understood that I am not going to be used to raid the UE." And with that, he says, "Forget it." He probably had no more intention of raiding the UE than the man on the moon because the UE didn't have anything significant that they really wanted. Nothing significant that they wanted. I was foolish to even think it.

DONAHOE

He was upset that you were setting conditions?

FIERING

Of course he was upset. Who am I? I haven't even started to work for him and I'm laying down conditions under which I'm working.

DONAHOE

Now, were they in the AFL-CIO?

FIERING

Yes, oh, they're a powerful union.

DONAHOE

Well, how come you weren't on the blacklist there?

FIERING

Well, because by that time they were ready. They were ready. Ed Lingo had done that for me.

DONAHOE

Oh, but how much time had passed?

FIERING

At that time, let's see, that was-

DONAHOE

Between AFSCME and this?

FIERING

I'm trying to get my dates straight on that. By that time there must have been about almost two years that had passed.

DONAHOE

So he was probably out there working for you.

FIERING

This was not like one day and then tomorrow. Oh no. No, no, no. As a matter of fact, he kept in touch with me. He kept in touch with me until I finally went to work for AFSCME.

DONAHOE

So he was actually probably working behind the scenes for you all the time.

FIERING

He was working for me. When he told me, he says, "I'm going to get you back in the labor movement."

DONAHOE

And he meant it.

FIERING

And he meant it.

DONAHOE

Wow. And he was just a regular guy? He wasn't really a political person?

FIERING

Well, no, he was just a steelworker, just an ordinary steelworker. He was a leader in his union. To be offered a job as a full-time rep for the CIO you would have to have been a leader of the union, in this case the [United] Steel[workers of America] and Bethlehem Steel, a powerful, strong section of the union. But he was an ordinary guy. He wasn't a politician in the sense that he would follow-

DONAHOE

But you must have made such an impression.

FIERING

With the stories he had heard about me--and this was after a two-year hiatus, you know, a two-year lapse--I was very flattered. I don't mind telling you. You can tell [because] I'm telling you the story here, and this is now twenty-seven years later--twenty-six years later. I feel very good about that.

DONAHOE

Yeah, well, it really sort of ascertains a lot of things.

FIERING

Well, I made some noise in the South. That's what I did. Anyway, so he was the one who put the IBEW on my tail. And so the IBEW called me. What happened is what I told you about that transpired. Then, I didn't get that job. I was still working in sheet metal, and on odd occasions I went back to work in that oil company. They always had a job for me whenever I wanted to go back, which was very interesting. But times were good so it wasn't too difficult. In 1964, I finished working on the Music Center [of Los Angeles County], the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, and the new [Los Angeles City Department of] Water and Power Building downtown as a sheet metal worker. I won't tell you about some of the experiences I had in the sheet metal trade. That's another kind of story, but it doesn't fit in here anyway. Very interesting to me and interesting to my kids. My kids get a big kick out of it. I then went on to work on a couple of jobs after I had gotten laid off from the Music Center. I was sent out on a job on a construction job in the [San Fernando] Valley--a new building which turned out to be extremely heavy. By that time I was already in my early

fifties. Construction workers should be retired by that time. It was very, very heavy work. When that job was halfway over--As a matter of fact, I asked the foreman if he wouldn't lay me off. And he wouldn't lay me off. So I just sat down on the job and he had to fire me if he wanted to get the job done. I went back down to the union hall and got another job. I went out to a new hospital that was being built out in the Valley. That was also very heavy work where the guy running the job was a very tough foreman. And I stayed on that job just a short while, and during this period, by the way, I developed back problems. I thought it was the heavy work. And a couple of times, I had to be put into the hospital for a check-up on my back. To make a long story short, I found once I quit the trade, I never had a back problem.

DONAHOE

Really?

FIERING

It was in my head.

DONAHOE

No, but it was heavy work.

FIERING

It was heavy work, but I didn't really have back troubles. It was really psychological--like I wanted to have back troubles. Like back troubles should come with that territory. Anyway, this job on Saint Mary's Hospital had a very tough foreman. And I thought, I really don't need this. I had met a friend of mine--I had met a guy, Hugh Weiss, and we became somewhat friendly, who owned a real estate company. And he was begging me to come to work for him. That field was also good at the time. I had met him because two years previous to that I had undertaken a job as a campaign manager for a guy who was my daughter [Roberta Fiering Se~ovia]'s teacher, Gary Lipton. He was running for city council. And so I met a number of friends. And then one of the people I made friends with was this guy who owned a real estate outfit--a real estate broker--who was on me to come to work for him. Well, I had had it in 1964 with that hospital job. So I thought, I've got to make a change. So I quit and I maintained my dues in the union because I didn't know which way I was

going to go in case I needed a job. But I went and saw this friend of mine--this real estate broker--and he gave me a job immediately. I worked in a real estate thing for little over a year, and I made a lot of money. I made money from the first day I went to work there.

DONAHOE

Selling houses?

FIERING

Yeah. It was just fantastic. I made more money than I ever made in my life. But I quit him because I didn't like the way he was treating people. And I went to work for a big outfit in the Valley.

DONAHOE

Real estate.

FIERING

Real estate outfit, yeah. Gribin-Von Dyl.

DONAHOE

Which one?

FIERING

Gribin-Von Dyl. It's the biggest outfit in the Valley, and I became their number one guy. They were big out there; they had offices allover the Valley. I stayed there for a while, and I was very successful. I made money, but it got to be very boring. I had only been in this thing for over a year, but it got to be so boring, and was wishing I could get back into the labor movement. One day, I am sitting at this desk feeling sorry for myself and this guy, Lingo, calls me up. He says, "Are you ready to come back to the trade union movement?" I says, "Just tell me where and when." He says, "I've got an appointment for you today if you want to." I says, "What time?" He says, "Two o'clock." I says, "Give me the address; I'll be there." So I hung up and I walked out of that office, and I never came back.

DONAHOE

Perfect timing.

FIERING

I went down and I met the district director of AFSCME.

DONAHOE

So it was AFSCME again.

FIERING

It was AFSCME again. I had an interview with them and he asked me a series of questions primarily about my background and my past. I said to myself--political past--and I says, "Look, I ain't going to bullshit about this thing. These guys probably know as much about me as I know. I'm going to level with them. If they don't like it, the hell with' them." So I leveled with them. So when I get through, he says, "Well, I just wanted to see if you were telling me the truth." He pulls a dossier out of his desk and he says, "Here, you take it."

DONAHOE

He had it on you all that time.

FIERING

He had it all that time. He says, "You take it."

DONAHOE

But what did you tell them?

FIERING

I says, "Look, I ain't going to bullshit you. I just want to tell you the hell where I come from." I says, "I'm not apologizing for a goddamn thing. I did a hell of a lot of work for the trade union movement. I've got a good record. If you want somebody competent, I think I'm competent. That's the way it is." He liked it.

DONAHOE

But you didn't go into all the big details about your political life?

FIERING

No, no, I didn't have to go into my political life--except to state generally, yeah, I was a radical and all of that, come from a left-wing past. That's all, I

didn't have to go into more than that. Then he pulls me aside and says, "I just wanted to see if you would tell me the truth, that's all." He wanted to see if I was honest with him.

DONAHOE

Where did they get the dossier?

FIERING

My dossier is floating allover the place. They get it from the HUAC. Who do you think?

DONAHOE

And they send them to all the unions?

FIERING

Of course. The AFL-CIO goes down there and would get it; all they had to do is ask for it and they would get cooperation immediately from HUAC. How do you think they get all the stuff on you that they put out about you from the year you were born, for Christ's sake?

DONAHOE

: Oh, I know. Yeah, I have seen them.

FIERING

That's where they get it.

DONAHOE

Every step you took.

FIERING

When they want to attack you, for Christ's sake.

DONAHOE

So what year was this?

FIERING

This was 1965.

DONAHOE

'Sixty-five. So actually, it's almost ten years.

FIERING

Of what?

DONAHOE

That when you left-

FIERING

It was '57 to '65. It was eight years.

DONAHOE

Eight years, yeah.

FIERING

Eight years. He told me the rate of pay. I didn't even ask him, he told me the rate of pay. I cut my earnings by more than half of what I was making--by more than half. Which some people say I was crazy to have done, but I was happier. Because I was making good money in real estate. I would have been rich today I guess. For Christ's sake, the first couple of months I was there I bought a couple of houses. I had never owned a piece of property in my life, for Christ's sake, and I had already bought a couple of houses. Anyway, so he gave me the job and I went to work for him. My thing, you know. As it turned out after a couple of years, I became his boss.

DONAHOE

What did he hire you as?

FIERING

What did he hire me as? To handle grievances and to organize the War on Poverty workers.

DONAHOE

Okay.

FIERING

See the War on Poverty program came in with [Lyndon B.] Johnson in 1965--'64 and '65. I don't know if you remember that or if you know anything about it.

DONAHOE

I do.

FIERING

So here were all these workers. That was a waste of time organizing them. I could have organized a lot of other people in that period; it would have been permanent. In any event, I organized them and then what happened was--and I did some other little organizing, what they call servicing. You know, you go out on grievances, settle grievances. We didn't have any contracts then because there was no legal recognition of unions by public entities at that point, see. All we had was a law which said that management had to meet with you. And so if they met with you, that's what we used to build the unions. In 1967, exactly ten years ago last week, the international AFSCME calls me up and wanted to know--No, it wasn't international; it was the district setup we had here in California--in the West. The AFSCME setup in the West: the leadership of the international representative, the district president, and the district director. We had a different change-up. There was a different district director at that time than the one who hired me, because the whole setup changed in California. They amalgamated everything in California, with the exception of a couple of locals, into one big statewide setup and set up California Council 49. They wanted to know if I would go up north to Humboldt County because they had some problems there. But really the situation was that every one of them was afraid to go up. We had a local union there that affiliated to us. It was an association, an independent association of county employees in Humboldt County, the Humboldt County Employees Association, and they had affiliated with us. They expected big things out of the affiliation with the AFL-CIO. And they were running into trouble with negotiations and the board of supervisors up there told them to go jump in the lake. They wanted a raise, and they were becoming very unhappy with the union in not getting what the union had told them to expect--all the promises the union had made to them. They were going to jump the traces and disaffiliate. They were that unhappy. So the people who were down here were

very much afraid to face that kind of a situation. That's what we had; that's what AFSCME was at that point. So they asked me if I would go up. And me, I loved challenges, so I went up. I walked into this place--I had never heard of Humboldt County from a hole in the ground--I walked into a setup. They had a negotiations meeting set with the chief administrative officer of the county, Vernon Fletcher. He apprised me of the situation that people were very unhappy with AFSCME. didn't know this until I got up there. This is what I learned from them. See, people down here wouldn't tell me that. All they would tell me was you are the guy who maybe can do it. So I went in, sat down, and took over negotiations. And as luck would have it, I worked out an agreement with the chief administrative officer and with the committee. We had a representative committee there. And the people were very happy with the way I handled the thing. So the chief administrative officer said, "Now that we are through, I have to go. The board of supervisors is meeting next door. They're waiting to hear what the results of our meeting are." We had been in session for about two hours. So he walks in there. He's there for about ten minutes, and he comes back and he's crying, literally. Literally, tears coming down his cheeks. So, we asked, "What is it, Vernon?" He said, "I'm sorry to tell you that when I., walked in there, I told the board of supervisors that we had just arrived at an agreement and they told me that it didn't make any difference. They had called the press an hour ago and told the press there was not going to be a raise. We have nothing." So when the committee heard that, they were incensed, and this guy is humiliated. He was a good honest soul, he was just humiliated. The least you would expect was that the supervisors sent him in to negotiate--and this is the chief guy who runs the county for them that they at least respect him to the degree that they would stay behind him. And if he negotiates an agreement, they would accept it. It's usually just a formality. Or else, pull him out, don't send him in. But when you send him in with instructions, you know, you are expected to back up your man. Anyway, so here he is sitting there and he is totally humiliated and I get up cheerful as hell and I say, "Don't worry, Vern." And I am walking and I'm patting him on the back. "Everything is going to be okay." It was an ideal situation for us. And that comes from experience, see. That comes from experience knowing people and how they will react in certain circumstances. So I told the committee, "Let's go." The committee followed-me out, we went, we had a meeting and called the executive board of the union together. I put it to them

that it wasn't just that the CAO was humiliated, everybody was humiliated. What the supervisors did was spit in our face and they could see crap and are we going to eat it. And money was not the issue anymore. Their integrity was the issue. And that's the way people are. If you want to keep them out for a long time, you need more than money. Like the survival of the union--you've got to convince them that it is important. To these people, they didn't have the understanding about the survival of the union, but this was just an insult, a heavy insult to them that they could be treated that way with such indignity. So we agreed that we weren't going to take a strike vote. We would just pass the word around the county and let the people tell us what to do. And so we set up a meeting the next day at eleven o'clock. And we sent the word allover the county: here's what happened in our negotiations today and if you want a meeting, we are meeting at eleven o'clock. And the people sent back the word--if you know Humboldt County, it's a tremendous place. It's bigger than Los Angeles County in territory. And people sent back word from everywhere. They're coming off the job and they are coming to the meeting. So we had the meeting and the whole county was at the meeting. Everybody was at the meeting. So I made a report for the committee, and, you know, I was excited myself. We left it open for feedback and, of course, the line of the report geared the kind of feedback that we were going to get. They told us, "Give them hell. Let's strike." One after the other, county employees struck this refrain. These are people who are among the most conservative group of people in the state working for a public entity.

DONAHOE

I can imagine.

FIERING

They would not have said the word "strike" if they had a mouth full of shit. Here they are, one after another, talking about strike, let's strike, let's strike, let's strike. We didn't put a strike vote--the leadership did not ask for a strike vote. We had it come from the floor. Then somebody made a motion for a strike, we put the vote, and it was a unanimous vote. When did we start striking? We started striking right away. \*[That experience taught me a lot about the power of the public employee. Our communities are viable today only to the extent they are assured of the daily services that government

provides. Shut down these services and the communities grind to a halt. That's what happened to Humboldt County. This is even more true when the public employee has the support of the labor movement. We had two instances like that, both of which helped push the Humboldt County Central Labor Council to threaten a general strike. Eureka is a big shipping port. We sent one picket down to the docks with a picket sign. The longshoremen, organized in the ILWU (International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union), to a man refused to cross that line where the picket stood. Everything shipped out of the country has to be checked by the tax assessor and everything unloaded off the ship has to be inspected by the agricultural inspector. These county employees were part of our strike. The docks had to shut down and ships could not be unloaded. The other incident occurred at a huge building project. Every worker was a member of a building trades union. We sent one building inspector, a striker, out with a picket sign and every worker walked off the job. Remember, every phase of building requires an okay from the county building inspector before it can proceed to the next phase. So a \$25 million project came to a halt. There was tremendous pressure on the county supervisors to settle the strike. They were meeting every day in the county auditorium packed with concerned citizens demanding an end. We held the high moral ground and a united group of employees. At the end of the fifth day, following a threat of a general strike by the central labor council, they instructed their CAO, Vernon Fletcher, to resume negotiations and on the sixth day, approved his recommendation five to zero. It gave me a new appreciation of the public employee's role in the community as well as his power.] \* Mr. Fiering added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

### **1.13. TAPE NUMBER: VIII, Side One (September 25, 1987)**

DONAHOE

Okay, so you finally became hired by UE [United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America]-

FIERING

By AFSCME [American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees].

DONAHOE

AFSCME, excuse me.

FIERING

In 1965.

DONAHOE

In 1965, okay. And I'm trying to find out how did you find working in the public sector? Was it different from working in the industrial sector?

FIERING

It was a new animal to me and I didn't know what to expect. I had no conception of the kinds of problems that they deal with or how to approach a public entity, its problems or public employees, for that matter. But I decided, "Look, I am an organizer and I'll just approach it like I would anybody else." And I found to my amazement that workers are workers no matter where they work and a boss is a boss. You have to treat a boss as a boss. And that background, that industrial-union experience, was what was really needed in AFSCME and that's what [Jerry] Wurf was searching for in hiring people. He didn't hire me. was hired by the district council, but in a way he really approves or disapproves of staff people. But that's what they were looking for, people with that--He recognized the need for people with that kind of background. If he was going to do the job, he wanted it done. Of course, he made a tremendous contribution to the union.

DONAHOE

He was the president?

FIERING

He was the national president.

DONAHOE

The national [president], that was his actual title.

FIERING

Yeah. He had taken over the presidency I think two years before. He had defeated a conservative leadership which had controlled AFSCME ever since its inception. He came in with a struggle program, and he did one hell of a job

organizing public employees. He set the tone for all public employees in the country. He made a real contribution. It was mainly as a result of his leadership that the union grew as it did. Not only that, but that other public unions grew also. He made public employment an inviting thing to many unions and they started penetrating it in order to build their memberships. But AFSCME became the dominant union in the field. But what I learned is that you--I just took whatever I knew and I applied it. And it works. I found that struggle works. A boss is a boss, and you organize workers on the basis of a struggle program. The mood among public employees for struggle and militancy was growing at that time. They felt very discriminated against in comparison to people in the private sector, who were way ahead of them. It wasn't difficult to grab ahold of that kind of feeling and go to work with it. So my first job was in Pasadena [California], and it worked well. Hell, we set up an organization in Pasadena, and we became a dominant force in the union setup in Pasadena. There had been some older established unions like the IBEW [International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers] and the [International Union of] Operating Engineers that had small groups of people. But we became the bigger union.

DONAHOE

Was this for the city of Pasadena?

FIERING

Of the city, Pasadena city.

DONAHOE

So you were organizing the city into AFSCME.

FIERING

Yeah, that was my first assignment. My first assignment.

DONAHOE

Pasadena.

FIERING

It's a conservative community, strangely enough, but it didn't make any difference. Like every place else, the worker is a worker.

DONAHOE

And they had approached AFSCME to be organized?

FIERING

Yeah, they had approached AFSCME, and at their first meeting I was taken out there--I think it was their first real big meeting--I was taken out there by the district director who hired me, Sam Hunegs. He had met with the committee from there before--a large committee. And then when he had set up this meeting by that time, I was on the staff. So he took me out and tossed it to me. And I took it from there. I found out organizing public employees was just like it used to be in the thirties. It was not difficult at all.

DONAHOE

This was in the sixties.

FIERING

This was in the middle sixties.

DONAHOE

And the public employees are kind of on the move.

FIERING

They were on the move, right.

DONAHOE

Similar, as you said, to the industrial workers in the thirties.

FIERING

That's right.

DONAHOE

So they're the one kind clamoring for organization, right.

FIERING

They were clamoring for organization, right.

DONAHOE

I was going to ask you, like, what was the level of the status of the public sector when you entered it in the mid-sixties?

FIERING

Well, when I entered it, it was largely unorganized. \*[Let me digress here for a few minutes. To say public employees were unorganized is not entirely accurate. If by organized you mean union organization, that is true. Public employees over many years were organized in self-service organizations called associations. The focus of these associations was not on collective bargaining, an adversary relationship with management, contracts detailing wages and conditions. They attempted to provide an instrument for public employees in areas outside the job to enhance the employees' security, providing insurance programs, death benefits, all of which the employees paid for, using the mass-purchasing power of the association to bargain better rates, and so on. These associations dated back almost to the inception of the public jurisdiction they were a part of. This is very brief, but I don't think we have room here for the history of union organization in the public sector in which these associations later came to play the key role.] However, from a union perspective, out here it was just about totally unorganized. You had spots of organization, for instance, the building trades. In the county, you had some organization that had been going on there for many years among hospital workers. And in the city you had organization that had been going on among the blue-collar workers who ever since the forties and fifties, had established first an independent union, by the way, which then affiliated with the SEIU [Service Employees International Union]. \* Mr. Fiering added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

DONAHOE

For the city of Los Angeles.

FIERING

Yeah, that was Elinor Glenn. She was a part of that at that time. That showed the shortsightedness of the old leadership in AFSCME, which could have had them, and they then became the key to the organization of the majority of workers in both the city and the county. But if it had been Wurf, he would have made an accommodation. He was not the president at that time when

they were in trouble--See when the split took place in CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations], the public workers, which at that time were SCMW [State, County, and Municipal Workers of America].

DONAHOE

What was it?

FIERING

State, County, and Municipal Workers.

DONAHOE

And that was like an independent-

FIERING

They were expelled from the CIO.

DONAHOE

They were?

FIERING

Yeah. When they were expelled, they went independent, and they were decimated. But they maintained a group in L.A. city and L.A. County. And they also maintained a group in Hawaii. In Hawaii they became a powerful force among the blue-collar workers in Hawaii.

DONAHOE

So they were expelled in 1949?

FIERING

Nineteen forty-nine. At that CIO convention.

DONAHOE

Oh, way back, I see.

FIERING

Way back. And here we are in the middle of the sixties now and they have a firm base.

DONAHOE

So they were still going?

FIERING

They were still going. Why? Because in the early fifties the international president of the SEIU, George Hardy, was smart enough to make a deal and offer them conditions which they couldn't refuse. He took them in as they were, no questions asked about their politics or anything. See, that was not possible with AFSCME. The old president of AFSCME wouldn't do it. That was-- I forget what the hell his name was [Arnold Zander]. If he had been Wurf, it would have been different. And the whole situation of AFSCME in California would have been different.

DONAHOE

So the former leadership of AFSCME before Wurf was really too conservative to recognize a lot of the potential.

FIERING

The possibilities, the potential.

DONAHOE

They missed a number of important things. But didn't they organize the county workers, the Los Angeles County workers?

FIERING

Yep, but that was a whole different thing, very involved.

DONAHOE

I was involved in that later.

FIERING

You were involved in that?

DONAHOE

Yeah. There had been an independent union there too.

FIERING

Well, there is an independent association, the Los Angeles County Employees Association, which affiliated with the SEIU.

DONAHOE

The SEIU. I thought it was the--?

FIERING

Local 660, that became 660, which affiliated with another part of the workers. The hospital workers were Local 434, which was Elinor Glenn's union, which had been in SEIU and already had a base of several thousand members.

DONAHOE

I see. It became very complicated.

FIERING

It is. It was complicated all right.

DONAHOE

So when you came on the scene it was basically unorganized?

FIERING

Unorganized, yeah.

DONAHOE

Or some independent unions?

FIERING

Well, which was typical. It was true in the city, too. There were independent associations as well as the SEIU. We had a scattered membership.

DONAHOE

And what was your main responsibility?

FIERING

Well, my responsibility--At that time I was assigned to Pasadena.

DONAHOE

But weren't there restrictions about what you could do and what you couldn't do? The limits of this public organizing in the public sector? 330

FIERING

I was told to organize them and to service them.

DONAHOE

I thought you could just handle grievances?

FIERING

Well, originally when I applied for t~ job in 1961, at that time what they were looking for and even in-it's true in '65--what they were looking for was a grievance handler. Somebody would sit in the office and wait for telephone calls from people with grievances. And when you had a grievance, you would assist them in handling the grievance. There was a limited law at that time called the Brown Act--it still exists as a matter of fact--which permits such kinds of representation. It doesn't permit contract negotiations or real collective bargaining, but it permitted that kind of representation. And it became a handle for the unions to move in and organize. So that's what they were looking for. We had a rather conservative leadership in the district council. The guy who hired me was a rather conservative guy. And that's as far as--So he didn't have vision either; he was part of the old setup in AFSCME. So when I came on, essentially I was supposed to be a grievance handler. But here this thing breaks out in Pasadena and he was busy with other things, so he took me out just at that time and he gave it to me like, handle their grievances. So we had a meeting, and the thing was to organize them, not just to handle the grievances.

DONAHOE

It was beyond the grievances.

FIERING

Of course. I did what I knew how to do best: organized them. And when I organized them, I represented them- the same as you would if there was collective bargaining: set up a committee, set up a stewards, a structure, set up a local union and went to work just like a local union. But once I had got into that and while I was setting that up, the OEO [OCCupational and

Educational Opportunities Act] program broke open, the War on Poverty. (In L.A. it was the Employment Youth Opportunities Agency, EYOA). And I didn't know the difference between OEO and AEO or anything else, you know. This was all new country to me. Except that there was a clamor and there were certain political ties this guy had--this boss of mine had--and there were pressures to organize these people. They wanted to organize, so he turned it over to me. If I had known at that time what I learned later, I would have told him it's nothing. But as it turned out, it was a year and a half of wasted time and effort. Completely wasted. I organized over a thousand people. We had about twelve hundred people in the union, and we had some contracts, too. But it was an ephemeral kind of thing, you know, he's here today and gone tomorrow. It depends on funding from the federal government and the political atmosphere. Nothing permanent like a city is permanent or a county is permanent.

DONAHOE

So the War on Poverty program had been set up by the government sort of in response to community demands?

FIERING

Well, it was Lyndon JohriSon's War on Poverty. There was a certain latitude given to workers in community organizations at that time. And they seized on it because there was money involved. And they got grants of money. And they got an opportunity to set up the leadership of these various organizations that were springing up allover with demands from the funding agencies of the OEO to make their organizations go, for whatever the purpose. Either it was job training or I don't know what--Head Start at that time. All kinds of programs that would give people work and would be community-based, community-run, and highly political. Because whoever had the political muscle in the community was able to latch on to money, you know, and the politicians in that way used it to control the Hispanic community and the black community, where most of the money went. And the people were given a lot of latitude, so it wasn't difficult to organize them at all. And we had easy entry and cooperation, because they recognized that a union could help them maintain their funding. The union was a political organization. So we had a good deal of cooperation also. There was the boss/worker relationships, adversary

relationships, where there might have been a contest for control of the work force.

DONAHOE

Okay. We were discussing that there was an adversarial relationship present so that you did have a worker and a boss situation. But can you--?

FIERING

You mean in the public area, in public employment. You do. You have people who make decisions, the management, and you have workers who they direct. I mean, they've got a job to do in administering of budget and administering departments, providing community services, and they supervise workers.

DONAHOE

Oh, I can see that because my husband works for a city, and he organized a union there. But I was wondering-we were talking about the War on Poverty there for a minute--and I was just wondering how that actually applied.

FIERING

The War on Poverty, you see, it applies. It applies, because in any event, you've got an agency, you've got a director, and you've got a board of directors who run the agency. They set up a director to manage, to carry out the decisions of the board of directors. See, the board of directors is set up as a condition of a grant of money, and it's composed of community people. They appoint a director and a director appoints a staff, and their job is to administer whatever the function of that agency is, whatever the terms of the money grant are. Whatever it may be. Head Start, it's easy to visualize. In the job training program, it's easy to visualize. And they supervise people. And you have conflicts in terms of people versus people and you have conflicts in terms of the way direction is given; you have grievances. You have some directors that ride roughshod over workers and others who know how to treat workers. So these people organize in order to have something to say about their jobs and about the budget and how the budget is divided. So that they get some conditions that they would want as workers, like health and welfare conditions, which they normally would not get. An agency would not give it to

them because they want to use the money for the community people it's supposed to serve. It's that kind of thing.

DONAHOE

Did you find it more difficult organizing there? Was there resistance?

FIERING

No.

DONAHOE

Was there a lot of resistance from the director?

FIERING

There was resistance by some of the agencies, yeah. They didn't want anybody interfering with their operation. They assumed the same position towards the union that any employer would: that the union was going to try to dictate to them how they were going to run the agency. In other cases, you had people who were very sympathetic to a union and who made it easy for us to come in and deal with them. You had both kinds. Sometimes you had to have strikes or walkouts or protests of one kind or another. We had all kinds of demonstrations going all the time. But the bottom line was it was not permanent.

DONAHOE

But no one knew at the time.

FIERING

No one knew it at the time, that's right. But what happened was that the politicians were becoming afraid of it, because the people were getting out of hand; they began to believe in the War on Poverty. It was really a war on poverty and they thought they should take it over and direct the War on Poverty and [that] they should have a lot more impute. The politicians were afraid of that, so gradually they chipped away and chipped away at control of it until there was very little left of it. Some programs, like Head Start, which had proven themselves were left and that [Head Start] continues on today. I think its funding is still federal. I'm not sure, I think it's still federal. And some other programs, community programs, probably exist. Some of them became

privatized like TELACU [The East Los Angeles Community Union] over on the east side. That's how it got its start; it got its start in the War on Poverty. TELACU on the east side and-

DONAHOE

And now it's private?

FIERING

Of course. And the Watts Labor Community Action Agency [WLCAA], Ted Watkins's program, got its start the same way.

DONAHOE

So that was Ted Watkins?

FIERING

That's right. And you know, that's still a going program. It has been very successful in many areas.

DONAHOE

TELACU too?

FIERING

TELACU too is very successful, financially successful, yeah. \*[Walter Reuther and the United Automobile Workers (UAW) were responsible for getting the funding that created TELACU and the WLCAA. He staffed each of them with a UAW representative, Ted Watkins in WLCAA and Esteban Torres in TELACU. Watkins is still there; Torres went on to become a congressman.] \* Mr. Fiering added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

DONAHOE

That's interesting. So the government began cutting funds to most of these?

FIERING

Began cutting funds and began restricting the authority of the local agencies. By the time the--Let's see, it was 1965, '66, '67--by 1968 even.

DONAHOE

That short?

FIERING

You wouldn't have recognized it.

DONAHOE

Really?

FIERING

Of course. Once the government made up its mind to move in and put a stop to all this free movement, they clamped down pretty hard and that was it for a people's movement. There was no people's movement anymore. But over the long pull, which is really not so long in terms of time, the thing dissipated and didn't amount to anything. It was not a factor, it was not permanent. You never could count on money. A constant fight for survival. And less and less funds being allocated to it and it took different directions. And it was just a waste of time. I could have used that time organizing public workers.

DONAHOE

And so at that time you could have been in the county, the city, and all these other things, and yet you were putting all-

FIERING

All my energy and all my time was in that. That was my assignment that this guy gave me.

DONAHOE

There were thousands of others allover.

FIERING

And everything out there that was so essential to AFSCME was going neglected. It was really neglected, yes. Well, anyway.

DONAHOE

The other thing I wanted to ask you about AFSCME and this public sector was I thought that collective bargaining wasn't legitimized in the public sector for a long time.

FIERING

After 1969, October 1969.

DONAHOE

So, how were you organizing Pasadena and how did the--?

FIERING

Because the Brown Act permits--See, the Brown Act followed the Kennedy executive order for federal employees, presidential Executive Order 10988. The Kennedy executive order permitted public employees to present grievances to management and to have representatives they desire to represent them on grievances, period, see. In 1961, George Brown, who was in the California Assembly at that time, promoted what came to be known as the Brown Act, which permitted the same thing for public employees below the federal level, the state down to local communities. Now, all you really need is a right for an organizer to go in and represent a worker and that becomes an entry point for a union. As a matter of fact, it is much more than you can get in the private sector. In the private sector you didn't have that right. You had to first organize and win an election. But here any worker could join or not join a union and ask for representation if he wanted it. So people would join the union then because they could get representation. They couldn't get a contract [though].

DONAHOE

They couldn't get a contract, but they could get representation.

FIERING

But they could representation. Then, if enough of them joined the union just on that basis, they could then pressure the governmental agency, the entity, the public entity for improvements of a general character. And they could mount a campaign for it, see.

DONAHOE

So AFSCME then used this as a means of organizing--?

FIERING

Of building a union, of organizing, that's right.

DONAHOE

Of building a union and instituting collective bargaining.

FIERING

Well, AFSCME was a big factor in California in getting it. When the terms of the county--Well, we were involved with UCLA, a big, big factor at that time. I was involved with UCLA and with a couple of other unions out of the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations] in determining the character of the law that would permit, well, a limited form of collective bargaining, but really not so limited, too. And then, in L.A. County and L.A. city I was involved with what was known as the Aaron Committee, Ben [Benjamin] Aaron from UCLA and his committee, again, who pulled together the city management and the AFL-CIO union committee and the county management and the board of supervisors and the AFL-CIO union committee to determine the local ordinances based upon what was in the Meyers-Milias-Brown Bill, which was winding its way through the state legislature, but passed late in 1969 as the Meyers-Milias-Brown Act for County, City, and Special District Employees in California.

DONAHOE

Oh, this is the Brown Act again.

FIERING

No, that was since the Brown Act. See, what happened with the Brown Act was that it didn't quite do the job in keeping the lid on all the unrest among public employees. So they had to come up with something better. The something better was something that looked like real collective bargaining. That was the Meyers-Milias-Brown Act in 1969. The Brown Act was a door-opener: it enabled us to organize. Once we used it to organize a bunch of people and we got these people in motion, then the Brown Act did not suffice. It wasn't enough. They needed something a little more comprehensive to deal with this now-growing mass of people that were demanding to be heard, recognition, see. And so came the Meyers-Milias-Brown Act, it's called, MMB.

DONAHOE

And when was that?

FIERING

That was in October '69 that it passed the legislature.

DONAHOE

Oh, so that's actually what you consider the institution of collective bargaining for public employees in California.

FIERING

And that is still what is governing in California, the Meyers-Milias--that is governing only for city, county and special districts. There are four other laws, three or four other laws, that govern other areas of public employment, like the universities, the public schools, and the state employees.

DONAHOE

What about like the small cities?

FIERING

They are governed by Meyers-Milias-Brown.

DONAHOE

Oh, they are?

FIERING

Yes. All cities-

DONAHOE

I thought there were certain charters or something.

FIERING

Well, there are different forms of authority that are granted local community officials in some city charters which may exclude some areas they have a right to bargain about with the unions that represent their employees. But in terms of recognition of the employees, that's standard, that's uniform, see.

DONAHOE

So that must have been quite a struggle in itself just to even get to that point.

FIERING

Oh yeah, yeah. That was the big fight in the sixties, see.

DONAHOE

It was to win this.

FIERING

Right.

DONAHOE

So you had been involved-

FIERING

I was involved with the big movement of public employees in California and I  
was-

DONAHOE

Beginning in Pasadena, then going to Humboldt County.

FIERING

Beginning in Pasa--Well, you see, that thing in Humboldt County was a fluke,  
but at least it got me out of the War on Poverty.

DONAHOE

Oh, so that was after the War on Poverty.

FIERING

That was in '67, it was in September, '67. And as I mentioned before, my going up there was a fluke. \*[But that whole incident came at a propitious moment. Stoppages and walkouts among California public employees were spreading, almost four hundred in 1967. Anxiety was mounting in Sacramento. As an aside, if you want to include this, I just saw a friend of mine who was on the staff of AFSCME when I was the executive director of the California District Council. He's involved in a study the UC Berkeley history department is doing of the labor movement in Humboldt County. Humboldt County was a base for

the Wobbly (Industrial Workers of the World) movement way, way back in the early twenties. They're having a celebration about it in November. They are presenting all the papers, a whole sheaf of papers to Humboldt State University. The story and papers of this AFSCME strike will be a part of that history. It was only a one-week strike out of years of history, but a very significant strike.] Anyway, I gave you the story of the strike. It was the first successful county-wide public employee strike in California's history. And I think I went into considerable detail [before]. What brought it to a victorious conclusion was we finally got the Central Labor Council in Humboldt County to agree to go to the board of supervisors and say, "Tomorrow if you do not settle, there will be a general strike here." That helped settle it. We had the whole town shut down anyway. In fact the labor movement was very reluctant, they had to be pushed. But there was no alternative for them. But it was a tremendous experience. \* Mr. Fiering added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

DONAHOE

Well, that must have served like as an inspiration for other public workers.

FIERING

Well, you see the interesting thing about it was that it was more publicized in some eastern parts of the country and in Canada than it was in Southern California. The people here were afraid to publicize it because they were afraid it was going to be a loser, and they didn't want other public employees to read about a loser. I remember so clearly [how] they would call me up and beg me to call it off. They thought it was going to be a catastrophe.

DONAHOE

But what happened after you won? Didn't they publicize then?

FIERING

They publicized then, but you can get most of the publicity while it's on, not after it's over.

DONAHOE

But it seems it would be an inspiration that you say, "Look what they did in my county."

FIERING

Then they can talk about it. They would talk about it, but the most publicity you would get out of it is while it's on. At that time they could have used it, because [Ronald W.] Reagan was right in the middle of it. He had his guy almost living with me, and his office was calling more than once a day to find out what was the status of that thing. You have to know how things were rocky in the whole public employment area then. And so I remember so clearly how they would call me up and they would say, "Please, call it off, call it off." And I would say, "What are you worrying about? We've got them in a box. Just sit still. It's a winner. It's a winner." Couldn't help but be a winner. I knew it. Anyway, of course, when you win everything is great, you know. Winning that strike propelled me to the leadership of AFSCME in California. I became executive director of the State Council 49 shortly after.

DONAHOE

Did SEIU take advantage of it at all?

FIERING

No. We didn't even take advantage of it like we should have, which was too bad.

DONAHOE

Yeah, because it seems like it would have been very important.

FIERING

That's all history.

DONAHOE

Just one thing I want to go back to for a minute like when you became involved in AFSCME. From what I heard, a number of organizers like you came from basic industry. Is that true?

FIERING

Yeah, that's right.

DONAHOE

So why was that? Similar to you, were people--?

FIERING

Well, Wurf was looking for people from basic industries then, see. He saw that it was the kind of experience that was needed in the public sector. First of all [it was] a struggle experience, and he was a guy who was for struggle; he was not afraid of a strike. And secondly, [he was] somebody who could conceptualize organizing on an industrial basis--all employees in the public jurisdiction in one union, see.

DONAHOE

So it's much more like an industrial organization in--that they want to break down that craft approach, t~.

FIERING

That's right. See, the 'organization that was built in public employment, up until that time, was essentially a craft organization. Like in the county, the building trades workers had been organized since 1950, and they had made a political deal with the board of supervisors on the kind of pay and conditions they would get. Didn't affect anybody else in the county, only the building trades because of their political power, their political connections. Part of all those agreements are that you are not going to spread organization, are you? And they were agreeable not to spread it. All they cared about was the building trades people, their membership. don't fault them for that. Or you had the IBEW in various sections of the public employment throughout the state. But they were organizing the electricians. Or the [International Brotherhood of] Painters [and Allied Trades], the Sheet Metal Workers [International Association,] other crafts, see. These are strong crafts. These are people who control like you control production. They control whether or not an operation goes, you know. They were successful in organizing some people in other parts of the state and here, too. But as far as the great mass of public employees were concerned, they were neglected completely by everybody until this.

DONAHOE

When AFSCME finally did organize, say, the public sector at UCLA or the city, what about these craft unions? Did they affiliate or were they still separate?

FIERING

Well, the craft unions were part of the AFLCIO. We all were. No, they didn't affiliate, they maintained their separate identity. But they were a part of the AFL-CIO. So if we had a public employee council in the AFL-CIO, they were a part of it. The building trades were a part of it. The Operating Engineers were a part of it. Using one example. And there's a public employee council in the L.A. County Federation of Labor, which is representative of all public unions in all public jurisdictions in L.A. County. And they are a regular department of the AFL-CIO, the L.A. Federation of Labor. And they work out cooperation, or within the county you have a council of public unions--of all the AFL-CIO unions. And there are quite a number of them, each one having its own little thing: the sheriff's deputies union, ALADS, [Association of Los Angeles Deputy Sheriffs] have got the sheriff's deputies, see; the [International Association of] Fire Fighters have got the fire fighters; the Operating Engineers have got the operating engineers; the building trades have got theirs. The big, well, Local 660 SEIU [Service Employees International Union], which is the biggest group, represents a majority of the county employees but is not a part of this because of some disputes they had about representation. They used to be. When we got it started--See, I start to run over jurisdiction and it gets a little confusing. We had one from each union. Then they changed that as time went on. After my time they had some form of organization depending on a different form of representation. They ran into some disputes with 660 as a result of that. They wouldn't give 660 credit for being the biggest in terms of numbers. But that's nothing for us here.

DONAHOE

Okay, so when you first went in to AFSCME, it must have been kind of exciting in some ways.

FIERING

It was very exciting.

DONAHOE

Because it was wide open.

FIERING

Wide open.

DONAHOE

And they didn't even have collective bargaining so you had a lot of things to aim for.

FIERING

That's right.

DONAHOE

Did you kind of work out plans as you went along?

FIERING

Well, the big plan was just to organize wherever you could organize. For instance, right after that strike in Humboldt County and I came back, I resolved that I was going to separate myself from the War on Poverty because that wasn't where the action was.

DONAHOE

You were clear at that point then?

FIERING

Well, I wasn't altogether clear. There still-You know, I had organized it and people had a claim on me. So I was trying to handle whatever I could there, but was trying to move out of it into other areas. After that strike, people called from Arcadia [California], for instance, and they wanted to organize.

DONAHOE

The city of Arcadia.

FIERING

The city of Arcadia. So I went out there. We had very few staff. We didn't have the money for much staff, and the international wasn't ready to plunge with a lot of staff at that point. We didn't have the MeyersMilius-Brown Act; we

didn't have the makings of it even. This was in late 1967, beginning of 1968. So we had two or three people on the staff. So whatever work there was they had to divide among them, and whatever you had going of any kind, you just had very few people to divide it amongst. So I took on the Arcadia thing. I went out there and I called the people together. They were hot to organize so we signed them all up. I called up the management the next day and I says, "I want a meeting with you. We want some recognition." Management met all right and they started stalling me along. Well, you got choices then: If you let them stall you along, you are going to lose the workers, or else you are going to bring it to a head. So we figure what have we got to lose. So we called a strike. We just shut down the whole city operation; everybody walked off the job. And when they did, the city which hadn't been expecting it--they thought they would soft-soap us or spoon feed us--they went nuts. So they called me up and then said they are ready to deal. Now they are ready to recognize us. So they recognized us and we sat down and negotiated an agreement. That was my MO [modus operandi], you know, and that I brought in from the private sector. You organize on the basis of struggle. You don't horse around, you don't crap around. You know what you have got to do. You follow the procedure you have to, and when you've got to, you just lay it to them. And I did that in the county. A group of mechanics in the county wanted to organize L.A. County so I got them together, and, in the interim, I had a coronary.

DONAHOE

You what?

FIERING

In the interim I had a coronary.

DONAHOE

Oh, I thought you said that. I said, "What?" You kind of like brushed over it.

FIERING

Yeah, yeah. That was twenty and a half years ago.

DONAHOE

You mean between Arcadia and L.A. County?

FIERING

Between Arcadia and L.A.--No, first, right after Humboldt I went to Arcadia and at the same time the county people started to move. First, we got the Arcadia thing; we got to where we got the recognition. We had the stoppage, we got the recognition, set up a committee, and the committee would handle stuff for us. And I was moving with the county mechanics too. Here also, we had management that was soft-soaping us, see. And so I said, "I'm not going to crap around with these guys." The guys were militant, and they had a pretty key operation. Everybody rolls on wheels and they did everything that rolled on wheels. So we just told the management--We played it very rough. You know, it's interesting about these experiences. These people are in touch with me to this day, and this happened twenty-one years ago. And they are in touch with me to this day, and many of them are retired. But when we get together, they relive these experiences as if they happened yesterday.

DONAHOE

It's probably one of the most significant things in their lives.

FIERING

Yeah. For instance, on the first committee with the mechanics, the blacks were badly discriminated against. Badly. They couldn't get--It was unusual for one of them to get beyond the class of helper. So what did immediately, I set up a committee to meet with management and included on the committee was at least one black, and they walk in kind of scared. My first job is to educate the committee to show them that the boss is just like they are--he puts his pants on one leg at a time [too]--in order to give them courage so that they'll know, because otherwise there is a lot of fear in them. In this department anyway--and in a lot of departments. So the first thing I do is to show them I am not afraid of the boss. And I talk to them the same way I would expect to be treated. And, to this day, they recall that meeting. It's twenty-one years ago, and they recall that meeting to this day, especially that black worker. Because then when we came out, the blacks really--And, of course, that's one thing, AFSCME was hot on the issue of discrimination. And it took a little bit of doing, but we opened doors for the blacks there.

DONAHOE

I can imagine.

FIERING

We opened doors.

#### **1.14. TAPE NUMBER: VIII, Side Two (September 25, 1987)**

FIERING

It happened before the boss, and that meeting just turned them completely around. From that time on they knew how they had to treat the boss, because they saw how the boss backed up when I took them on. He didn't know what we had.

DONAHOE

That took a lot of courage.

FIERING

And so they mimicked what went on in that meeting from that time on and they began operating on their muscle. And so when we went in there with a committee and we started negotiating for certain things demanding certain things and we didn't get an answer, they asked what do we do. I says, "You know what to do. There's only one thi~g you can do." And that's where experience comes in--on different kinds of strike strategies, stoppage strategies, that you use so that the workers are protected when they do it.

DONAHOE

Yeah, because they weren't allowed to strike.

FIERING

They were not allowed to strike. Oh no. But it's just like the thing in Humboldt County. You can pull a whole county out, and they didn't dare fire a single worker. The same with these mechanics and with the people in Arcadia. You have got to do it in a way so that they are all united and they are so determined that the management is in a quandary about how to deal with it.

DONAHOE

But this is a lot harder because it is one department. Before you had the whole city.

FIERING

Right.

DONAHOE

This is just a department in the county. How did you do it?

FIERING

What we did here, I went to the key guy and I put the bug in his ear on how it should be developed, and he was willing. And he passed the word down so that he wasn't way out front or the committee wasn't way out front. It became a spontaneous, rank and file action, see. People just walked off a job; they are mad and they walk off a job, and the committee walks off last. The committee says, "What can I do?" And they walk off last. "We got to be with our people. They're going out." The first thing I know I'm sitting in the office making believe that I don't know what's going on and I get a call from the management: "These people are out." I says, "No kidding, you tell me they're out?" They are asking me to help get them back. I says, "Great. I'll get them back. But you know what you have to do to get them back? You have to give me something to help get them back." And this happened time and again, time and again. And they developed that technique down to a-

DONAHOE

And there were ways they got around it because they weren't liable for violating anything?

FIERING

Nothing, no. Well, of course, there was a rule in the county that if you were off more than three days, why you were automatically discharged. But enforcing it-

DONAHOE

You mean, with no excuse.

FIERING

No excuse. But what happened was, for instance, the first time taught the county a lesson about that, that they've got to get into it quickly to put a cap on it. These guys all walked out. There were about five hundred mechanics. They all walked off the job, and when they did-

DONAHOE

All of them?

FIERING

All of them. Oh yeah, they cleaned out the department. When they did, see, here's the hundreds and thousands of other county employees looking and seeing these people down there in that building walking off the job. And they run over to find out what's the matter and they're told, "The hell'with the county, we're going out." And the word begins to spread and [it] becomes infectious, especially in the unorganized situation like that when unionism is new and people do have a lot of grievances. And they found that people without leadership, without anything from other departments and other units-had nothing to do with this department--just decided, "Hell, if they are going to do that, I am going to do it too." That started to spread all through the county. The only way the county could get a handle on it was to get these guys back and they called me to help get them back. And in order to get them back, we settled the problems, and we had no hesitation about it. It was just a question of doing it, so it was done properly. And it became a very militant department. Well known for that and, of course, it enhanced AFSCME's reputation. We had the same thing-We had a lot of probation officers, several hundred of whom had been members of the union. And they were brought up on that, see. They would demonstrate constantly in one way or another. They wouldn't have extended off-the-job walkouts, but they would come down during their lunch hour or after work or some damn thing and just demonstrate.

DONAHOE

There were things like informational picket lines or something like that?

FIERING

It enhanced our reputation as the most militant of the unions.

DONAHOE

So what happened? Here you have this great in with the mechanics and the probation officers and there was this opportunity to really spread throughout.

FIERING

Yeah, what happened? Well, for that, that's a very complex story. I suppose blame is to be divided, because we had an opportunity to get all the county workers in AFSCME and I had set up a meeting with the leadership of the [Los Angeles County] Employees Association (LACEA) and Wurf. And he came in and had a meeting with them. He had them thinking hard about affiliating their organization to us. On the basis of that meeting, he came in a second time, and in the meantime, we're conducting an organizing campaign. By this time, he calls me up and he says to me would I mind, because I was the director of the union here at that time. I became the director of the union not long after that thing in Humboldt County.

DONAHOE

So that was like '67.

FIERING

No, '68.

DONAHOE

'Sixty-eight, okay.

FIERING

They took everything in California and combined it, with the exception of a couple of locals outside of here: one in San Diego, in San Bernardino and in San Jose. They took everything in California and combined it into one California council (AFSCME District Council 49) and I became the head of that. So the thing started to open up and became ripe for a real organizing drive down here, so I suggested to Wurf that he decentralize AFSCME because California is too big for that. We decentralized and we set up a council just for the area here, Southern California, and I became the head of that, executive director, District Council 36.

DONAHOE

Would that then include San Diego?

FIERING

No, it did not include San Diego, nor San Bernardino. Other than that, it included everything else in Southern California.

DONAHOE

Because it was too big?

FIERING

No, because the locals there were used to operating autonomously, and they were old established locals from many, many years back and he didn't want to make any waves. There wasn't any point to it, so he let them continue on as they were. And you had a leadership which developed in these outfits which became--they considered it their little patch of territory and they didn't want anybody else to have anything to do with it. Anyway, he called me up--Well, he had a guy in here who was assigned to conduct the organizing drive here and for all of California, but he was instructed to provide a staff here. And this guy was using me and telling me what to do in terms of filing petitions for elections, which I'm just assuming you know something about. I don't want to have to explain all of this. He was telling me the kinds of units he wanted and he was the California director and I was following whatever he wanted to do. I didn't agree much with what he wanted to do, but this was what he wanted done, so we filed the petitions. And then he started his organizing campaign and I became very unhappy with the way he was organizing. I called up Wurf and I told Wurf, "This guy just doesn't know what the hell it's all about, and if you are going to do anything, you'd better take him out because he is not the guy for you." So for a short period there I was doing whatever organizing there was with a couple of other people who were assigned. And Wurf calls me up and asks would I mind if he sends in one of his hotshots to take over the leadership of the organizing drive. And I say, "No, send him in." It was not a big thing for me, I didn't think, at the time. It became a big thing, but it wasn't then. I wasn't out to build an empire or looking for glory really. So he sent in a guy [Tom Fitzpatrick] and then we set up another meeting for Wurf. Wurf came in a second time and this time he met again with the leadership of the association. It's called LACEA.

DONAHOE

L.A. County-

FIERING

--Employees Association.

DONAHOE

--Employees Association. I remember that.

FIERING

He had them in a meeting, he could have had them, but he scared them to death. He scared the hell out of them. He was too aggressive and insensitive to their reaction to him.

DONAHOE

Wurf did?

FIERING

Wurf did. He made them afraid that once they affiliated, they were going to place themselves in a position where they could be taken over. They would lose control and Wurf was not sensitive to that. The SEIU then made its move with these people and the SEIU then offered them a deal with complete autonomy, the right to pullout any time they wanted to, and the AFL-CIO label, which is really all they wanted so they wouldn't be subject to raids.

DONAHOE

Yeah, and they wanted some kind of clout, too. They didn't have anything.

FIERING

Well, clout wasn't so much to them; it was more survival. As long as they were independent, they were open to attack by any union. But once they had an AFL-CIO label, and this became the standard modus operandi for many associations, then nobody could touch them. And the SEIU offered them that label and a deal which guaranteed their autonomy and the right to pullout if they didn't like it, their affiliation, and whatever [else] they wanted. And Wurf was not sharp enough to sense that when he was here.

DONAHOE

Which is interesting.

FIERING

And so they signed up with the SEIU. In the meantime, we are sitting there with these petitions. The county established its own law [Los Angeles County Employee Ordinance Act 9646] based on Meyers-Milias-Brown and proceeded to hearing and stuff and we are carrying on an organizing campaign in opposition now to the SEIU. An awkward position because they were entrenched with the LACEA. So, well, the upshot of it is that--I suppose blame could be spread around to a lot of people. I pointed some of it at myself though I determined later that that was unjust. Some of it I pointed at Wurf because of missed opportunities when he could have cleaned the whole thing up in one fell swoop. And some of it to this guy he sent in, who was a hotshot organizer, who was on to me because of these mechanics who were part of the blue-collar group. He wanted them united with the rest of blue-collar workers and I had committed not to and I wouldn't break my word, though I finally did, I did petition to have them included with the rest of the blue-collar unit. But what I didn't know had taken place--and didn't learn until much later when I became friendly with Harry Gluck--was that the personnel director of the county [Gordon Nesvig] and the head of the SEIU had met with the head of the L.A. County Employees Relations Commission, which supervised the elections, and had convinced him that the mechanics should remain separate. So even though I petitioned that they be united with the other blue-collar workers, they were separated. As the election turned out, this guy who was sent in and handled the organization for the international decided he was going to be very smart and he had told Wurf, "We don't need them anyway." He told Wurf that I was raising questions about uniting both units and he was telling Wurf, "The hell with Fiering. We don't need him. We are going to whip him without it." But he didn't count his votes right; it turned out that those mechanics made the difference. And so they found it easier to blame me. I felt very bad about it. I thought for a while I was to blame, because if we had won that blue-collar election, we might have sailed through the rest of it, too, and won the whole kit and caboodle. But this guy had already--if we had won, of course, what would have happened was I would have been out--this guy had an understanding with Wurf and already made arrangements on buying a

house here, which I didn't know about this until later, that he was going to settle here. If he had settled here, there was no room for me, see. But he had done that and he had already put in a request for leasing a sailboat. He was going to live the good life here, and I didn't know about this until later. In any event, as it turned out, whatever happened at least permitted me to survive here, which otherwise, I would not have. But I had felt very guilty about the fact that maybe this did make the difference, though I felt relieved to find later that I was not at fault. So at least I could live with myself. But really what it was, if this guy had done what he had to do, we could have moved in and perhaps really, not only won that blue-collar thing, we might have been able to overcome the conniving that had been going on, which we knew nothing about, to combine that blue-collar unit. That was a key election.

DONAHOE

It seems like it would have been.

FIERING

Because then followed the white-collar [election], see. We lost the key election, the blue-collar election. We were not in a good position to pursue the white-collar [election]. If we had won, we would have been in a position to pursue it.

DONAHOE

Well, did you ever find out why Wurf wanted to bring this guy in in the first place, since you had the good track record?

FIERING

Well, this guy had been working for Wurf for some years. Incidentally, he had also come out of UE.

DONAHOE

Oh, really?

FIERING

Then out of the IUE [International Union of Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers]. He was one of the people who led the break to the IUE, see.

DONAHOE

He led the break?

FIERING

Yeah. His father was one of the founders of UE. And also, as a matter of fact, if you read all this stuff about UE, you know about the East Pittsburgh [Pennsylvania] Westinghouse [Electric Corporation] plant. His father [Michael "Red Mike" Fitzpatrick] was the leader of the union in East Pittsburgh Westinghouse.

DONAHOE

The name of the town was Swissville. That's what thought.

FIERING

You're thinking, not Swissville, you're thinking of Westinghouse Air Brake [Company].

DONAHOE

I know East Pittsburgh, but I thought they called that Swissville too. That's what my husband said.

FIERING

He did? You may be right. But you're not right about this. It was East Pittsburgh.

DONAHOE

Because I know people who worked at that plant; we knew people from back there. It's the biggest Westinghouse [plant].

FIERING

Well, if you knew people, they knew the Fitzpatricks.

DONAHOE

Is that what their name is? The Fitzpatricks?

FIERING

Yeah. And his father was known as "Red" Fitzpatrick. Because he was red.

DONAHOE

What was his first name?

FIERING

Huh?

DONAHOE

What was his first name?

FIERING

His brother's name was Tom and that's what this guy's name was. He was named after his brother, this guy's son.

DONAHOE

The one who came out here.

FIERING

The one who came out here.

DONAHOE

So he was a Tom.

FIERING

He was Tom, yeah.

DONAHOE

It's interesting that he came from the UE like you.

FIERING

Yep. And he was a good organizer. He was a good organizer.

DONAHOE

So he had been working--?

FIERING

And he had been working for Wurf several years and he had organized the Wayne County [Michigan] area and some other places for AFSCME. He had done some good work.

DONAHOE

So he came out to kind of--?

FIERING

To handle this campaign. I thought at first he came out just as an international rep to handle the campaign he had begun. As it turned out he had other plans.

DONAHOE

Well, what happened to the poor mechanics who had been withdrawn?

FIERING

The mechanics were still in AFSCME.

DONAHOE

And the probation officers?

FIERING

Still in AFSCME.

DONAHOE

So those two departments went with-

FIERING

See, we had my plan and it was working out up until this break. We had five bargaining units, and they were the first--I rushed in to file first petitions. They were the court clerks.

DONAHOE

The court clerks?

FIERING

Which was a very, very conservative group. And these two groups-

DONAHOE

Mechanics and probation, yeah.

FIERING

Mechanics, yeah, probation, and agricultural inspectors, which was a small group--those were the first four and later we organized the fifth in opposition to 660. We defeated them in elections. But my idea was to start a snowball effect. And so I rushed in to file the first petition as soon as the L.A. County Employee Relations Ordinance was passed. So that the first petitions that the commission would have to consider would be ours. And the first election that came up, the first hearing that came up was for the court clerks. And I handled that hearing. And we did quite well, we got the unit established. At that time the whole question of formation of units was unclear, because California was just in the throes of learning something about the establishment of collective bargaining in public employment. But they learned fast. But, at that point, this was the first experience, this was the first bargaining unit anybody had applied for in California under Meyers-Milias-Brown. And so the next hearing was the probation officers.

DONAHOE

This was 1969.

FIERING

This was 1970 already.

DONAHOE

Because I worked '70.

FIERING

Nineteen seventy, yeah.

DONAHOE

And I remember going through it.

FIERING

So we won the elections for the court clerks. Then the probation officers came up and we won the elections for the probation officers and so we were on a roll. Then the agricultural inspectors came up and we won the elections for

the agricultural inspectors. So AFSCME was winning and winning and winning. Then by the time the mechanics came up, which was my plan for the fourth one, the commission by that time called a halt and said, "NO, we want to take time out to determine how we are going to be setting up units." If we had been able to get by that, it would have been a whole different story. But, we didn't. And so what happened is history.

DONAHOE

And then the other factors: Wurf meeting with the leadership of the LACEA and-

FIERING

Well, this was all going on at the same time.

DONAHOE

So these initial bargaining units remained in AFSCME?

FIERING

Yeah. Oh, they are still around, sure.

DONAHOE

And there was a fifth one you say?

FIERING

Yeah, well, we then competed with Local 660 for the psychiatric social workers. And we beat them on it.

DONAHOE

But they won the clerical workers?

FIERING

But this was after collective bargaining had already been established. This was one of the independent groups that remained after all the elections had taken place.

DONAHOE

So after that SEIU then won clerical workers and social workers?

FIERING

That was in '70, also. See, all these elections outside psychiatric--forgot about that, that was later. That was three or so years later. Four years later.

DONAHOE

So what happened was LACEA actually rejected AFSCME and went with SEIU?

FIERING

That's right. AFSCME withdrew from the clerical election. That was the big thing.

DONAHOE

So it wasn't like they were really fighting each other at that point, because there was nothing more you could do.

FIERING

Well, of course, there was. Everything was wide open then.

DONAHOE

No, I mean at that point, when they decided they didn't want to go with AFSCME.

FIERING

No, at that point everything was still wide open. That's when it was determined by the AFL-CIO, which has a no-raiding clause in its constitution, that that particular situation would not have been deemed to have been raiding, because we had petitions in for these people, see. After that it was raiding, because after that people became dissatisfied with SEIU and they came to us. If we hadn't had that Article 20 in the AFL-CIO national constitution prohibiting raiding, we would have torn the hell out of them.

DONAHOE

Really?

FIERING

That's when everybody else was gone from the internationals; [it was] just me and my council and people started coming to us. They wanted us then, see, because we had a militant reputation, and so I did do something about it. I decided I would move in on 660 and I started to take over their grievance machinery because the peculiarities of the law permitted that kind of thing. And I organized a bunch of people in a big unit of theirs that had about three or four thousand people. As a matter of fact, do you know the Kaufmans, Annie and Mike Kaufman?

DONAHOE

Sure.

FIERING

Sure, you know the Kaufmans, I saw them down there at that event.

DONAHOE

At the play, they were there that night, yeah.

FIERING

Mike was one of the leaders of that move to come-

DONAHOE

They worked for the state, I thought.

FIERING

They worked--No, later on. At that time, Mike was a computer operator in the computer department for the county, see, and he brought a bunch of people to us and we started to organize them and I moved in to take over the grievance machinery of 660. And I had an arbitration case set up and they were bringing members into our outfit. We would have just torn them wide open, we would have taken over the whole goddamned kit and caboodle. Just what we didn't take over a couple of years previous we would have taken over then. But they filed charges in Washington with us and the AFL-CIO held for the SEIU and ordered us out of the picture, that it was raiding in violation of Article 20, so we had to back out and that was the end of that. So from there I decided, "Well, if we can't fight them, why let's be friends with them because our interests are mutual, we both have a common boss to fight." So I made an

approach to--But we maintained our excellent reputation because we were militant, we were the militant union. I made an approach to the leadership of 660 and it wasn't easy. Between Elinor Glenn who had a terrible dislike for us because of the way we handled her on the organizing campaign and a guy by the name of Harry Gluck, who was the leader of 660--she was the leader of [Local] 434--but between the two of them, they were the SEIU, pretty much. There were social workers in [Local] 535 but you figure-

DONAHOE

Oh yeah, I remember that one.

FIERING

That was a separate bag. Anyway, so I made an approach to develop some friendship and cooperation between us, even though we were really a minority union. They far outnumbered us. It was difficult for them, very difficult--they were suspicious of our industries--until 1973 when they ran into difficulties in negotiations. They ran into difficulties because of their inexperience and we didn't, and the reason for it was because of the difference in our experiences. We were making mileage in negotiations, coming out with some concessions, and we were stuck short of a final settlement because the county couldn't move until the big unions were moved. And one day Harry Gluck called me up and wanted to meet with me, Harry Gluck, and Elinor--And Dave Crippen of the Social Workers Union (Local 535).

DONAHOE

Elinor Glenn I've heard of a lot, yeah.

FIERING

He says, "I'll have Elinor there and Dave Crippen and myself. Would you like to meet with us?" And I says, "Sure." So that was an important turning point. In the county, it was at that point historic. It was an important turning point. So we met out for breakfast one morning and they asked me what my suggestions were; they asked me for advice. So I laid out what I thought we could do and what they ought to do. I thought what we ought to be shooting for was a strike and they had the troops and I had the imagination. I had the

troops who were willing if we could get more of them, because I wasn't about to stick our neck all the way out without some guarantees. So they were so desperate, because they hadn't moved off of ground zero in negotiations and here we're in the middle of negotiations, they agreed and I outlined a little strategy. They adopted that, and the strategy was we will go back immediately and start telephoning all the stewards, that we are having a special meeting of stewards to talk about strike, pull them off the job in the middle of the day. And hit hard and fast. We would call this meeting quickly before management had a chance to start clamping down on people. And so that was the agreement we made and we broke up after breakfast and went back to our offices and on the way I'm thinking to myself, "These people don't look too solid to me." So when I went back, the first thing I did was get on the phone and I started calling up all our stewards, told them about the meeting, what the agreement was, and they were enthusiastic as hell, and I says, "Be sure you get everyone of the LACEA stewards, SEIU stewards, and tell them that we have got this agreement." And they did and the word started to spread among them, and sure enough when I got back--I was back in the office a little while--I get a call from Harry and he says, "You know we have reconsidered this, we don't think it's too wise." I says, "Harry, it's too late, the word is out. You can't stop it now, you might as well go through with it." Reluctantly, they went through with it and it turned out to be an exceptional meeting. There were hundreds-

DONAHOE

What year was this?

FIERING

Just '73.

DONAHOE

I thought so for some reason, okay.

FIERING

It was a turning point, and we had hundreds of stewards there and, of course, every one of them was a hero. Elinor is a hell of a fine speechmaker.

DONAHOE

Yeah, I'm surprised what you say. I always heard good things about her.

FIERING

Well, it's okay. Her intentions were always good.

DONAHOE

I don't know her that well.

FIERING

Well, see, her experience in a trade union movement, in the organized trade union movement, was very limited, because she always was in the public sector where you never had real collective bargaining. So she never had a chance to build and develop the kind of union or the kind of experience that goes with building a real union, see. But she is very well intentioned, you can't question her intentions, and she is a hell of a good speaker, she is a hell of a public speaker. So she made a big speech, I made a big speech, and Harry Gluck made a big speech. People were ready to go and they were ready to march and, when these people got back into the shops and the offices, everybody is ready to strike in the county. We set a deadline and then we worked against the deadline. It was April 29 and everybody is working against that deadline, particularly the management. I didn't care too much, I wasn't worried too much, because a strike is just what that county always needed really.

DONAHOE

Yeah.

FIERING

As a matter of fact, when you start dealing with associations and the company-union complex that they have developed, they need a strike to break them out of that mold, to start developing into a real union. That's why they never really developed into real unions in the county, see, nowhere. Either in Elinor's union or 660, never developed into real unions because they never went through that experience. So everybody is getting ready to strike and we set up a strike machinery and we continued our negotiations. I was very flattered they asked me to sit in with them on their negotiations, too. I sat in on their negotiations and got out their list of stuff, and I said, "You've

got fifty points and haven't even resolved point one, point one." So the main thing was to start boiling down the demands on the laundry lists to its essentials, you know, and Elinor, Harry and I were meeting--and we're different unions, you know, and the county is ready to accept me sitting there representing them when normally they'd say, "Hey, get the hell out of here! What the hell are you doing here, who the hell are you?" So we resolved all the issues just before the strike deadline. Management came through with a firm offer that was satisfactory and saleable, and it was a wild time that year. Next year was much easier.

DONAHOE

From then on, yeah.

FIERING

And the following year. \*[When SEIU and AFSCME were at odds before this year, my modus operandi was to use their strength, their political strength, to get things for my members. We would get our members excited and use that to excite SEIU members. The county would give us more just to get us off their backs, so they could deal unhampered with the SEIU. This year we pooled our strength and leadership, worked together, to get more for everyone.] It was one of those two years anyway. It was much easier and we got good settlements as a result of that for the next couple of years, because they knew that people were still on their muscle, people hadn't forgotten that this is the way they got it. They were still on their muscle. Some important lessons to be learned, not from the point of view of how to negotiate, how you use, if you haven't got all the strength yourself, how you use the other guy's strength in order to get what you need, see. And our negotiating committees learned a lot from that, because they are sitting there watching. We had a lot of good experiences like that in the county. One of the experiences we had was negotiating wages for the mechanics group, AFSCME Local 119, which always operated on its muscle. Learned a very good lesson, right off the bat. From the first meeting they learned that lesson. We were negotiating for a raise and as we went up the line to the various levels of management, they were giving us a lot of crap, you know. They were going to give us a raise, [but] they were checking it, they were making a survey and indicating hope, you know. Finally, we get to the top guy. They had finally arranged a meeting with--well, first of

all, they arranged a meeting with the deputy personnel director of the county, John James. At that time these guys had full authority to make commitments for the board of supervisors, and this guy started to play tough cop with us. So here's our committee sitting there and I went to work on this guy and he's sitting there. He had come in, we were told, with his chief assistants, and he was going to show them how it should be done, because I was tough to negotiate with, and he was going to show them how it should be done, how I should be handled, see. And so he had these guys all sitting there and he was going to show them how I should be handled. And he started and I took over the ball and [said], "Here's my committee." I went to work on the 80and-so and before long he was saying, "Please, Henry; please, Henry." My committee is repeating this to me to this day, to this day. I see these guys and they talk about it to this day. He said, "Please, Henry; please, Henry, you are making me look bad in front of my people, please, please." Oh, d"id I ream him out a new asshole. Anyway, he couldn't say yes to a raise, so I says, "Set us up with a meeting with so-and-so," the personnel director. So we met with the personnel director and he was going to show his top people how it should be done. So we walk into the meeting, and these are the top guys in the county, and this guy, as soon as we walk in and sit down, he says, "I want to make this brief." He says, "I just wanted to let you know where we were coming from," he says. "There's not going to be a raise." "Oh," I says, "Gordon, good, I'm glad you told us so we don't waste time." So I says, "Let's go," to my committee, and we all get up and we walked out. And we worked out a little strategy on what should happen. They called up the plant, not me. They called up the people because the people were all anxious to hear what the hell was going on because they expected a raise. So the chairman of the committee tells the leading guys left in the shop what took place. And it's similar to the situation up in Humboldt County, where the board of supervisors said, "Go to hell." And in effect that's what this guy said, "Go to hell"; didn't even talk to us. So went back to my office and these guys went into the plant and as soon as they hit the plant there's a meeting at a little shop waiting for them, see. And the guys are steaming, and first guy gets up, the chairman gets up to make a report, and he says about five words out of his mouth and somebody says, "Strike!" They pick it up and the whole goddamn department walks out from allover the county. They called up to everywhere and everybody comes out allover the county and they come streaming out and I'm sitting at my desk and the

committee came up to the office. While they're there, just as they walked in, the telephone rings, and I get a call from the personnel director. He says, "Henry, Henry do you know what's happened?" I says, "No, Gordon, what's happened?" He says, "They walked out." I says, "Who walked out?" He says, "The whole goddamn department walked out." I says, "The hell you say, they didn't walk out?" He says, "Yes, they did, they did." I says, "Jesus Christ, what are you going to do about it?" He says, "I don't know." He says, "What are you going to do about it?" I says, "I don't know what the hell I can do about it." I says, "Look at the position you guys took while we were in the meeting." I says, "Jesus Christ, you want to settle this, you guys better talk it over and give me something to talk to these guys about." So he says, "I'll call you back." He calls me back and he offers a raise over the telephone. And I says, "It's a deal now?" He says, "It's a deal. But we can't make the deal while the people are out." And I says, "All right, now what we'll do is this: I'll convince the guys to go back, I won't say anything about the raise, and then we'll come in with the committee after the guys are back to work and you'll make the offer of the raise and we'll sew it up." He says, "Okay, we'll work it that way." I went to the meeting. We called a big meeting--the guys were out two days--we called a meeting the second morning. We called a meeting--I don't know if it was that night or the morning--whatever it was, we called a meeting and we were out two days. And I make a big pitch and we're spreading the word around to key people, "Don't worry this thing is in the bag." Key people. "We got to go back to work. They can't talk to us while we're out. It's a matter of how they look to the rest of the community and to the rest of the workers. They have got to feel you guys are back at work before they sit down and meet with us. They will meet with us," and so on and so forth. We took a vote and they voted to go back to work. Went back to work, the committee walks in the next morning, and in ten minutes we had everything we wanted and everything was great. \* Mr. Fiering added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

DONAHOE

That's fantastic, and was that like '73 by then?

FIERING

No, this was '72 or earlier. Man, those guys' wages, their wages were medium, you know, in the state, and they zoomed up to the top of the scale in the state. And so did all of our groups, everyone of our groups got the top scale of anybody in the state in those classifications of work.

DONAHOE

That's great.

### **1.15. TAPE NUMBER: IX, Side One (October 2, 1987)**

DONAHOE

Okay, last time we were talking about AFSCME [American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees] and your involvement with AFSCME and how important winning collective bargaining was. So you were going to tell me a little bit more about that.

FIERING

Well, the upsurge in organization that followed-All of these incidents were all interrelated. One does not automatically happen without something happening before. Coming out of the war, there was not the depression that had been predicted. Things were pretty good. People in the public sector made advances in organization and made advances in their contracts and working conditions, whereas the people in the private sector stood still because they had not a mechanism with which to deal with their employers.

DONAHOE

Right, that's so important.

FIERING

That was one factor there. The other factor was this whole concept that had grown up in the country, in America, about the philosophy of the sovereignty of the state and the fact that workers who work for the government are a special group and have a special loyalty to government and it would be unpatriotic for them to think in terms of organizing to confront a public employer as an adversary. But as things improved in the private sector for those workers and they made huge and rapid gains in wages and job conditions, that concept gradually diminished in importance. Public-sector

workers began to measure the inadequacies of their conditions against what their neighbors were experiencing. So the idea of that kind of sovereignty and loyalty was diminished and the public employees began to think in terms of union organization. As they did, President [John F.] Kennedy issued his Executive Order 10988.

DONAHOE

What was that?

FIERING

Executive Order 10988, which permitted federal workers the right to present grievances to their employer and to be represented with representatives of their own choosing, that was the phraseology. But that meant they could call in anybody--they could call in a union official--and so that gave the unions a handle in the public sector by shouting, "See we can represent you. Now, if you join our union, we will represent you." They couldn't negotiate contracts, but they could represent them on grievances. \*[We were unsuccessful in winning federal legislation for employees below the federal level. Legislation had to be won on a state-by-state basis. In California we got the Brown Act, then the Meyers-MiliasBrown Act. Before we leave this, let me pick up a thread we talked of previously, the development of self-help organizations among public workers, the organization of these associations. The majority of public workers today represented by AFL-CIO (American Federation of LaborCongress of Industrial Organizations) unions are members of these associations, now formally affiliated with one or another AFL-CIO union. I'm pointing up the evolution of this type of organization which, when formed, never intended to function as a union, but with changing times and pressures, gradually moved, first to represent employees on job conditions, to meet the challenge from the AFL-CIO, then to maintain their existence, under pressure from their members, took the jump to formal affiliation with the AFL-CIO. That evolution continues, so they are more and more taking on the substance of a union as well as its appearance.] Well, in California that was picked up by George Brown, who was an assemblyman at the time and who sponsored what came to be known as the Brown Act, whose terms included those that were embodied in the Kennedy executive order. But it became the law in the state, so that any public employee on a level from the state down to any

community or special district could call in a representative to represent him on a grievance or a working condition. Well, that gave the unions their big handle on public employment, and of course, it was a big appeal to workers that have some reason to come into a union, because the union could represent them, even on a limited scale they could represent them. \* Mr. Fiering added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

DONAHOE

It was like a wedge.

FIERING

That's right. And so there was an influx of people into the unions and with that came the inevitability of small work actions, which began to grow in intensity and in Los Angeles to such an intensity that the social workers went out on strike in 1966.

DONAHOE

Right.

FIERING

And stayed out for some ten days. They lost the battle, but you can say they really won the war. Very, very good group. Fortunately, it was a very good group of people, highly conscious, socially conscious group of dedicated idealists. And that's what really made the difference, though they lost, in not killing off an organizing movement in California. It was that kind of people, because even though they were forced back to work they still persisted in organization.

DONAHOE

And that was '661

FIERING

And that was encouraging to, even though it wasn't said in so many words, it was a source of encouragement to all public workers. And you might say, though, that the conditions maintained in the public sector still couldn't stop

organization because conditions were really bad, wages were really low. The differential between the public sector and the private sector was so huge.

DONAHOE

I remember that.

FIERING

It provided a terrible source of agitation. And so the Brown Act led to many of such stoppages, because workers did come into the unions and when they came into the unions they were together. When they are together, they are capable of taking an action. Well, this led, of course, to the incident I was telling you about up in Humboldt County with that strike, which was unique, really unique. After I got back home after that strike, things started to perk in the county here and in the city. And organization grew. It grew in other places also but not nearly as rapidly as it grew in Los Angeles.

DONAHOE

So there was really the main part was here?

FIERING

Yeah.

DONAHOE

Weren't there things going on in the Bay Area too?

FIERING

Yeah, there were things going on in the Bay Area. Of course, the Bay Area is an area all by itself. It has a certain uniqueness because of the ILWU [International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union] history there and the long trade union history there.

DONAHOE

Yes, very different.

FIERING

But I don't think--Well, if anything, yes, they moved probably in tandem with every other part of the state. There's Local 400-

DONAHOE

Because I remember social workers up there also.

FIERING

Yeah. Well, the social workers started to organize all through the state as a result of what happened here. And they set up a local, 535 [of the Service Employees International Union]. [tape recorder off] So I got out of that War on Poverty thing; I just edged my way out of it because I saw it was a waste of time, and I told the guy I was working for. By that time, I had a different boss. The guy who hired me on the reorganization of the union was put in the same category as me, was downgraded. I didn't know how bitter he was, but he was bitter about it. A year later when I took over leadership of the union, he became especially embittered and I didn't realize that until too late. But, in any event, a call came in from some city--I think it was Arcadia--that wanted to organize and they are looking around for who wants it and I jumped in and I says, "I want it." Because the call was that the people were excited. And I'm dealing with a bunch of people who are afraid of people who get excited, you know. They don't know how to deal with it, how to handle it. So I went out then- I think we went over this story.

DONAHOE

Yeah, we talked about Arcadia. I remember that one.

FIERING

And we got that one set up in short order once we pulled the whole city out. Then one morning I was on my way out there and went out there, had a meeting with the guys, and came back to the office. As soon as I came back to the office, I started getting chest pains and I thought it was-

DONAHOE

So this is right during Arcadia?

FIERING

Yeah.

DONAHOE

So what year is this?

FIERING

This is January 10, 1968, and I thought I was having a bellyache or gas. I was doing push-ups while I was having a heart attack.

DONAHOE

Oh no!

FIERING

I didn't even know about it.

DONAHOE

You mean to relieve the gas?

FIERING

Anyway, one of the guys in the office evidently had been through the experience before and he threw me into his car and we went to the doctor. The doctor didn't know what was wrong with me.

DONAHOE

And you were having chest pains?

FIERING

This is a case where you go to a left-wing doctor you know because-

DONAHOE

You think he knows something.

FIERING

--you think he knows something because he's a left-wing doctor. He didn't know what the hell it was all about.

DONAHOE

He never thought to take an EKG?

FIERING

Didn't even take an EKG. I don't know if he had a machine, but he didn't take an EKG. He was very casual about it, and here I am suffering, and he says, "Well, if you want to go to the hospital, I will make arrangements to go." So this guy who was with me urged him to make provisions at the hospital. So he says, "How do you want to go, do you want to call a cab?" So this guy volunteered to take me over, fortunately. So we got to the hospital and they gave me some Demerol, knocked me out, took the EKG, and told me I had had a heart attack. I was in the middle of it.

DONAHOE

All that running around you were doing, you should have been rushed to the hospital immediately.

FIERING

Yeah, immediately.

DONAHOE

It's lucky that you survived.

FIERING

I am, I am.

DONAHOE

Look at all that time that was wasted.

FIERING

Well, I survived it and went back to work.

DONAHOE

How long?

FIERING

I was out three months.

DONAHOE

That's still not bad.

FIERING

Well, they wouldn't keep you out that long today, but at that time the state of the art called for that to be normal.

DONAHOE

It's like twenty years ago.

FIERING

Oh, not three months--am I saying three months? Three months or three weeks.

DONAHOE

It couldn't be three weeks.

FIERING

No, no, three weeks I was in the hospital.

DONAHOE

Three weeks is like nothing.

FIERING

Three weeks I was in the hospital.

DONAHOE

For three weeks you were in the hospital?

FIERING

Then I went back to work and we had some of the same and I immediately picked up with the groups that I had been organizing. By this time, there was already talk in Sacramento about the possibility of a collective bargaining law and that was a big thing, which eventually became the Meyers-Milias-Brown Act.

DONAHOE

Right, that we talked about last time.

FIERING

The unions and the university got into the act. And industry in California and the public employers in California, they all recognized the need for it, because it was the only way they could get a handle on all this anarchic activity. People popping off anytime they wanted to, walking out, no controls, no way to reach them, no organized mechanism. So collective bargaining became the organized mechanism that permitted people to have a means through which they could air their problems and get them resolved. That's really what it is. It played a useful role. And so Meyers-Milias-Brown was born.

DONAHOE

'Sixty-nine, yeah.

FIERING

'Sixty-nine, October '69, it was passed in the legislature and became law. [Ronald W.] Reagan signed it immediately. He was governor at the time. It's interesting, Reagan as the governor was a lot more loose than Reagan as the president, not that he worked any harder. He was known as a guy who used to work from nine to five with his feet up on the desk most of the time and other guys doing his work. He had a very easy life.

DONAHOE

Well, there were a lot of cuts when he was governor, I remember.

FIERING

Well, there may have been some cuts, but we got this law. That was important. Matter of fact I think I mentioned when I was up in Eureka leading that strike, he had his guy assigned to practically live with me.

DONAHOE

Yeah, I remember you told me.

FIERING

Became a very good friend of mine and couldn't say enough good about me. But he was on the phone to Reagan's office seven times a day and vice versa, reporting on the status of the thing, because they were afraid of it. You know that was the atmosphere at the time. You never could tell when something

was not going to set up a major explosion among public employees. The unfortunate thing was that our own people were just as afraid, see.

DONAHOE

Really?

FIERING

So they didn't take full advantage of it.

DONAHOE

So· that was really a real victory, that was an impetus to--?

FIERING

Oh, that was a watershed.

DONAHOE

Yeah, I can imagine.

FIERING

Of course, with that, beginning in 1970 unions could then organize and ask for legitimate bargaining rights, legal bargaining rights, become legal bargaining agents. Not exactly on the same conditions as in the private sector, there was a difference. The most you could get under Meyers-Milias-Brown was what was called the majority bargaining status instead of exclusive bargaining status. That's been modified since.

DONAHOE

Okay.

FIERING

Do you understand the difference?

DONAHOE

No, why don't you explain the difference.

FIERING

You really need it in here?

DONAHOE

Well, why not? Is it really long and complicated? '

FIERING

Not really. Majority bargaining status means that the majority bargaining representative has the sole right to bargain for a contract and to set the terms and conditions of a contract with the employer, but any other organization and individual could come in and represent employees on any terms and conditions of that contract. See, under exclusive bargaining rights only the exclusive bargaining agent could represent the employee. Now that makes a big difference.

DONAHOE

But how, I thought you had rules against raiding, isn't that kind of raiding?

FIERING

Well, that may be, but when you are talking about the public sector, you are talking about a predominance of public employees being organized in independent organizations. So any independent organization could presume to do that, though the reverse really was what was happening. The unions were on the attack against the independent organizations, but there were periods after this where independent organizations were on the offensive and attacked legitimate AFL-CIO bargaining agents.

DONAHOE

Really?

FIERING

In some--yes, it's happening today--and won in some cases.

DONAHOE

So, in other words, if the majority bargaining agent was AFSCME, just say, and they were bargaining with the county, but by rights an independent association could come in?

FIERING

That's right.

DONAHOE

But wouldn't have to prove that they--?

FIERING

And take over the-

DONAHOE

The negotiating?

FIERING

Not the negotiating, but the grievance machinery. They could represent these employees on grievances under the terms of the contract.

DONAHOE

But don't they have to prove that they represent a certain number of the people? They can just come in?

FIERING

Nope, [just] one.

DONAHOE

One person?

FIERING

That's right. The person with the problem or a group with a problem. In fact I tried to use that with the SEIU [Service Employees International Union] when in 1971 or '72, all the bargaining agents had been established and AFSCME had been pushed out of the major bargaining units in [Los Angeles] county. A lot of these people were disillusioned with what [Local] 660 was doing with the SEIU and some of them started coming to me and I picked up on it. That's why I was talking about Mike and Annie Hoffman. Their bargaining unit, which was a big bargaining unit in the county, I seized on that one and we signed up a hell of a lot of their people and I started going to work taking over the grievance machinery of the SEIU. I started filing grievances and pursuing grievances all the way up to arbitration when somebody suddenly tipped them off that

there's an Article 20 in the AFL-CIO constitution. We had an arbitration demand filed, and the county was hesitant about acting on it, but they had to act on. But the Employee Relations Commission was asked to delay action in appointing an arbitrator because they were told there is going to be a charge filed against us and it is going to be resolved by the AFL-CIO. They didn't want to get into the middle of that kind of politics. So they filed a charge and of course they were upheld, and here we were sitting with a whole lot of cards ready to take them over and we had to back out.

DONAHOE

Because of that. What's Article 201

FIERING

Article 20 is a no-raiding article.

DONAHOE

So it is no-raiding actually.

FIERING

That's right.

DONAHOE

So even though you said another union can come in or--?

FIERING

It cannot be an AFL-[CIO] union.

DONAHOE

Oh, I see. So it is mostly the independents.

FIERING

That's right.

DONAHOE

They are not covered by Article 201

FIERING

Or [International Brotherhood of] Teamsters. Huh?

DONAHOE

They are not covered by Article 20?

FIERING

No, how can they be?

DONAHOE

Because it's only the AFL-CIO, of course, yeah.

FIERING

It's an agreement within the AFL-CIO; it's part of its constitution dealing with relationships with the AFL-CIO unions.

DONAHOE

I see, I see.

FIERING

They have all agreed by constitution to abide by the decisions of an arbitrator on that particular article, but it doesn't affect anybody else. It doesn't affect the independents, it doesn't affect the teamsters, doesn't affect anybody else.

DONAHOE

Doesn't affect those that aren't in the AFL-CIO.

FIERING

That's right.

DONAHOE

I see. Did that ever change?

FIERING

No.

DONAHOE

Does that still exist?

FIERING

That still exists, of course.

DONAHOE

To this day they never got exclusive bargaining, they just have majority bargaining.

FIERING

They have majority bargaining. Now, even though the Meyers-Milias-Brown Act was amended a year later to permit exclusive bargaining' rights in the county, they have been unable to win it. In the city they have won it.

DONAHOE

Oh, in L.A. city?

FIERING

L.A. city they have it. They not only have that, they now have agency shop too. But in L.A. County they still have only majority bargaining status; they still don't have exclusive bargaining.

DONAHOE

So it's really a way to allow these independents to come in.

FIERING

It always is. It's a threat.

DONAHOE

It is a threat, yeah, that's something. Let's see, where were we? [pause] So, around this whole--I think we were talking about the county. When the county was being organized you had won a number of the bargaining units under AFSCME, but then there were different hesitations in the leadership of AFSCME. They were kind of hesitating about the county and the SEIU managed to get in there.

FIERING

Yeah, well, what happened, the way in which they approached the organization, I was asked to play a secondary role in the organizational campaigns. [Jerry] Wurf had a guy who was a hotshot.

DONAHOE

Oh that's right, we talked about that.

FIERING

A guy by the name of Tom Fitzpatrick, and I was thinking about his uncle's name.

DONAHOE

Oh yeah, right.

FIERING

About his father's name? His uncle's name was Tom from the UE [United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America]. He stemmed out of the UE and then the IUE [International Union of Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers], see. And I came across his father's name in this book.

DONAHOE

Oh really?

FIERING

Mike [Fitzgerald]--"Red" Mike they used to call him.

DONAHOE

Oh that was "Red" because you had mentioned a Red.

FIERING

Yeah, they used to call him Red Mike.

DONAHOE

And he was the one from UE?

FIERING

Well, he was the one who switched to the IUE. He was a big leader in the East Pittsburgh shop. He was a founder of UE.

DONAHOE

Oh, okay.

FIERING

But then during the big split, he went to the IUE, and his son, of course, went to the IUE. That was Tom who came here as an organizer for AFSCME. He was a pretty fair organizer; he was a pretty good organizer. He had done a hell of a job for Wurf in the East and the Middle West and so Wurf wanted him out here and I wasn't going to make a big deal out of that. I didn't realize that it would have meant eventually that I was going to be out. didn't know that till later. I was very naive about that. But in any event, there was a--It isn't worth telling the complicated story about the bargaining units.

DONAHOE

No, because we had covered a lot of that too.

FIERING

Yeah. But in any event, he didn't succeed in winning the first big unit he went into, the blue collar unit. I had started off with a series of victories; before he came here I had filed petitions. It was not at my instigation to file petitions, I filed petitions at the instigation of the guy who preceded Fitzpatrick. But I did want to file petitions, that was my thing. But the nature of the petitions was what eventually led to big differences between me and Fitzpatrick. Not that it was critical, because he was the guy who could make a final decision anyway. But we then won--the first certification petitions that were filed were acted on by the commission--we won them. I started on a snowball effect, see, and everybody started to feel AFSCME was unbeatable.

DONAHOE

Well, you won some major areas.

FIERING

Anyway, at the time I felt so bad about it I took part of the blame, but later I began to look at it objectively to see what my own role was in it. It isn't like

I'm trying to slough off responsibility. I share some of it, but the major responsibility is shared by Wurf, who missed the great opportunity of his life. He could have had all of California if he had done what it was possible for him to do. And Fitzpatrick, who was so goddamn arrogant, he didn't have his--he thought it was a shaoин. A guy who never went out to visit the workers on the job and thought he could mastermind this first big election that he was responsible· for from behind a desk and assure Wurf that no matter what I did, nO matter where I was with it, that it was a shoo-in. I remember our national attorney was passing through here and gave me a call just the day before the election and he says, "Well, Henry, I guess you are going to have a big union here with the election." I said, "Don't bet on it, don't bet on it," because I was out there.

DONAHOE

Nothing is guaranteed.

FIERING

That's right. I said, "Don't bet on it," and he was surprised to hear that. But you couldn't tell this guy anything. You couldn't tell Fitzpatrick-

DONAHOE

And without contact with the workers he thinks he's going to win them over and that's it?

FIERING

Well, he had his own style of organizing.

DONAHOE

From where? [laughter]

FIERING

Well, if he had done what I did he might have been a little more fearful. I had separated out the mechanics that I had organized, see, and I had figured that was going to be one of those quick elections we get. By the time the L.A. County Employee Relations Commission got to them, they decided, "Hold up, let's get organized here and see where we are at with bargaining units," and I hesitated about throwing the mechanics in with the rest of the blue collar

workers. And then I did, I finally did. But after I did, what I didn't realize was that the county was also counting votes along with the head of the SEIU. This was told to me by the guy who was the head of the SEIU seven years later, see: that they paid a visit to the chairman of the county commission, the employee relations commission, that set up bargaining units and convinced him to separate out those mechanics, even though I had withdrawn the petition. And so when he went to the commission, he suggested to the commission that this is 8 skilled group and deserves its own identity and keep them separate, and those votes made the difference on whether we got the majority. I felt very bad about it, very bad. felt just torn up about it, and I blamed myself to a large degree, though later I realized what the hell was really happening, when I took stock of it. I wasn't making the-

DONAHOE

You really had the support.

FIERING

First of all, I made the decision and I did what this guy wanted, but I wasn't making the final decisions all along. This guy was and he could have done what he wanted to do, but his real attitude was to thumb his nose at me, to say, "Fuck you, buddy," you see. "I didn't need you. I was going to do this anyway; I was going to win without you, see." And he had gone and he had rented a boat, he had rented a house--He was ready to bed down here, and if he had--he and Wurf had worked that out--that would have been, as far as I was concerned, that would have been the end of me here. I would have been pushed allover the place, and I wasn't about to be at that point. It would have meant that I would have been forced out; I would have to make a decision to get out. So I survived that in the way I didn't want to survive it.

DONAHOE

Yeah, by losing the rest of the county.

FIERING

But then, a year and a half later--less than that, a year later--the whole atmosphere changed in the county when these guys were all gone, and people then took stock again in the county, and they wanted AFSCME. And they

wanted us particularly because of the reputation that AFSCME had established. That's where this one group and other groups were coming to me to organize them, and I was organizing. I didn't know much about Article 20, because I didn't have that kind of a background with AFL-CIO. Mine was with UE, and they weren't covered by any Article 20, see. And Christ, we were ready to take over everything that the SEIU had at that point.

DONAHOE

Really. 402

FIERING

That 660 particularly had. I don't know about Elinor [Glenn]'s group and whatever might have happened with that. But anyway it was an unfortunate set of circumstances. So we established what we had, we solidified it. We had the best contracts in the county. We had the best wages in the county. In fact, we had the best wages for our groups in the state, in all the classifications we had, and our people were very, very up, and very happy with the union, and everybody else was looking to us too.

DONAHOE

But that was it, I mean you never went over--?

FIERING

You couldn't take over any--We did succeed in competing with SEIU in one bargaining unit which was independent--social workers, the psychiatric social workers, AFSCME Local 2712.

DONAHOE

No, that's not [Local] 535.

FIERING

No, that's not 535. And we beat them. It was based on our record. They were an association and they voted a hundred percent to come with us based on our record as against [Local 660's] record. That was that incident I told you where we bargained with the county. I says, "Listen, I got to reward these people for coming to us."

DONAHOE

Right.

FIERING

Because we did the--I was the only one who was an experienced trade unionist coming out of the industrial movement and was appreciated by the SEIU leadership. And once after that Article 20 decision, I decided, "Look, there's no point. We are not enemies anymore and there's no point in fighting them. We are only hurting each other." And my MO [modus operandi] in organizing is that you find out how you can use other people to improve your own position. It doesn't mean you sell them out, but how can you use them. And as it turned out we used them before, because the county was constantly afraid our militancy was going to lead everybody out. Well, we didn't have anything to do with the other units at that time. But then when they came to me and asked for my advice, when they were all in a box--that was 660, Elinor and Dave Crippen--we started this movement for a strike. That was based on my making a turn, making the decision, that, well, from now on I'm going to make friends with these people. have nothing to fight with them about anymore.

DONAHOE

And you started working together?

FIERING

Worked together. And we worked together and here again, I went out into the forefront of the whole movement, see, and I was able to tell the county, "Listen, I control this thing." (I'm giving it to you just the way it was said. )I said, "I control this thing." And they say, "We know you do." And I says, "You want a settlement, you've got to work through me." And I say, "Now, I have got to have a reward. First of all, my bargaining unit has got to come out well, and I said, "As far as this unit is concerned I go~ to reward them for joining us, I promised them that." So we worked out that little deal, but then I helped the other unions, once we had taken a strike vote in consummating their own contracts. Harry Gluck, who was the head of 660, and I became very close, very close. Matter of fact, the way I became a consultant to 660 after I retired was that he at that time had an appointment with the--Brown had given him a

big appointment in the state as chairman of the California Public Employment Relations Board.

DONAHOE

Governor Brown.

FIERING

Yeah, "Jerry" [Edmund G.] Brown [Jr.]. And so he told his successor, Steve Cooney, to be sure to come after me, to get my help as a consultant. I was consultant to him for several years.

DONAHOE

Well, what did you think was the difference between AFSCME and SEIU later when you started working with them? And what would make one better than the other?

FIERING

Neither is better than the other. The difference was the trade union background versus what's called an association background, or what we would call a company union background. Not the inability, but the inexperience in understanding the relationship of a union to an employer. And my approach was what I had learned all my life. You've got a boss, and you've got workers. There is only one way to deal with it: organize to fight. And they were unaccustomed to that. See, the associations had dealt with the county on, well, you've heard of the term "collective bargaining." That's what it was. They used to consider themselves a part of the county machinery, and they really were. They were the employee arm of the county machinery, but they didn't get anything for it, see, and the workers resented it.

DONAHOE

So they came out of the independent federations and associations, and AFSCME was more-

FIERING

The popular idea of a union.

DONAHOE

--had utilized people from basic industry to organize. It was a different attitude, a different approach.

DONAHOE

So basically you could have worked the same way in either one?

FIERING

For anyone, that's right.

DONAHOE

They were both the same really. Well, how do you decide on jurisdiction, because they were both there in the public sector and--?

FIERING

Well, jurisdiction is whoever gets there firstest with the mostest is the one that gets 1n. That's the way it is.

DONAHOE

But they really collaborate now more then ever, don't they, AFSCME and SEIU?

FIERING

Then they did, after the fight.

DONAHOE

They don't now?

FIERING

Right now they are not.

DONAHOE

Well, I was just wondering how do they decide, how do they work things out, how do they collaborate?

FIERING

Circumstances either impel them to meet together or circumstances don't impel them to meet together, or run into conflict with one another on issues.

They have their own interests, but where their circumstances bring their interest in tandem, they work together. That's the way it works, everybody works for himself.

DONAHOE

I know, but it just seems like it comes into conflict a lot, you know, to the detriment of the workers.

FIERING

It does. It's a bad situation there, has been for several years. The workers are split apart. We started a coalition, Harry Gluck and I, of one from each of the unions that was involved then. There was AFSCME, SEIU, Elinor's group--and the [International Union of] Operating Engineers, which though it's a small group is an international and a very key union in the county. The [International Association of] Fire Fighters was an AFL-CIO union, and one other. It was about six different-

DONAHOE

AFT [American Federation of Teachers]?

FIERING

No, the AFT is not in it. And we worked together and we agreed that Harry would be the chairman because he came from the biggest group--nobody questioned that--and that maintained for a few years. Then they elected the rep from the Operating Engineers, Joe Wetzler, as chairman because he was a neutral, and because there was conflict among the other unions. But that thing has degenerated over the years now, and that coalition that we formed at that time is completely different now, and 660, which represents the majority of the workers, is out of it. Not even a part of it.

DONAHOE

They are not even in it anymore?

FIERING

Not even in it.

DONAHOE

How long did it last?

FIERING

Well, it lasted for all the time I was there until '76, six years. It lasted for seven years, till Harry left.

DONAHOE

Until about '70?

FIERING

'Seventy-seven.

DONAHOE

'Seventy-seven. So from say '77 till now there has been a lot of conflict.

FIERING

Yeah, it's unfortunate.

DONAHOE

Yeah, it really is. So there's no one in there now trying to build new coalitions and figure out--?

FIERING

Well, they have a coalition, but it excludes the biggest union in the county.

DONAHOE

I mean a real coalition.

FIERING

That's right.

DONAHOE

What about the AFT, did they work at all?

FIERING

No, they're not-

DONAHOE

They are just a separate.

FIERING

They're not involved. They are involved in the AFL-CIO Public Employee Division, which takes in all the public employee unions. But the county, which has got its own coalition, they are not involved; there are no teachers there.

DONAHOE

When you became a consultant for the SEIU, then were you still involved with AFSCME too?

FIERING

Yep.

DONAHOE

So you have maintained your relationship with both?

FIERING

I was negotiating for the probation officers, the mechanics, and for 660 at the same time.

DONAHOE

But you couldn't bridge the gaps even though you were there?

FIERING

No, that's impossible. No, I couldn't bridge it and I wasn't about to. It wasn't my role, I was no longer director of the union. If I was the leader of the union, 409 that would be one thing, but then I couldn't represent SEIU. But as an independent operator I could be a consultant to anybody, and I was a consultant to probation officers up until two years ago. And to the SEIU up until--I was a consultant to Elinor's union, though she had retired, but I had negotiated a couple of contracts for them up until two years ago. They wanted me to do it again this year, but I didn't want it. I don't want to handle that anymore; it's too heavy, it's too heavy.

DONAHOE

Do you think there's a way that could be beneficial to the workers and, you know, fair to everybody that they could divide jurisdiction amongst certain groups of the public sector? Do you think both unions are pretty much the same?

FIERING

Yeah, they are--in California only. See, this is the only place where the SEIU has made real progress in the public sector, and that was because of L.A. County. That victory in the county opened the doors of California to the SEIU.

DONAHOE

Okay, yeah. But nationwide they are not?

FIERING

Nationwide they are not a factor. Here and there they have got some groups, but California is where they are a factor, and what did that was L.A. County. A big group of workers has tremendous impact in the public sector throughout California. AFSCME lost an awful lot that time.

DONAHOE

But AFSCME you feel is more powerful nationwide.

FIERING

Oh, there's no question about it. AFSCME is the public employee union.

DONAHOE

I just didn't know if that is the public employee union.

FIERING

That's the public employee union.

DONAHOE

So it's really just in California then that SEIU--I hadn't realized that AFSCME was the major public employee union.

FIERING

They are the public employee union in the United States. They've got over 1,100,000 members, and they are all in the public sector.

DONAHOE

A million a half?

FIERING

No, 1,100,000 or better, and these are all in the public sector.

DONAHOE

And what about SEIU?

FIERING

SEIU has got, the SEIU membership is somewhere around 800,000, but of that 800,000, they may have maybe 300,000 in the public sector, but most of those in the public sector are in California.

### **1.16. TAPE NUMBER: IX, Side Two (October 2, 1987)**

DONAHOE

How do you see the current role of AFSCME in the labor movement?

FIERING

You mean nationally?

DONAHOE

Nationally and in California, too.

FIERING

Well, nationally AFSCME is not only a big force in the labor movement because of its size and the fact that it is well organized and that it has money, but it's a credit to the labor movement. It's a damn good union. It's a real good union, very progressive and dynamic leadership.

DONAHOE

Who's the president?

FIERING

Jerry [Gerald W.] McEntee. He took over when Wurf died.

DONAHOE

That was in the seventies?

FIERING

That was in December '81.

DONAHOE

So you feel really that it's a good union in terms of being democratic and responsive to the needs of the members.

FIERING

Oh, yeah. Yes. And an unusual president, an unusual president, who is very responsive to the rank and file. We didn't know too much about the guy before he became president. The guy who was the district president here, John Seferian, who is very close to me and who remained district president after I retired, was instrumental in the vote that elected McEntee. He was running against Bill Lucy, who was the secretary treasurer of the union and still is.

DONAHOE

All of AFSCME's members are in the public sector, but SEIU, you said they have 800,000, and 300,000 only are in the public sector.

FIERING

My guess is about 300,000, if it's that many.

DONAHOE

In the public sector?

FIERING

Yeah.

DONAHOE

Where are the other 500,000?

FIERING

They are--First of all, it used to be called the Building Service Employees Union. Do you remember the BSEIU? Building Service Employees International Union, the old AFL union of janitors?

DONAHOE

Oh, no, okay.

FIERING

Maintenance men. They changed their name, because the influx of people in the public sector didn't like that name, you know. It was a question also of being associated with janitors; they didn't like that. So they took off--and I think that was done at Elinor's instigation--so they took off the word "building" and they called themselves the SEIU, instead of BSEIU.

DONAHOE

Oh I see, okay.

FIERING

As for SEIU, their base ever since their inception was in the private sector.

DONAHOE

Okay.

FIERING

And they still have a huge number of people in that area.

DONAHOE

Maintenance people.

FIERING

Maintenance people, custodial, janitorial, hospitals.

DONAHOE

In the private.

FIERING

In the private sector, that's right.

DONAHOE

And that's where they originated.

FIERING

That's where they originated. It wasn't until this experience in California that they burst onto the public sector scene, and that enabled them to flaunt it in other places of the country. It also showed them what a huge reservoir of potential membership there was, and so they organized some more workers in the public sector in other areas of the country, but they are scattered: have a few in Massachusetts, a few in Pittsburgh, a few in New York, Oregon, in some other states, you know, but they're scattered. They are not significant. As a force, they are not significant in the public sector, except in California, see. They've got big chunks of California. They've got the CSEA, the California State Employees Association, and the 90,000 people they represent. That's not how many members they've got, but that's what they represent. They affiliated with the SEIU here just a couple of years ago. They have many counties that followed suit on L.A. County, like Santa Clara County, Santa Barbara County, Ventura County, and other counties like San Francisco County.

DONAHOE

They do?

FIERING

San Francisco city. They make up a hell of a lot of people, and just as a guess, my guess would be that they probably represent today in California--I wouldn't be surprised if the number didn't run close to 200,000 public workers.

DONAHOE

Really, oh, okay. But AFSCME has the state employees, aren't they in the--?

FIERING

We have some state employees. We've got the clerical workers, the service workers in the universities, which makes up something like--the bargaining units AFSCME has, has about 38,000 people, I think.

DONAHOE

In the whole state of California?

FIERING

No, no in the University of California system. They are covered by a separate law, the Higher Education Employment Relations Act.

DONAHOE

State workers?

FIERING

State workers. That's the rehabilitation workers Unit. State workers are covered by the State Employees Employment Relations Act.

DONAHOE

Oh okay, I was thinking of the-

FIERING

In the state, all AFSCME has got among state of California workers is Lenny Potash's group, rehabilitation workers, Local 2620. Wait a minute. That's right, Lenny Potash's group. Where are the clerical workers that they've got? Those are in the universities.

DONAHOE

Because they just finished that big campaign a couple of years ago for the University of California.

FIERING

That's right, universities. So all they've got in the state is the rehab workers.

DONAHOE

That's all? I thought they had a lot of other people.

FIERING

No, they don't. For the moment, that's it, outside of local public entities. They have got local unions in local jurisdictions all around California, like in L.A. County they got five unions. Now, in L.A. city they represent the clerical workers and about two or three other bargaining units, or one or two other bargaining units, but the clerical workers are the big unit. They are four thousand people, and that's where they broke through on the comparable worth issue, which made history you know. Well, the first one in comparable worth was also AFSCME up in San Jose city. That was a historic agreement, but then the big one on comparable worth was down here in L.A. city.

DONAHOE

And that was from AFSCME.

FIERING

That was AFSCME, yeah. They broke the ground on comparable; that's their achievement.

DONAHOE

Now, when was that, the L.A. one? I forgot the dates.

FIERING

Two years ago.

DONAHOE

What's the status of SEIU now? Do you think that people have been relatively satisfied now with SEIU?

FIERING

Well, SEIU to this day does not have a majority of the people it represents as members in the county, to this day. That represents an awful threat to them, which they just have been unable to overcome. They never fully matured as a union, they never fully grew out of the association mentality they were formed with. They never fully matured as a union. I keep telling them--as a matter of fact I had lunch with one of them yesterday--that my opinion is they won't until they go through a full-fledged strike.

DONAHOE

SEIU, yeah.

FIERING

They have come a good part of the ways but not altogether there.

DONAHOE

Some of them have had strikes, like Kaiser, [Local] 399.

FIERING

I'm not talking--Kaiser is not a part of the county, that's not public employment.

DONAHOE

Oh okay, because we were on SEIU, but it was a different union.

FIERING

Oh, SEIU is a union. It has been through a lot of strikes. I'm not talking about SEIU as a--I'm talking about the public-sector SEIU. Now, there are areas of the SEIU in the public sector where they have matured as unions and they operate as unions, particularly true up north, see, in Santa Clara County, and up north from there, San Francisco County and Alameda County, which is another SEIU. Marin County is SEIU when you start talking about counties. My daughter [Maxine Fiering DeFelice] is a member of that.

DONAHOE

Well, my husband, I told you, he is a member down here, so.

FIERING

But in L.A. County that's what I'm talking about, which is a significant part of California, and that's showing the same kind of development with the CSEA, difficulty in--See, CSEA joined the SEIU; they were shopping around for an AFL-CIO label, see. That's all some of their leaders wanted. They just wanted to get the AFL-CIO off their back, and the AFL-CIO is selling labels: "Take our label and you don't have to worry about being raided." That's as it was. That's what brought the county people into the AFL-CIO. Their people were pushing:

"Either we get AFL-CIO or we're going to dump you." So the leadership gave them the label. Didn't give them the union--that has come from within--they gave them the label. Same with the CSEA, they gave them a label, so no other AFL-CIO union can raid them.

DONAHOE

That's what happened with my husband. They affiliated with SEIU.

FIERING

They took that label, nobody can raid them, see. These people can't organize into another union; they have to make themselves into a union wherever they are at. So I suppose it has got its good side to it, coming from the UE where we were born and bred on raiding.

DONAHOE

Well, but you had to resist raiding-

FIERING

I'm talking about--First of all, we tore up the AF of L with raiding. We not only organized the unorganized, we also--the AFL-CIO shops were practically unorganized; they were dying--and we took them over, many of them. I went against the [International Association of] Machinists and the IBEW [International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers] many times. But then, of course, we became the object of raiding. We were experts in raiding. Take those two years I was mentioning to you about, '42 to '43, when we won sixty-six out of sixtyseven, you know. I just mentioned the numbers; I didn't give you the flavor of it. That was a whole mixture of things. Unorganized shops people had never organized and some of them are IA of M machinists locals, some of them IBEW locals or other unions in the AF of L. Most of them unorganized but, shoot, we had some hellish times, great times.

DONAHOE

It was entirely different. It seems as though people with industrial backgrounds like you were sort of drawn into AFSCME because of the leadership's approach.

FIERING

No, I was drawn into AFSCME because they offered me a job.

DONAHOE

Right, but they wanted somebody like you.

FIERING

They wanted, yeah.

DONAHOE

Whereas SEIU didn't have that kind of-

FIERING

Well, they really wanted somebody with experience in the trade union movement to handle grievances. That's how narrow-minded they were with the concept of a union. This guy who hired me, he hired me as what's called a grievance handler. What's my job? Just to sit at the telephone and when the worker calls up and says, "I have a grievance." I'm to attend to the grievance. I can't exist that way. And when the War on Poverty thing opened, well, people would come into the union to ask me about organization, and I'd ask them, "How about it? Here's some people to organize." They said, "Go ahead and organize."

DONAHOE

Yeah, but Wurf had a bigger idea than that.

FIERING

But Wurf had a bigger idea, that's right. And didn't know enough about public sector to know the difference.

DONAHOE

Yeah, but then you picked it up later, yeah.

FIERING

But then I picked it up, yeah.

DONAHOE

But SEIU didn't seem to have that kind of outlook, whereas the leadership of AFSCME did.

FIERING

The only one who had it at that time--Well, Elinor was in this Local 434 and there was the city which had Local 347, which had once been both one local, when it started as United Public Workers. When it split, it became two locals and Elinor went with the county side, and the guy named Sidney Moore was the chief guy. When Sidney Moore was pushed out in the factional fight, another guy took over for the city workers, which now is a big strong union, about six or seven thousand people--Local 347. It's pretty well solidified, well organized, and primarily black.

DONAHOE

Los Angeles city workers?

FIERING

Yep. It's the blue collar section.

DONAHOE

That's the blue collar section.

FIERING

That's SEIU.

DONAHOE

That's SEIU.

FIERING

That came from the United Public Workers of a handful of people, a few hundred people in the city and county.

DONAHOE

Amazing, wow.

FIERING

So they grew into--Well, I can't say they really grew into a union, because they didn't have trade union experience. They were always in the public sector, and being in the public sector you miss something, you miss something. They never got that, even Elinor. Elinor was fortunately a tremendous speaker and a strong personality, and so she could command attention and demand leadership. But in terms of her experience in union organization, what it takes for union organization and negotiations, contracts and stuff like that, she did not have that background or experience. Even as late as 1970, '71, when I came, I didn't realize it until I was associated with her in this big crisis you know that we had.

DONAHOE

Right, right. So it just seems that from what you are saying the SEIU people didn't have that kind of background by and large, whereas AFSCME-

FIERING

That's right.

DONAHOE

--really solicited people with that kind of background. That made it a very big difference.

FIERING

Of course, SEIU learned though.

DONAHOE

Yeah.

FIERING

They've changed. They've got a hell of a good staff today. Oh, they have got some great kids, great kids.

DONAHOE

I have met a lot of them, yeah, they are. We probably know the same people.

FIERING

Great kids.

DONAHOE

But I always thought George Hardy was pretty interesting.

FIERING

Yeah, he is 8 very interesting guy, that's right. He offered me a job, back in 19-- Let's see, fifteen years ago. And he offered me a huge chunk of geography, but at that time I was fifty-nine years old. He didn't know that because I didn't look it, you know. So I met with his attorney here and we're discussing it, and the only thing I was most interested in was did they have a pension plan. It was then that he realized how old I was and that my main interest was a pension. They didn't have that, and so we agreed that it was not for me. But he offered me one big piece of u.s. geography.

DONAHOE

Really? Now, did he come out of that old Building--?

FIERING

He came out of the old Building Service Employees Union. His father was one of the organizers of it, and he worked at it, and he became a business agent in it. He grew up in that union.

DONAHOE

Because he seems more of a, you know, kind of the old-time trade unionist.

FIERING

He is an old-time trade unionist, very down-toearth.

DONAHOE

Yeah, so he seemed to come out of that whole tradition, but I guess some of the others didn't. I can see the difference.

FIERING

Very practical, very practical. Of course, his practicality was best demonstrated when he made the deal with the public workers. That was being far-sighted. Gave them no conditions: "Come on in just as you are."

DONAHOE

Yeah, that's exactly what they want.

FIERING

But everybody else was looking at him cross-eyed and laying down the anti-red line.

DONAHOE

So he was the one that actually engineered that?

FIERING

He is the one who the SEIU can thank.

DONAHOE

For that.

FIERING

For the position they hold today in the public employment area.

DONAHOE

In California, yeah.

FIERING

In California, particularly. One of these crises in '73, in fact right after we finished negotiations, my wife [Clara Wernick Fiering] was stricken with congestive heart failure.

DONAHOE

Nineteen seventy-three?

FIERING

Yeah, I was in miserable shape. That went on for seven months; she was in a coma for seven months.

DONAHOE

She was pretty young.

FIERING

She was--she was fifty-nine when she died.

DONAHOE

You had your coronary pretty young too.

FIERING

I had my coronary in '68. I was fifty-five. Fifty-five? Yeah, fifty-five.

DONAHOE

That was pretty young as well. It was almost twenty years ago--nineteen years ago.

FIERING

Yeah, January, it will be twenty years.

DONAHOE

Yeah, that was pretty young too.

FIERING

And then I had open-heart surgery four years ago.

DONAHOE

Four years ago?

FIERING

Hmm-mm.

DONAHOE

Did you have another coronary after that?

FIERING

Nope, I was on my way.

DONAHOE

You didn't learn your lesson.

FIERING

Well, no, I suppose in a way it was inevitable. After all it was, what, sixteen years after the other one, and I figured eventually I was due for one of those with all the bypasses that were taking place at that time. And I was pretty close to my cardiologist. I had a workman's comp case--workman's comp paid for mine--and I got to a point where he says, "Well, I think you are about ready," so I did, and I have been in great shape since that time.

DONAHOE

So that was what, '83?

FIERING

Yeah, '83, that's right. April '83. I have been in great shape since that time.

DONAHOE

Since the bypass.

FIERING

Oh yeah, and I have done a lot of work since that time.

DONAHOE

What kind of bypass was it?

FIERING

I had four of them.

DONAHOE

You had like quadruple?

FIERING

Yeah.

DONAHOE

At one time?

FIERING

I don't know why, yeah, I don't know why people make a big fuss about that whether it's three or it's four.

DONAHOE

Well, because there's more things that could-

FIERING

No, once they open you up it doesn't really make a hell of a lot of difference,  
you know.

DONAHOE

Oh my God, just one cut.

FIERING

I haven't had a pain since that time.

DONAHOE

Really? That's wonderful.

FIERING

My heart is in great shape. My pulse is--I run.

DONAHOE

I know, you told me you jog four or day.

FIERING

I took up a lot of exercise. Yeah,

DONAHOE

When you had the first coronary in after that, did you have a lot of problems?

FIERING

Oh, I had pains, yeah.

DONAHOE

Did you take care of yourself? five miles a that's right. '68, then

FIERING

Well, they put me on a walking regimen, but, shoot, I was so tied up in all of this stuff I wasn't- could have been more careful and should have been more careful.

DONAHOE

You didn't watch your diet?

FIERING

If I had, I wouldn't have come to this point. If I had done then what I do now, I wouldn't have come to this point.

DONAHOE

So you didn't watch your diet or exercise properly or do anything?

FIERING

No, the main thing was organizing, organizing, and the thrill of that battle, you know, that conflict, that challenge out there.

DONAHOE

Even after Clara had her heart attack, it didn't-

FIERING

Hmm?

DONAHOE

Even after your wife had her attack?

FIERING

It was a miserable time. And I had the rest--I was carrying a big load in AFSCME. Even though we had a staff, I was representing far more than half the people in contract negotiations outside the county as well as inside the county. I had everything inside the county. It was one hell of a load, and with my wife in the hospital, there wasn't much I could do for her, nor anybody else the rest of that year. But it was a horrible period in my life, a terrible period.

DONAHOE

I can imagine. And she had no warning of this?

FIERING

Oh yeah, she had a warning.

DONAHOE

She had a lot of warnings?

FIERING

In 1963 she had to quit because she had a warning. Well, she had warning prior to 1963, though she didn't say much about it and didn't take it too much to heart because you think you are immortal you know, all of those [kinds of thoughts]. In 1963 she had to quit. See, UE used to move her around too, up [through] the northern part of the state and down here, because they had a jerk up there in the northern part of the state who didn't work.

DONAHOE

Oh, yeah, you told me about that.

FIERING

And she was very, very responsible, and she used to work at her job. She didn't just collect pay. The goddamn pay wasn't big enough anyway, it wasn't. But in '63 she couldn't make it anymore so she went on disability, and while she was on disability, she in '66 had open-heart surgery. She had valve problems.

DONAHOE

And she was only forty-nine at that point.

FIERING

No, not forty-nine. She was--let's see, '74, she would have been sixty, so-

DONAHOE

What was it about fifty then?

FIERING

So in '64 she was fifty, so she was fifty-two, fifty-three years old. Fifty-two years old.

DONAHOE

Well, that's pretty young.

FIERING

Well, she had had rheumatic heart fever when she was a kid.

DONAHOE

I was going to say did she have a heart problem, because that's pretty young, especially for a woman.

FIERING

She had rheumatic fever when she was a kid, and they have said that all of those people had valve damage.

DONAHOE

My stepmother died very young of the same thing.

FIERING

Yeah, but she never took care of herself.

DONAHOE

Neither did my stepmother so, yeah.

FIERING

And so she had a-

DONAHOE

Yeah, that rheumatic fever really--They didn't know what to do then at the time.

FIERING

Yeah, they didn't know about, that's right.

DONAHOE

Those years did tremendous damage to people.

FIERING

So she had that surgery and after that surgery she was on disability and she decided, well, she can't go back to work the way she used to, so she decided to take a law course and she went to law school.

DONAHOE

Oh, God.

FIERING

And became a lawyer.

DONAHOE

She became a lawyer in '60--when she started--?

FIERING

She became a lawyer at the age of fifty-five. Fifty-five or fifty-six.

DONAHOE

That's incredible.

FIERING

Yeah. And she was with a firm that collaborated with [Ben] Margolis and [John T.] McTernan. We owe a lot to McTernan for her becoming a lawyer, because he carried her all the way through on that because she was being challenged, you know. At that time they had rigid bar interviews and examinations.

DONAHOE

So Margolis and McTernan really helped her out a lot?

FIERING

McTernan, McTernan was the one that saw her through. He knew how to handle the--The bar committee did the interviewing and he primed her on everything that she had to say about her background and so on. You have to be absolutely honest about questions, and they go into everything, you know. They ask you if you are a [Communist] Party member. You've got to tell them where you lived and when. If you make a mistake on an address that you formerly lived at, they will hold it against you. So anyway she went to work for Katz and Rosenfeld out in the valley and they took her in as a partner. We

knew [Robert] Katz pretty well. He had been a former partner of Margolis and McTernan. And she worked herself to death.

DONAHOE

You mean after all of this she--ooh.

FIERING

She worked at that job of a lawyer just as she handles any job she worked at: she gave it everything. She handled it just the same like she was doing her union job. She got to represent the ILWU in a couple of its locals. One out in Boron, matter of fact-

DONAHOE

Oh, Boron, yeah.

FIERING

They really admired her. They made up a special bible for her when she died with a cedar box and decorated it and sent it to me, you know, and all of that. And for Local 26, she represented a couple of cases, arbitration cases.

DONAHOE

What Local 26, that was the--?

FIERING

ILWU.

DONAHOE

Yeah.

FIERING

And so Margolis and McTernan offered her a place in their office and made her very happy. And they were fixing it up. We had just gone down there and looked over the way they were fixing up the office, you know, going to have her name on the door as one of the "counsels," and a week later she had heart failure. From which she never recovered.

DONAHOE

Oh, terrible.

FIERING

She was really thrilled about that. Well, anyway that went on for seven months.

DONAHOE

You mean all the--?

FIERING

She was in a coma for seven months.

DONAHOE

Seven months, that's really hard.

FIERING

Yeah, well anyway she died.

DONAHOE

Oh, that must have been really terrible.

FIERING

Yes, it was terrible.

DONAHOE

And, in the middle of this, you were organizing at the county.

FIERING

Hmm-mm, I'm trying to hang on to the union. \*[And my sanity. I couldn't work. You know, we spend so much time on these interesting experiences. A lot to be learned by others. But at such 8 time, it all becomes irrelevant. Nineteen seventy-three was the most traumatic year of my life. The county's negotiations were behind me at the time of Clara's seizure or I would have walked away from them. It was a period during which I took plenty of time to think about my priorities. That was over a seven-month stretch. One does a lot of soul-searching, reflection, introspection, call it what you will. But for the first time in my life, I tried to think through what had been most important

and really was most important. You wish you could do it over. Yes, it was a little late to straighten out your priorities. If I could have, my family would have come first. I missed a lot. My perceptions changed on how to enjoy life, on what I had missed out on. I really am a different person today. I no longer seek out challenges and conflict. Within a year after Clara died, I was married again. My luck held. Ida (Monarch Fiering) is a most compassionate, loving wife, and for the first time in my life, I feel relaxed and fully content. After my marriage to Ida, I set my sights on a possible retirement date. And how I could make up to my kids for some of the lack of attention, which, of course, you never can.] \* Mr. Fiering added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

DONAHOE

Were the children scattered at that time?

FIERING

Yeah, my kids were scattered. Yeah, all of them.

DONAHOE

There wasn't anyone living nearby huh?

FIERING

No, once in a while my son [Frederick Fiering] would be in town, but he wasn't much help then.

DONAHOE

And they were all in school?

FIERING

No, they are up north.

DONAHOE

They had moved and married and settled by that time.

FIERING

They were married; they had families.

DONAHOE

Okay, this is a good place to stop this.

FIERING

All right.

### **1.17. TAPE NUMBER: X, Side One (October 8, 1987)**

FIERING

I want to correct those dates.

DONAHOE

Yeah, you can do that.

FIERING

That experience when we were all together and took on Los Angeles County was 1973. And the strike date I talked of was April 29, 1973.

DONAHOE

Okay, so that's the one when you built the united front, the coalition [American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME); Service Employees International Union (SEIU); International Union of Operating Engineers].

FIERING

Yeah, that's right we built the united front in the county. That's right.

DONAHOE

Okay, so that was after you had realized that they had the majority. But you were still going to work with them.

FIERING

But we were still going to work with them. And that coalition survived. It's a lot different today than it was, but it survived in the same form until Harry [Gluck] left in 1977 or '78. I left in 1976. We were in a certain position, and the best way for us was to work with them, to use their strength somehow, and,

of course, we did. We used their strength to our advantage, but we got more than they did by knowing how, because they didn't know how to use their own strength. But we helped them anyway get more than they would have, and so it benefited everyone. It changed after that over questions of representation, but that was long after I retired. I wasn't a part of it after 1976, and I never injected myself into the issue when it happened. I think it happened in 1981 when the issue came to a head as to the degree of representation they should be allowed. It turns out that the union with ninety people got as much as--had one vote just like a union that represented forty thousand people. [SEIU Local] 660 was unhappy with that.

DONAHOE

That wasn't--?

FIERING

Well, what happened was, you see, the coalition originally included one from each international union, which is fine, except with SEIU where they had two, Elinor [Glen] and somebody from 660. (Elinor was from [SEIU Local] 434.) Their status permitted that, and everybody was happy with it. Nobody argued about that, because we were all together anyway. Nobody was really fighting each other. We had just been through a very successful fight and everybody was happy together, you know. So nobody is making a fuss about that. But in later years one of the unions, CAPE, which stands for the California Association of Professional Engineers and which affiliated with MEBA. MEBA is opening its doors to membership on the basis of a dollar a head. MEBA, Marine Engineers Beneficial Association. They were selling membership; they were selling the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations] label for a dollar a head, that is, a dollar a month per capita.

DONAHOE

Now, is this what you were telling me about when you only have majority bargaining rights and independent groups can come in?

FIERING

No, no. But these are not independent groups.

DONAHOE

What are they?

FIERING

They are AFL-CIO groups. MEBA's an AFL-CIO union.

DONAHOE

But aren't they covered by--?

FIERING

So what happens, for instance, is that CAPE, which was originally an independent group and which wanted to be a part of our AFL-CIO coalition but couldn't because it wasn't in the AFL-CIO, went out and got itself an AFLCIO label. They got off cheap, see. MEBA was selling the AFL-CIO label. You affiliate to MEBA, and you, therefore, are CAPE/AFL-CIO and all you've got to pay is a dollar a member per capita to MEBA to get that label and nobody can touch you. So you may have all kinds of dissatisfaction in your membership, but there's no place for them to go; they've got to stay in that organization, see.

DONAHOE

But that has nothing to do with Article 20 [of the AFL-CIO constitution] or raiding or anything like that?

FIERING

Well, it has [raiding] to do with it. Once they affiliate with MEBA and become a part of the AFL-CIO, nobody can raid them, you see. That's what they buy with that, which is an unfortunate thing but that's the way it is. So they represented some diverse groups as time went on, the tax assessors, engineers, the deputy sheriffs, another was the lifeguards with ninety members, which later came in and became a part of CAPE also to escape the raiding thing, see. And so as time went on, they maneuvered themselves so that each of these constituent parts received entitlement to one vote on the coalition. So here's CAPE, one organization, but it has three affiliates. Or MEBA with one organization, MEBA, they all became a part of MEBA. One organization, but their constituent parts each had a vote, see. And here's [Local] 660 representing forty thousand people also had just one vote, and differences arose because there were different interests involved in the coalition that ran into conflict with each other, and the question of how many

votes anybody had became important. Because they used to bargain together on overall issues. On fringe benefits for instance, they .would bargain together, see. And so 660 raised objections to that and they were pushed out because the rest of the coalition, for whatever the circumstances were at the time, could not agree to give 660 more than the one vote. It was a complicated thing, you know, as to how that whole thing arose, but that's what the bottom line [was]. So 660 took off on its own because it couldn't allow itself to be voted down on what it considered some basic things their membership needed when they're representing the majority of the county, and they are still out.

DONAHOE

All this time?

FIERING

All this time.

DONAHOE

So they are by themselves?

FIERING

And there's nothing anybody can do about it. The L.A. [County] Federation of Labor has rules governing coalitions and they couldn't modify them for the sake of 660 and run into conflict with all the other unions, because each of these constituent unions that made up the coalition was a power force in the AFL-CIO, see.

DONAHOE

So they pretty much work by themselves?

FIERING

So they work by themselves pretty much, yeah.

DONAHOE

That's too bad though in terms of the whole county.

FIERING

It is because they should be the leader of the county.

DONAHOE

Are the AFSCME groups still in that coalition?

FIERING

They are still in the coalition. See now, in the AFSCME group you've got a dominant group in AFSCME, for instance, the probation officers, whose interests are closely tied in with one of the groups in the coalition that's a part of MEBA--the deputy sheriffs. AFSCME would not want to run into conflict with that group, so when you talk about the power relationships inside the AFL-CIO, AFSCME's going to run to the support of its favored group. It's in the power center at the AFL-CIO. So that's an example of the kinds of complications that arise. So AFSCME is tight with the coalition, they don't want to leave it. Similarly with--Well, in SEIU you have factional differences in the union.

DONAHOE

Within the whole union itself.

FIERING

SEIU has two other representatives in the coalition from two other locals.

DONAHOE

Oh, that still remained in.

FIERING

That still remained in. One of the reasons being there were factional differences with the 660 leadership. Another being [SEIU Local] 535, which is [comprised of] social workers who are very headstrong and whose local leadership, for whatever the reasons--the county leadership--insisted on staying with the coalition; they felt more secure.

DONAHOE

What's the other local?

FIERING

Local 434.

DONAHOE

Local 434.

FIERING

Ophelia McFadden.

DONAHOE

Oh, okay.

FIERING

See, she is the international vice president of SEIU, and there were sharp differences between her and the general manager of 660 at that time.

DONAHOE

Oh, I see.

FIERING

And she preferred to remain, and she's a member of the executive board of the L.A. County Federation of Labor, too. She wasn't going to break with the rules of the federation. There's a whole complicated setup now; it has just completely changed over a period of time. It's screwed up.

DONAHOE

Oh, God. Well, that kind of brings us to the question of your estimate of the development of the labor movement in Los Angeles.

FIERING

Well, I want to get in there some comments about Frank Emens' book [The Breakup of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, 1945-1950], about that inordinate amount of space that he takes explaining the fight on foreign policy between UE [United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America] and the CIO as a very major cause of the rupture.

DONAHOE

Oh, okay.

## FIERING

\*[AS I read his thesis, it seemed to me it was James J. Matles building a record to prove it was UE withdrawing from the CIO instead of being expelled from the CIO. And then proving that UE was right to withdraw over issues like the CIO's withdrawal from WFTU (World Federation of Trade Unions), U.S. relations with the Soviet Union, American imperialism, foreign policy, the Marshall Plan, and so on. These were big issues Philip Murray raised because it gave him the opportunity to use the Cold War as a club to beat us to death. Of course, it made him a part of the political establishment. It's true, the UE convention took completely opposite positions from the CIO. And on the non-communist affidavits, Murray was refusing to sign. On that we were tied to his kite. A justification for our not signing was, "How can we sign if Murray hasn't signed." That was supposed to be an argument while his minions inside and outside UE were red-baiting the hell out of us. This was 1948 and 1949. Those of us in the trenches were trying to keep the focus on bread and butter, contracts, autonomy, UE's record. Unfortunately, the foreign-policy issues were not a part of everyday union life. Except in isolated cases, they weren't debated by the rank and file even though the delegates they sent to the UE convention voted to support; primarily because they supported the leadership and opposed anything the James B. Carey forces stood for. Emphasak is elevating foreign policy to the major reason for the split. But more than that he's trying to prove that therefore UE left the CIO instead of vice versa. It didn't make a hell of a lot of difference to the rank and file at that time. And I don't know, what is it, more than thirty years later, what it proves today. He should have tried to prove whether we were prepared to hold our membership on these issues against Murray and the CIO. And most everybody else. I don't think we were. History shows we didn't. And if I had my druthers on two issues to do over they would be signing the affidavits much earlier, following other CIO unions, and secondly undercut our opposition on their attack on our foreign-policy positions by proposing some accommodation with Murray. That would have given us time to get out of that box. But we were all captives of a rigid left line that left no room for compromise.] \* Mr. Fiering added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

## DONAHOE

When workers were mostly interested in trade union questions.

FIERING

They were interested in their livelihoods; they didn't think that much about foreign policy. They weren't really asked to debate it.

DONAHOE

Especially at that time.

FIERING

Yeah. We take it up in the convention, you get through a resolution--so what, so what.

DONAHOE

But not to make it a fight to the bitter end.

FIERING

That's right, but it doesn't touch the rank and file. But you go around the country hollering, "You see, this is what our rank and file thinks. We are doing what our membership wants," and the membership doesn't even know you're saying that.

DONAHOE

Well, the raiding attested to that.

FIERING

Proves it, that's right.

DONAHOE

Because people wouldn't have been susceptible to the raiding if they had understood and agreed with all of this.

FIERING

That's right, and that was the proof.

DONAHOE

Seems like they didn't see-

FIERING

But the fact of the matter is that foreign policy was never an issue in the raiding on our part, not out in the field. It may have been an issue between Murray and our top officers.

DONAHOE

Oh, no, of course.

FIERING

The opposition made red-baiting the issue, that was their issue. They used foreign policy in that respect, but we never made foreign policy an issue, as big an issue as it was between UE and the CIO. We continued to hold out the olive branch. It was a bad period; it was a very difficult period.

DONAHOE

So when did they finally recognize signing that clause--?

FIERING

Oh, that was at the 1949 UE convention.

DONAHOE

Oh, so it was up to '50. It was that long.

FIERING

Yeah, just before, yeah. The convention was September '49.

DONAHOE

Okay, so then after making it such a battle they finally decided to sign, but by that time it was hardly anything left.

FIERING

Well, no, there was a big part of UE left, but we were greatly weakened because our focus was not on the raiding and saving ourselves. Our focus was on a lot of programmatic issues that really didn't touch. We were still doing our job, you know, as reps, handling problems for the membership, but we weren't really orienting the membership towards the great danger of the union being ripped apart and the fact that the CIO wanted to destroy us. As I think back, we never talked in those terms, that the CIO was going to destroy

us. Here they were destroying us, and we never talked about the fact they were destroying us to our rank and file. We were fighting against a faction within our union, see. The UEMDA rUE Members for Democratic Action], yeah.

DONAHOE

But what was the basis?

FIERING

Then what happened was, the companies, GE [General Electric Company], and Westinghouse [Electric Corporation] particularly, announced that they weren't going to recognize us anymore because they didn't know who to deal with. And that came after the '49 convention and the chartering of IUE [International Union of Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers] by the CIO. Up until that time, we were victims of raiding in many other areas. The FE [United Farm Equipment and Metal Workers of America] had affiliated with us; the UAW [United Automobile Workers] went after the FE, see. But we were victims of raiding in other areas, but in GE and Westinghouse the big break didn't come until after the '49 convention--the big break meaning while we were being chopped apart by the Carey forces inside, the companies had not taken a position. Now, the government had taken a position; they were issuing subpoenas left and right. But then GE and Westinghouse announced that they didn't know who to deal with, petitioned for elections, and then, of course, that triggered a new policy by the National Labor Relations Board. The NLRB would honor the petitions and order elections, even though the contracts had not yet expired, even though there was no petitioning for recognition by a competing union. We were on the defensive by that time, really on the defensive.

DONAHOE

Okay. So should we move to Los Angeles again?

FIERING

Let's move in there. Okay, what do you want to know?

FIERING

I want to know your estimate of the development of the labor movement in Los Angeles, because you have really seen it I think from-

FIERING

Well, but I wasn't involved much in it--well, I was involved in it from-

DONAHOE

Well, from the fifties.

FIERING

From the middle sixties, that's right. At least I was a part of it.

DONAHOE

Well, actually you came here in the fifties.

FIERING

I came here in the fifties. I spent some time here, some little organizing here, and some little servicing. The servicing in terms of the whole of my UE work, was not much. Much of it was in Ontario [California] at the GE plant there. There were, I believe, two UE 10cals--1421, an amalgamated local, and 1012, Ontario GE.

DONAHOE

Was that one of the biggest plants, Ontario?

FIERING

Ontario, no, it was not. It was one of the big plants here on the coast for UE.

DONAHOE

On the coast, yeah.

FIERING

But in terms of UE it was a small plant.

DONAHOE

But I meant on the West Coast.

FIERING

On the West Coast. On the West Coast, I think it was probably the biggest plant that the UE had out here, thinking back. By the time I came here, most

of what they had had been lost. I came out here on a leave of absence and I got tired of sitting around [so] I went to work in a shop, Domestic Thermostat, which became a part of Minneapolis Honeywell. And then I asked for a permanent transfer out here, which I got, and I did this organizing of this plant on the east side, Standard Coil. I organized a GE shop in Ontario that serviced jet engines.

DONAHOE

Standard Coil, I remember you telling me about that one, yeah.

FIERING

And then I did some servicing up and down the coast. There was a Westinghouse strike, up there in Seattle, Washington, and in Sunnyvale, California. I did some servicing around here in a couple of shops from rUE Local] 1421 and the Ontario plant of GE. Then, of course, I went back East a number of times for extended periods and that made up my tenure here, and by 1956 I had made my decision to quit and then in January '57 I did it. It wasn't easy, but I did it. I didn't know what the hell I was going to do. But I have been through all of that with you on that tape, right? Then I went to work--I told you about the story and how I got this job in AFSCME, which is flattering and very interesting, I thought. Well, I went through the first years in AFSCME with you. I went through organization of the county, and okay we are into '74, and in '76 I retired. I became vice president of the county federation of labor, which when I-

DONAHOE

When was that?

FIERING

In 1969. See, after I became the leader of AFSCME here, we were entitled to a position on the executive board of the L.A. fed, and I was elected to it. And I think--I was elected in 1970. I served six years [until] '76, so maybe it was the middle of '69, up until '76. And I got more of a flavor of what the labor movement was all about, that it wasn't-

DONAHOE

From like that period, yeah.

FIERING

From that period really. That it wasn't all I had thought it was about when I was looking at it from the narrow view of the left and from the outside. It was a different kind of a labor movement I saw. I began to understand better the kinds of people who worked for the labor movement, and what their motivations were, the kind of people they were. They were people who came out of the ranks of the working class, who came up through the shops, and who did what they thought had to be done to do a job for the people who were paying them, for the workers, as best they knew how. Some of them did a damn good job in that regard.

DONAHOE

So in that position on the county federation, you came in contact with all these different representatives.

FIERING

With all of them, a cross section of the labor leadership of the labor movement here.

DONAHOE

So you really were in a good position to estimate and evaluate.

FIERING

In a better position than I had been when I was outside the labor movement.

DONAHOE

So what did you think?

FIERING

I, as I say, I was pleasantly impressed by the character of the people that were leading the labor movement. They are good honest soldiers in the main. They did the job, and they worked hard. My conception of these guys was what I used to propagandize when I used to agitate against them: that these people are living off the backs of the workers, taking it easy, and living a good life and selling the people out. Just wasn't true, was not true. But, of course, that's to deal with the political line of the national AFL-CIO, and the political line of

these people, which I may have in some parts agreed with, in some parts disagreed with. They played the game from the point of view of the unions representing--They were a reform organization within the system, and they played the political game the same way, taking advantage of their political power to get things for the people they represented, and no better example of that can be offered than the building trades. Politically, a very narrow group, but they played the political game to get some goddamn good things for their people--a lot of security, a lot of benefits, good wages. It's true also for other unions; they played the game that way. They were not a revolutionary organization; they were a reform organization that accepted the system, worked within it, and they wanted a piece of it. That was their philosophy, and I saw them getting a piece of it. Now, it is true that their political line I don't think had the kind of depth that ran to a solution of many of the long-range problems of the country, for which a lot of Los Angeles people are today paying the price. But I don't know that I would have had that political line either; I don't know that I had it.

DONAHOE

Like what specifically?

FIERING

Oh, take what's happening with industry, you know. I mean when you look around-

DONAHOE

You mean plant closures?

FIERING

Plant closures. I mean when you look around, plants like the basic industries, steel and rubber and auto, shut downs, I don't know that the policies that I would have promoted would have made any difference.

DONAHOE

What would you have offered like as a way to forestall the closures that the other people didn't?

FIERING

I didn't have any idea about offering because I couldn't see it. I didn't envision such things happening in this country. But it didn't develop overnight. It was a process, and I think the labor movement had the resources to have seen it coming.

DONAHOE

Do you think anybody really did?

FIERING

I don't know.

DONAHOE

Nobody ever seemed to talk about plant closures.

FIERING

None among us dreamed that the steel industry and the auto industry, which were so far ahead of the rest of the world, could come to the kind of impasse that they are in today. Whoever did kept it an awful dark secret.

DONAHOE

I just thought that when you said that maybe if policies had been different that somebody had mentioned something, or you had had some inkling that this was-

FIERING

No, there was never that kind of a struggle, there were never that kind of differences. I wasn't making too many waves anyway, because I know I had a difficult time getting back into the labor movement and I just wanted to seal some friendships--I don't know if you want to call them friendships--I wanted to secure my position so that whatever I had to say would not endanger my position at the time. It developed into that, then I could speak up on issues. People, I found, were very respectful of me, listened to me, I was well accepted, well accepted. Everybody knew my past, and I never had to apologize for it and I never would apologize for it. There are some people who even distrusted me at that time and still do to this day, but they deal with me, see. They deal with me.

DONAHOE

Well, that was a pretty, you know, important position to be in, in the county federation like that. You had to have respect to get there.

FIERING

Yeah, you had to be accepted to get there. If there was any real political difference like that--See, the organization of the executive board was supposed to model the organization on the national AFL-CIO executive board. But if there was any real political difference of that nature, they would have found a way to keep you out or they would have gotten somebody else from your organization; they would have sp~it with you. They could do that. But I have to say, my thing was not making waves. My major interest was in organizing, we had a whole field to organize here.

DONAHOE

In terms of the public sector.

FIERING

In terms of the public sector, which was just breaking wide open.

DONAHOE

At that point, yeah right.

FIERING

That's right. That was all I wanted to deal with at that time. Other than that, nobody prevented me from saying whatever I wanted to. Now, we in AFSCME have progressive policies--the most progressive policies, or as progressive as any union in town. Nobody stopped us from doing that, nobody criticized us for doing that. Now, as far as my relationship with some individuals, some who used to look under their bed every night to see if there was a red there, were scared to death of the reds, they still looked askance at me. They still kept me at arm's length or, you know, were suspicious. But it didn't make any difference in terms of my acceptance, my being accepted in the labor movement. And everybody listened without anything to say, and I have no complaints, no complaints.

DONAHOE

Well, what people say, you hear that Los Angeles has never been as advanced or something, or as trade union aware as San Francisco or New York or the East. How did you feel?

FIERING

True, it doesn't have the same background. Well, you don't have the same union consciousness in Los Angeles, but that comes from a long history of Los Angeles, you know, [which] used to be a retiree town, an old farm town. The labor movement is much more recent here than it is in San Francisco. You don't have that degree of consciousness that you have in San Francisco.

DONAHOE

I was going to say, what are the changes that like you see from your experiences?

FIERING

Oh changes, I have seen tremendous changes in the union movement in terms of the union consciousness of people. Oh tremendous. A much higher feeling of unionism, especially in the trade union leadership, and you have that feeling. You feel it also as you get around among the rank and filers. I get around to a lot of picket lines, especially now being retired because of what I am doing with the retirees. And well, I'll tell you about some interesting experiences with the UAW, which was an archenemy of UE forty years ago. You talk to the UAW people today and you think you're talking to UE people back in that period.

DONAHOE

Like who, you mean the regional [leaders]?

FIERING

I'm talking about the former local leaders. I'm dealing with the retirees-

DONAHOE

Oh, the retirees, yeah.

FIERING

--who were brought up during that period and who were the international reps, local presidents, and district officers of that period here. And you listen to them today. So anyway that's my experience. And when I wanted help from the leadership of the L.A. federation, no problem. \*[You can't call my involvement with UE here in the fifties being a part of the labor movement. I was part of it from the middle sixties. Though I ought to back up a bit. My first taste of the labor movement, I suppose as a member, came when I was sitting in a membership meeting of Local 108 of the Sheet Metal Workers International Association and suddenly heard a tirade of red-baiting charges being leveled at a handful of people. It seemed things hadn't changed much. That was in the late fifties. By the late sixties, I was in a leadership position and the atmosphere had changed. I suppose it reflected the changes the country was going through. Your question is a difficult one. I can't speak with any real authority on the development of the L.A. labor movement. My first real contact as a participant came in the late sixties as a leader of my union. I come from an earlier generation than the current labor leadership. At that time you equated union health with union growth. The major emphasis was on organizing. The unions grew, flourished, and the benefits followed. It seems to me that the present generation turned inward. The emphasis is on consolidating the position of the unions and the position of the leadership. Organizing the unorganized faded to a low priority. I'm talking about the labor movement almost any place it is. L.A. is reflecting the national AFL-CIO, its policies and philosophy. You have to understand the structure of the AFL-CIO. It requires rigid adherence to the policies adopted by its leadership. The top leaders of the AFL-CIO in terms of its political outlook, in terms of the times in which they lived, have always been conservative, from Samuel Gompers to William Green to George Meany to Lane Kirkland. Probably the most progressive of all these was Gompers. The outlook has been, in my view, narrow, parochial. The trade union leadership saw themselves as representing an important constituency, but they never viewed themselves as representatives of an important social institution giving a measure of leadership to the whole country. Their role, notwithstanding the lip service they gave to broad social issues, was an extension legislatively of the job they were doing on the shop floor. Of course, there are changes. I don't imply that there is a monolithic leadership in the AFL-CIO. The leadership takes in a cross section of the country. The positions the leader of the AFL-CIO puts forth are

the positions of the majority of the executive board. Other views adopted by individual unions are also put forward. In fact, each union has autonomy and can espouse any program it wants in its own behalf. But for the whole AFLCIO, the majority rules. And then every subordinate body, state and local federations are bound by those decisions. Subordinate bodies are not allowed to differ. I'm not making a judgment on whether it's wrong, right, good or bad. It's got a right to put forward a differing position at a national convention, but then everyone is bound by it. But let me get back for a moment to about 1965. At that time, the country was deeply divided over civil rights and Vietnam. On civil rights, the labor movement was pulled along by events. Some unions were way out front, AFSCME being one of them. On Vietnam, Meany gave full support to the administration. I remember Jerry Wurf on a visit to L.A. detailing a trip he had just come back from, a tour of Europe on behalf of Meany and the U.S. government, his purpose, to carry the torch on behalf of U.S. policies in Vietnam. That was 1968. A few months later, Wurf did a complete flip-flop in his position. He related to me on that occasion he had come to the conclusion the war must end. Before announcing it, he had visited Meany to tell him what he intended to do. I mention this for two reasons. One is that it showed me that there is room for dissent, and the other is that Wurf is AFSCME, and AFSCME from that time was the most prominent voice in labor for ending the war. Speaking of the L.A. labor movement. First, just like the national, it lacks dynamism. But about those things it could do something about, I am impressed by the degree of integration of the L.A. Federation of Labor in so many facets of L.A. life, community, political, social. I think it's done a fine job all of which from time to time is reflected in community support for its causes, its politics, and so on. I'm hoping the coming elections will spark some life into the local and national AFL-CIO. I think the caliber of leader in a number of unions holds out hope. It had better. The present leadership was not geared to deal with Reaganism and its consequences, and so a whole host of problems has been loaded on us.] \* Mr. Fiering added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

DONAHOE

Let me ask a technical question. The UAW was not in the AFL-CIO, right?

FIERING

That's right, they are now.

DONAHOE

Just recently.

FIERING

But they are in the L.A. fed.

DONAHOE

But they are in the L.A. fed, okay.

FIERING

They are not in the [California State Federation of Labor] yet; they haven't affiliated with the state fed yet.

DONAHOE

So they are in the L.A. County fed but not in the state, and they just recently reaffiliated with the AFLCIO?

FIERING

That's right.

DONAHOE

Okay, but the ILWU [International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union] never reaffiliated?

FIERING

Never affiliated.

DONAHOE

And the [International Brotherhood of Teamsters] are still out.

FIERING

The Teamsters are out, that's right.

DONAHOE

Okay, I'm just trying to see whoever came back or did not come back. Now, are they in the county fed?

FIERING

No, they are not in the county fed. They are in my setup [FORUM, Federation of Retired Union Members], but they are not in the county fed.

DONAHOE

The ILWU?

FIERING

The ILWU is in FORUM also, but they are not in the county fed. They are not a part of the AFL-CIO, they're independent. But they are affiliated with my retiree setup.

DONAHOE

Now okay, and what is that called?

FIERING

The Federation of Retired Union Members, which is a part of the AFL-CIO.

DONAHOE

Had that been going for a long time?

FIERING

Well, it has been going, but-

DONAHOE

Did you organize it?

FIERING

No, I didn't organize it. It has been going--it started up about five years ago, but it was a dud, nothing happened. I'm credited with making something out of it, and it's beginning to really be something. It has tremendous potential.

DONAHOE

And this, everyone 1s eligible that was in the labor movement, whether they were part of the AFL-CIO or whatever? I mean, you know-

FIERING

Well, the Teamsters and the ILWU both affiliated with us.

DONAHOE

And the UAW.

FIERING

We are the only unified labor movement in the area, anywhere.

DONAHOE

But you did have dealings with all the different unions whether they were in the county fed or not, like you had contacts with people from the UAW.

FIERING

Well, no, not when I was working for AFSCME; I didn't have contact with anybody, except the L.A. Federation of Labor. I was new to them, you know, and it was a question of learning everything. When you think about it, I got back in '65 and I left in '76. During that time there was a huge development in the public sector, so there wasn't a hell of a lot of time to get acquainted with anybody outside the AFL-CIO. Now that I have retired I'm getting acquainted with them and the UAW people. I'm talking about not just the retirees, but the UAW organizations.

DONAHOE

When did you see the changes taking place in Los Angeles in terms of union awareness?

FIERING

When? Well, I can't speak with a lot of authority about it in the fifties because we weren't a part of the AFL-CIO. But then, of course, the movement was much smaller, the AFL-CIO was much smaller then and the Cia and the AFL was split, see. And the AF of L was no doubt the dominant organization here.

DONAHOE

Because of the building trades?

FIERING

Building trades and it's just longer established, yeah. What the CIO had going for it essentially here was the UAW, that's what it had.

DONAHOE

And the [United] Steelworkers [of America].

FIERING

And the Steelworkers, that's right.

DONAHOE

And [United] Rubber Workers [of America].

FIERING

Steel, rubber, yeah that's right. It had the basic industries it had in the East, and that didn't come until later, you know. Of course, the UAW organized in the forties, during the war they organized here, but the others didn't organize until must have been after the war, as far as I can think.

DONAHOE

No, they were before the war, in the thirties.

FIERING

Not before the--In the thirties out here, they were?

DONAHOE

Oh, it was a part of that nationwide organizing.

FIERING

Oh yeah? Did they have a big operation here, did they have big plants? I just don't get that feeling that they had.

DONAHOE

Well, the plants, none of the plants were as big as back East, but they were big for the West Coast.

FIERING

For here, for the West Coast.

DONAHOE

Yeah. And they were only manufacturing steel plants, like Bethlehem.

FIERING

Well, I can't claim a hell of a lot of knowledge about that here, because in UE we were just isolated from everything, we were on our own. The only ones we had real contact with was the ILWU, and we weren't in nearly as good a position as the ILWU. They were well grounded. They were--Well, that's the nature of the industry. And they were well organized, had excellent leadership, and Local 26 was growing, they were growing. Local 26 was growing, but UE was not really growing; UE was going downhill. But, nevertheless, whatever contact we had was with the ILWU, that was the only solid union we had contact with. There was nothing else out here. You had the United Public Workers [of America], but they didn't amount to much; you are talking about a few hundred people. UE didn't have a hell of a lot at that; we had maybe a couple thousand people, maybe three thousand, two or three thousand people, which is nothing.

DONAHOE

I was just wondering about the ILWU, just because they were in a similar position to the UE, in terms of like they were expelled from the CIO and so they were subject to raiding. Yet, those other unions never seemed to really make a dent in them that much, do you think?

FIERING

They never made a dent.

DONAHOE

And why do you think, why would it be different from the UE exactly?

FIERING

\*[Well, there certainly had to be good reasons. However, I'm just speculating about them. I never operated close to the ILWU until I came out here, and

even then my contact was limited. That's not to say I haven't thought about it. In a number of significant ways, their experience is different from UE. The first thing that comes to mind is the fact they were born in a bitter strike, many sacrifices but a huge victory. That permits a claim on the loyalty of workers. Another reason was the charismatic leadership of Harry Bridges who throughout his tenure as president personified the most militant and personal qualities like honesty and courage which workers worship in a leader. The ILWU has always, in my opinion, been the most democratic in the country. Of necessity, it was essential to Bridges's survival. His persecution required open and frank debate and exceptional rapport between him and his membership. That meant frank discussion of the communist issue and conviction by the rank and file that Bridges deserved support. With that there was a strong left-wing tradition and a strong left wing in the union that played a strong role in its survival. Finally--and this is not particularly in the order of their importance--the industry was highly concentrated on the coast and one hundred percent organized.] \* Mr. Fiering added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

### **1.18. TAPE NUMBER: X, Side Two (October 8, 1987)**

DONAHOE

What's your estimate of, you know, what you think the needs are in Los Angeles and key places to be organized, things like that?

FIERING

\*[I don't think the Los Angeles labor movement is different from any other big city, nor its problems. The labor leadership is set in a mold which I believe it must break out of if it is to move forward and enhance its position in the community and benefit its membership. It has its priorities confused. The primary and most fundamental task of the trade union movement is to organize the unorganized. Everything else flows from that, its economic power, political power, its relationship to the middle class and the power structure. There is plenty to organize. There are still large industrial plants, the health industry, many tens of thousands of department store workers, white-collar workers, other service workers, myriad smaller industrial shops, building trades workers, etc., and a couple of hundred thousand union retired folks.

The building trades are a good example of what the anti-union offensive has brought to that industry which at one time was solidly organized. Now double-breasting is a huge threat to the unions' continued existence. Whatever organizing is going on is by individual unions pecking away at smaller targets. We used to believe that we either grow or regress. We've lost sight of that axiom, but its proof is self-evident. You can't stand still. Instead, some characteristics of the labor movement are its effort to secure its place in the establishment, accomodating the power structure as it is. That may be good for short-term gains, but only constantly increasing its numbers and replacing lost membership will continue to enhance its power. Even if it means making waves. It lacks dynamism, it is quiescent, its focus is on narrow day-to-day problems. It needs to pull itself together with all the strength and resources it has and take aim in a concerted way at the huge reservoir of workers who need the union and direct a coordinated effort to bring them in. Its effect would not only be organizational. It would have tremendous political impact.] Well, I'm not--I work out of the headquarters there and I would say that it appears now that the labor movement is holding its own today, here. They have entered some negotiations in which they've experienced difficulties, they have been through some negotiations in which they have experienced some successes. On the whole there seems to be a positive feeling, a pretty good feeling. The autoworkers, I think--well, you can't say that they are optimistic. But considering the situation they have today--They just went through some Ford [Motor Company] negotiations, which turned out pretty good and which is reflected in your discussions with them. We will see what happens with the GM [General Motors Corporation] negotiations. But in terms of Los Angeles more apropos of that kind of thing is what has happened, for instance, in negotiations with Local 770 [United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW)], which just finished its negotiations, which is a local industry, see. It's not dependent on what happens nationally. They are in a very upbeat mood over their negotiations. Feel very good about what they were able to achieve. And it's not that they feel good because they didn't lose much. They don't feel they lost anything but they-\* Mr. Fiering added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

DONAHOE

Which one is that?

FIERING

That's Local 770, the markets, the supermarkets.

DONAHOE

Oh, the supermarkets, okay.

FIERING

That's the big, big outfit.

DONAHOE

The retail clerks, right.

FIERING

Well, Local 770 is just one of the locals. They have locals 1442, 905, and one or two other locals in the area here. All of them are in joint negotiations; they just finished their contracts. I was just up in their office--when was it, yesterday?--day before yesterday. Very upbeat mood. I was talking to one of the people who was in charge of their employee benefits section, which handles the pensions, welfare funds, and stuff like that. Very upbeat mood, very good. Generally, what you get out of the executive board of the L.A. federation is a pretty fair mood. There is not the defeatism that we experienced up until last year. And, I think, generally people feel things are getting better, they are improving, the atmosphere is improving. Negotiations are being conducted now, and there are some slight wage increases, not like what they like, but there are wage increases. Concession bargaining is minimal from what I hear now. That's a sign of the times. And of all the industries, the ones that face the biggest problems are the garment industries, ILGWU [International Ladies Garment Workers Union] and Amalgamated [Clothing Workers of America], I suppose.

DONAHOE

Why is that, because of the difficulties?

FIERING

Because of the nature of the industry.

DONAHOE

You mean all these little shops?

FIERING

Little shops, right, and alien workers, foreign born. There isn't that stability that you have in other industries. Generally, you just feel the atmosphere is a lot different than it was a year ago, much more positive. Of course, I don't have to tell you that, you can see it. I don't know what you want from me. What's the future? I always had confidence in the future of the working class.

DONAHOE

Well, where are the places in Los Angeles that you see as key to being organized? Like, you know, the percentage of the organized working class seems it has been decreasing steadily, so there's so many places to go. What do you think would be key places to organize, given your experience?

FIERING

Well, the key sectors to organize are the service industries. The hospitals, department stores, office workers, banks. When you're talking about service industries, what are you talking about? What do you talk about when you talk about service industries? Whatever the service industries are--Because what pops into my mind right away is McDonald's you know. That's a big industry now here, that kind of place.

DONAHOE

I know I was wondering why have the unions never gone after McDonald's and Wendy's and Carl's [Jr.]?

FIERING

I don't know why. I would venture to say they-Which union would take them on, which union would they fall into? I don't think anybody has felt that the effort was worth it yet. Organizing small places like that is a problem, a real problem.

DONAHOE

And then the nature of the workers.

FIERING

And the nature of the workers.

DONAHOE

Young kids, yeah.

FIERING

Young kids, right, but where else is there a big industry that's stable, that's well situated, that's stabilized in Los Angeles, that has not been organized? Steel and auto, you've got plants closed down; those that are working are working. The unions have got their problems in them internally, but, hell, that's no different than what they have always had--problems with the boss. They have got problems as a result of national policy. So there's an election coming up in '88, hopefully the unions are going to have much more to say about the election, and they'll play a role in the policies that are determined by whatever the incoming administration does. Assumedly, if the Republicans are defeated, then I will say the unions are getting more and more politically conscious, the workers are getting more and more politically conscious. More and more understanding of the role that politics plays in their life. I'm beginning to feel that. No great big deal, maybe because I'm talking a lot about it [so] that I feel it too, you know, but I feel they are receptive to it. Also it is much easier than it was in the past. Of course, the big focus of my movement right now is really political. Even though it has its other facets, it's really the '88 elections. But I think there's, I feel, a growing understanding of the importance of the '88 elections. And you can read it when you read in the newspapers reports about these big unions nationally that are getting into it. They are going to be dumping tons of money and people into it. Much more sophisticated I remember when we used to take a role in politics. Compared to what they do now, there's so much more sophistication today than before, because they have more money and experience. They have learned what to do with the money, how to use it politically, too. My own union particularly. My own union has got a lot of money and pours a lot of money into politics.

DONAHOE

Do you think there's more cooperation among unions in the labor movement?

FIERING

Today?

DONAHOE

Well, say in Los Angeles anyway?

FIERING

Yes, I would say yes. There is. Yes.

DONAHOE

Because of a growing recognition of what has to be done--?

FIERING

Yes. Well, an example of that is the response to the new immigration law. The L.A. federation took the lead in pulling together the unions behind that. Now, of course, they have a very deep political interest in that. This is a breakthrough to the Hispanic community. But they are pouring a lot of money in and a lot of organization into it. And they have got a whole setup going down at the L.A. Federation of Labor. And unions who have and are competing for a Hispanic work force are heavily involved in it.

DONAHOE

That would be a big breakthrough for the trade union movement to organize these people.

FIERING

Oh, yes. That's right. Well, it also means an opening politically to the Hispanic community such as they really have not had before, though Hispanic workers have not been difficult to organize, by the way. Hispanic workers and shops are not difficult to organize. But what they are doing, in a sense, also reflects the growing political importance of the Hispanic community and recognition of the degree of organization of Hispanic workers in the labor movement. I know the sheet metal union, which I was a member of and which was lily-white when I first got into it, it had, if I remember correctly, out of four thousand members, it had eighteen blacks. It had--Well, it was just beginning to open up to Hispanics, just some of them. Today it is very heavily Hispanic, and it has been Hispanic-dominated in recent years. But that reminds me of a story. After I became a leader of AFSCME and I would go around to these

doings that the leadership would be involved with in the AFL-CIO, the guy who was the leader of the sheet metal union spots me and his eyes flew open. He says, "What the hell are you doing here?" So I says, "I'm the head of AFSCME." He says, "Tell me something." He says, "How the hell did we miss you?" He referred to the red-baiting binge while I was there.

DONAHOE

Oh, I remember you told me that story.

FIERING

That's how they got rid of Carl Brant, one of the people who was railroaded out, and Herb March and others.

DONAHOE

They got him.

FIERING

Yeah, they got them. They missed me. He says, "How the hell did we miss you?" I says, "I was just quiet, making a living."

DONAHOE

When was that?

FIERING

That was in 1959, around there, '58, '59, '60, somewhere around that period.

DONAHOE

So it was as late as that they were still--?

FIERING

Yeah. What is it you want? Do you want to know, do I hold a lot of hopes for the labor movement, do I think they are going anywhere, do I have criticism of it? Yeah, there's criticism, you can always criticize, you know.

DONAHOE

No, but you said you saw Los Angeles develop more of a union awareness, and I was wondering like what do you think are the most aggressive unions, maybe

in terms of organizing? I don't know, it seems like I have seen a downswing in organizing, except in the public sector.

FIERING

Yeah.

DONAHOE

And is that changing? I mean, are the unions becoming more aggressive in recognizing the need to?

FIERING

Well, what do I know about what's going on inside the unions? Well, how many unions do I know about on the inside? I'll tell you, the ILGWU has an aggressive organizing policy. The ACTWU [Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union]. These unions have been decimated by loss of membership. Right now, it's life or death to them. The UAW has an aggressive organizing policy, always have had. SEIU has. UAW expends a lot of effort organizing its retirees. If you want to see how a union should deal with its retired people and the recognition and appreciation of the power there is in retired people, that's a union to visit, their retiree headquarters in Bell. They have got the best retirement setup going. But, of course, their retirees are members of the union.

DONAHOE

Right.

FIERING

The only thing they can't do is run for office and vote on contracts, but they can do about everything else.

DONAHOE

They can vote for president.

FIERING

That's right, they can vote for officers, any officers.

DONAHOE

All of the officers, that's right.

FIERING

They can't vote on contracts, but they can vote on everything else.

DONAHOE

They are full-fledged members.

FIERING

They're full-fledged members.

DONAHOE

They can't be chairman of the shop, which makes sense.

FIERING

Right, and they do that with minimal dues. They don't have to pay the same dues. There is no outfit like the UAW. They offer the best example of the political power that resides in retiree organization. But take the leadership of the AFL-CIO here, start with Bill Robertson. Some people disparage him. I don't know why they disparage him. My own experiences with Robertson have been excellent. And I remember when--First of all, I will say this about him. Before I knew the guy real well, I learned this was a guy who was assigned to the Los Angeles Herald Examiner strike.

DONAHOE

In the sixties?

FIERING

In the sixties, right. And he stayed with that strike for five years. Now, that ain't easy, and he did an excellent job. As you know, they just about ruined that paper. The paper couldn't wait to organize its scabs and get the AFL-CIO union label for Christ's sakes. Well, Bill Robertson was the guy who was the leader of that strike, see, and people don't think about that. That's where I come from, see, that's the kind of thing. When I look at a guy, I want to know what the hell did he do for the workers. And I see here's a guy who really did a tremendous job, tremendous. My first contact with him was one based on respect of that kind. Then I had occasion to work with him, because I was not

only on the board, but I was heavily involved in organization and negotiations with public workers. And when I had a problem, a real serious problem, then I don't call on anybody for help, unless I know how I can use them. That's what my thing is. I am not giving anybody my problem, I want to know how I can use them. Bill was always available and knew exactly the right thing to do when I needed a certain kind of help. He was very helpful to me at a time when I had to either put up and shut up. And I was playing a game in a certain way, had my ducks lined up in a certain way and I'd call on him to sew something up and he did the job for me. That was his chief role. How is he going to help workers? You take any picket line that's necessary, he's there, no matter what, he's there, see. On any issue involving the workers, where they are in trouble, he's there. Now, a lot of things one may not agree with him on, on how he plays the game politically. Well, the fact of the matter is he has got the labor movement in a hell of a good position politically today with the administration downtown. And what he has to do is play it from the point of view of his constituency, and you may disagree like hell with what his point of view is on building or overbuilding and things like that. But his constituency includes the building trades. Whatever he says has got to reflect what his constituency needs. And they need that and he does a hell of a job with that.

DONAHOE

How long has he been the head?

FIERING

He has been the head since 1972, since Sig [Sigmund] Arywitz died.

DONAHOE

All right, and where did he come from?

FIERING

Well, he came from Minneapolis. Originally, he was a bartender. He came up from the ranks in the Hotel and Restaurant [Employees and Bartenders International Union]

DONAHOE

The hotel and restaurant workers.

FIERING

But he was in Minneapolis. He came out here, and I don't know if he still was a member of that union here (he may have been a staff member), but then he became a staff member for Sig Arywitz. His style is different from most people, it's very low key. [I don't know] if you have ever seen him. But here's a guy who in the past was classified as a conservative, see.

DONAHOE

That's interesting how much he has changed.

FIERING

And he has--and you see it.

DONAHOE

Well, I told you-

FIERING

You see it.

DONAHOE

--that he was at that DSA [Democratic Socialist of America] meeting.

FIERING

Now, you know, that takes some doing. The guy is intellectually honest for him to do that and have the courage to do it, because he is surrounded by right-wing socialists, who are scared of outfits like the DSA. And scared of people like me.

DONAHOE

Yeah, and now he is playing a much more forward move.

FIERING

I admire the guy. I like him tremendously.

DONAHOE

Well, that's interesting that he has gone forward instead of backwards given the times.

FIERING

That's right.

DONAHOE

He could become more conservative instead of becoming less conservative.

FIERING

Well, you know, if the CP [Communist Party] people operate the way they used to, then he won't hesitate to attack them. And I say they would deserve it anyway, the goddamn bunch of screwballs they got down there. And never mentioned to you the fact they went after my ass too.

DONAHOE

You just talked about one strike where the young left women were working against you.

FIERING

Now, I only told you about that one.

DONAHOE

Yeah.

FIERING

But this was after I was the leader of AFSCME. There were two of them there that went after me.

DONAHOE

From AFSCME?

FIERING

Yes, from AFSCME.

DONAHOE

They were trying to get rid of you.

FIERING

You bet. DONAaOE: That's insane.

FIERING

Christ, it burns me up to think about it. So I attribute that--I said, "Where did it come from?" Because I always felt if anybody wanted to say anything progressive, I would support it. I was progressive myself. I did what they would consider all the right things, see. I wouldn't let anybody red-bait me, see, and here all of the sudden, these guys who had kissed the asses of the red-baiters, kissed their ass, were attacking me. They were bringing charges against me. Yes, this was formal charges they brought against me. And I said, "Why does this happen?" The only thing I can attribute it to is that the CP never forgave me for leaving.

DONAHOE

What kind of charges were they bringing against you, for what?

FIERING

Oh I forget now, I should have kept copies of them.

DONAHOE

And for what, on what grounds?

FIERING

The eight charges, oh, that I violated the trust of the workers, I did something against the workers--a whole list of formal charges with the international. And so there were hearings held and all that jazz, which didn't amount to anything.

DONAHOE

So you were attacked by the left, not the right.

FIERING

Not the right. By the left. Not all the left, just these screwballs. The screwball left, the CPers.

DONAHOE

Would you say they are still a force in Los Angeles at all?

FIERING

Who?

DONAHOE

The CPers.

FIERING

Oh, Christ, no.

DONAHOE

I'm just curious.

FIERING

Oh, Christ, no.

DONAHOE

I mean, I was just wondering where they stand or people that agree with their position but don't necessarily affiliate [with them].

FIERING

I tell them they died, the CP died many years ago, but it hasn't laid down yet so it could be buried.

DONAHOE

But there are a lot of people that still agree with a lot of the things that broke with them?

FIERING

Well, you have a lot of old left-wingers who have a sense of nostalgia, see, especially old people. You go to some of these affairs, what you will see is a lot of grey heads, not young people, but a lot of grey heads. But in terms of an organization that's effective, they have nothing. They wield no influence whatsoever. And I can't see them coming back. I can't see them coming back. No matter what the relationship is with the Soviet Union, I can't see it.

DONAHOE

What about other people in the left? Do you ever see them as a force, or independents, or is it just leftist-type people?

FIERING

Well, you know, when you talk left you are talking about a whole range of people, and there are a lot of--that's the interesting thing--a lot of young people who . are with left persuasions who are beginning to come into the labor movement. And many of them working full time, like the young idealists, you know, socialist-oriented. It's very encouraging, that part. But they are not CPers.

DONAHOE

No, no, I meant other leftists people that you see evidence of in the labor movement. Not CP.

FIERING

Yes, I do. I do. I see them, yes. I see--Of course, my contact mainly with that kind of people has been in the public sector, and it's astonishing how many of them are in the public sector working full time. Now, in the private sector, I'll say this for the private sector: socialism is no longer a dirty word. I can sit down with anybody. I sat down with a guy with the Teamsters, for instance, this happened the week before last, and he's telling me about an old CPer, and he's complaining about him. He said something which surprised me very much, and I said, "I'm really surprised to hear that." I says, "I come from that kind of background myself, but I am still socialist." This is a narrow, politically naive guy-backward--and he accepts it. And that is standard. Now, I have said that to a lot of people when we sit down and talk, you know, and I have had occasion to tell some people look, that's my background. A guy from the building trades comes in who is assigned by the building trades to work with me and he's talking to me about some people in the union he came from who were left-wingers, CPers (now they are retired) who used to give the leadership in the union a pain in the ass. He's telling me about them, and I say, "I know they're here, and some of them pretty active with us." I say, "Listen, you are talking to me about it, and I come from that background too." And I say, "I feel differently about things today, but what the hell. Whatever they

are, they are, what they were, they were. But I'm still for socialism." And this is a guy who himself is not, but they sit there, and they accept it, and you can talk about it today not like you could before- openly.

DONAHOE

Which is interesting, yeah. You know when you mentioned too about the Hera1d Bzamfner, that made me think like, the late sixties, I mean we had a number of key strikes. The Hera1d Examiner, the ILWU, Harvey Aluminum.

FIERING

Harvey Aluminum was in the fifties, in the fifties.

DONAHOE

I thought there was another later, in the late sixties.

FIERING

There may have been another one, yeah.

DONAHOE

The oil places--what are they called?--the oil companies, they seemed like they took a beating in the late sixties. It was like the Hera1d Examiner, look at what happened. I mean, they lost most of their workers.

FIERING

Their union shop--the guy who was the leader of that strike, I'm going to be doing some work for him. He's going into some deal and he asked me if I wanted to work for him, which I will. But he was the head of the [American] Newspaper Guild, but a leader of the strike, and thought all the time he knew what the hell my background was. Yesterday he says, "Hey, you come from that background, too?" I says, "Yeah." He's editing the county fed paper right now because the one who did got fired. Did you know Alicia--what's her name?--Alicia Ramirez. Anyway, she got fired.

DONAHOE

From the CIO newspaper?

FIERING

The AFL-CIO, she was the editor of the AFL-CIO newspaper [The Citizen]. She was a public information officer for the L.A. fed.

DONAHOE

Anyway things changed from those days quite a bit.

FIERING

Quite a bit.

DONAHOE

For the better-

FIERING

For the better, right.

DONAHOE

--despite the plant closures and everything. So that's something.

FIERING

When I think back how socialist used to be a dirty word, you know, and how today I can go anywhere and talk about it, that's progress.

DONAHOE

Or the thing like with Bill Robertson too, I mean, that's like totally amazing, that kind of stuff. It is progress.

FIERING

How do you measure a guy, how do you measure a guy? I've had people criticize him to me, and it burns me up. What they know is they sit back and they read that he wrote a certain article, he wrote the article on oil. don't know if you read about it in the L.A. Times; he justified [Thomas] Bradley's position.

DONAHOE

Oh, about the offshore drilling.

FIERING

The offshore drilling. Well, whatever motivated him to write it, it was one thing, see. You put that in the context of everything that's involved around what this guy is doing as part of his job, it's just one thing, whether you agree with it or not, and why he wrote it or not. He may have had to write it for political reasons. Bradley might have said to him--I don't know if this was so--but Bradley, he can do anything with Bradley, but then, on the other hand, Bradley can do anything with him too. mean, it's a quid pro quo and Bradley might have felt he needed that kind of support, and Bill is a name in town, you know. He is a figure, he's a public figure, and he wrote this article on oil, and I've heard people criticize him for it. So what, that's one thing. If you don't like it that's too bad. You're entitled to disagree. How about all of these things that he's doing that are positive? And as far as the trade union movement is concerned, there is no better trade unionist than Bill Robertson. A trade union point of view and the needs of workers--and I'm talking about rank and file--there's no better guy.

DONAHOE

Yeah, didn't he support the UAW with Van Nuys and the flight attendants.

FIERING

Anywhere, wherever there's a problem he would--Sunday morning, you know the National Football League [NFL] [strike of 1987].

DONAHOE

Oh, he was there, yeah, and then he went to the [Robert] Bork thing, after that.

FIERING

Then he went to the Bork thing; I couldn't go to the Bork thing.

DONAHOE

That was a lot.

FIERING

You know he was out there, [when] I got out there at eleven o'clock in the morning, he was already there. He didn't leave until about a quarter to one, I left at one o'clock. He didn't leave till a quarter to one.

DONAHOE

And then he had to go speak at the Bork-

FIERING

And then he went to speak to the Bork [meeting]. That was the last announcement he made there; he says, "I hope some of you will come down to the Bork meeting."

DONAHOE

Right, then when he got to the Bark thing he said, "I've just come from the NFL strike."

FIERING

Yeah, he's no youngster, and I'm not either. But two hours in 108 degree heat was no easy thing.

DONAHOE

That's very hard, I know. And he's probably instrumental in supporting the Theater Workers Project.

FIERING

Yes, he is. That's the only way it can get going, is get L.A. fed backing. That's the only way you can get it is if it goes by him, because he doesn't just delegate, he makes sure that he knows what the hell is going on. So how can you not like a guy like that. And even if he does something that you consider offbeat, you know, how critical can you be? You can criticize and say, "I don't agree with you, Bill, on this." Are you going to say he's no good? That's ridiculous. You may be the one that is wrong. He's a far cry from some of the people I can name in the past who went red-hunting. They got a lot of heads and made a lot of people suffer. \*[There were a couple of occasions when I called upon him for help. When the county public employees coalition was readying a strike, we wanted to mobilize the full resources of the labor movement behind us in case we went out. Robertson was there with both feet with the fed's PR apparatus, his own expertise and a~vice, the fed's political muscle. When I needed his political clout to play a role to tie down an important concession that would wind up a contract negotiation, he was there

even though it obligated him to return a favor. He has his own style. He is a low-key individual. No one can say he has the flair of the extrovert, but he runs a tight ship in the fed. He has control. He plays the game very close to the rank and file and at all levels of the labor leadership. But his heart is with the workers. He comes from there. He came up through the ranks of the culinary union. He was a bartender, eventually becoming a staffer and then to the fed staff. Tell him you've got a picket line set up and need him at any time. He'll be there. He is the local champion of the homeless. He is a Democrat. I don't know what that tells you. He is responsible for welding a tight relationship with Bradley, making the fed a big factor in his administration. It has paid off with policies that advantage unions. I think he is left of center, but not going so far as to lose touch with his constituency. I remember in years past he was characterized as a conservative. But that was by some in the far left who called anyone to the right of them a conservative. I can add he supported a function sponsored by the Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research. This was after I had given him background detail on its leadership. I leveled with him. I was on their board at that time. And let's not forget the Workers Theater Project would not have gotten off the ground without his support. I would say his instincts are progressive and his experience has moved him more and more in that direction. I don't want to imply he is a paragon of virtue, but on balance I would vote for and support him.] \* Mr. Fiering added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

#### DONAHOE

But that is very strange how the mood of the country and even Los Angeles has been somewhat conservative and yet there are all of these people in the labor movement who are becoming more aware at the same time.

#### FIERING

Well, that's the way I see them today. Of course, people change, and I hope that he keeps going in that direction. In terms of his relationship with me, I have never had a complaint. When I needed him, he was there. In fact even when I had my retirement dinner, he postponed--he had reservations for a trip to Denmark--postponed it so he could speak at my dinner.

#### DONAHOE

Really? Now that was in?

FIERING

'Seventy-six.

DONAHOE

'Seventy-six. Okay, well, what are you doing now exactly? You are building this retirees~ organization?

FIERING

That, yeah, and I'm the chairman of it.

DONAHOE

And that is all of labor you said, not just AFSCME.

FIERING

Everybody. That's a united labor movement, right.

DONAHOE

And you became involved in that after you retired.

FIERING

Just last year. I have been in it [since] only October, really the first of the year, but technically I got the appointment last September.

DONAHOE

Now are you the president of this club?

FIERING

I'm the chairman, not the president, chairman. See our positions are appointed by--We are a department of the federation, so I am appointed by Bill Robertson, see, with the approval of the federal executive board and the federation delegate body.

DONAHOE

Okay, so you are a department of the federation, okay.

FIERING

Yeah. Now, we are the only ones in the country who have got anything going like what we have here, but I understand it is being talked about a lot and being looked at. In California, they are starting to imitate it in other parts of the state. And it is going to be the way the labor movement goes in the future with the retirees. The major emphasis being the organization of retiree divisions in each local union, retiree clubs, with the development of a certain relationship to the working section of the union, see, and detail of the responsibilities of each to the other, and each one to its membership, that is a retiree club to its own membership. Without going--I don't want to give you the whole--If I get started on this I go for two hours. And then, of course, our group is a coordinating group. The county fed's FORUM is a coordinating group. It is a delgate body.

DONAHOE

Right, I see that.

FIERING

And while the major focus at the moment is the '88 elections, what we are essentially doing is our basic job, [which] is the organization of clubs, retiree clubs, and the development of a political action apparatus and, in the organization of clubs, developing what we call club life--how should a retiree club function or operate, see? And that, of course, runs to a whole range of activities dealing with the quality of life of retirees. Including things like, on the one hand, the one extreme, recreation activities and social activities; on the other extreme, looking to the problems that arise with older people as they get older: sickness, illness, health, and the help they need for all kinds of things. And it's catching on. It encompasses a--Well, when you think about it, the estimates are something like 35 percent of all retirees are union members. Well, they call them ex-union members. We are getting across the notion they are still union members; that's how we are cementing a tie. Which means in a county like Los Angeles--or in Los Angeles alone--Los Angeles County, you are talking about somewhere between four and five hundred thousand people out there. Many thousands of whom are drawing pensions out of unions, see, or as a result of union contracts, but who don't have an organizational tie to the union anymore. And our job is to bring them back, create that tie, and

organize them for their benefit and for the benefit of the labor movement. So it's a huge job, and it is nice to see it operating. It's making progress.

DONAHOE

Well, in that regard, Los Angeles seems to be in the forefront.

FIERING

It is in the forefront.

DONAHOE

Because it's not really going on anywhere else.

FIERING

As we get people from here who go East--and we have a lot of people go East from here--they mingle with other people, and they are telling them about our operation here. And it is creating interest elsewhere, I understand, just like it is in California. In California it really is creating a lot of interest. We just came off a conference in--what do you call it?--Alameda County, Oakland, just a month ago. Less than a month ago--three weeks ago? What's today? Yeah, about three weeks ago, a senior citizen's convention. And we had a caucus of trade unionists the whole first half of the day, and we had almost two hundred trade unionists there. And most of them came to it because they heard about our FORUM.

DONAHOE

Wow.

FIERING

And they expected--Well, the room seats a hundred fifty, and we didn't expect that. We thought we would have maybe fifty people. They just jammed that room. It was terrific, pretty terrific.

DONAHOE

Oh, that's wonderful.

**1.19. TAPE NUMBER: XI, Side One (November 20, 1987)**

FIERING

I was down in Palm Springs at an AFSCME [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees] district council convention this past weekend (it was just a routine convention) and I was invited to speak and I spoke on the retired members, that was my subject.

DONAHOE

Okay, today we are going to talk about the Southern California Library [for Social Studies and Research]. What is the history of your involvement, and what is your role in this library? I know you are on the board.

FIERING

Well, at first I saw the library, and that's going back quite a few years when Emil [Freed] was gathering up all the books he could lay his hands on, asking everybody to make contributions of books instead of throwing them out. And we kept the few that we thought were specially important to us, but a large part of our library we turned over to him, and that was like satchels full of stuff.

DONAHOE

What year was this? Was this in the late fifties?

FIERING

This was in the late fifties, yeah, early sixties, because I saw the library as important as a repository for that literature, and I saw his perspective as something that was worthwhile. Accumulating all that literature and holding it, for posterity, I thought it was worthy. It was a worthy cause and so we supported that, you know, but then that didn't change my conception of who Emil Freed was in terms of his relationship to the CP [Communist Party]. He was always close to it, and that's okay. He's entitled to his opinion. I thought what was important was what he was doing, and what he was doing was an important part of history and that I supported. Well, when I retired, he came onto me about getting on the board of the library, and I shied away from it for years. I didn't want to have anything to do with it because my estimate of the library was that it was an adjunct of the CP and I didn't want to have anything to do with that. But it didn't discourage him; I would get a call at least once a

year or sometimes twice a year or when he would run into me. And he was very persistent, very persistent. And so finally, in 1982 I decided, well, I'll talk to him. I said, "Give me the time to think it over, I want to ask you a few questions about it." And I did ask him these questions, you know, and so he assured me that there was no link, it was an independent library, which satisfied me. I told him what my view of a library ought to be: it ought to be a center for intellectual discussion of socialism, all kinds, running from CP all the way over to include every kind of group. It should be that kind of a center for the discussion of socialism, see. And he didn't disagree with me so he asked me if I would come on. I says, "I'll come on, but I want to do something." He says, "What would you like to do about that?" I said, "What I would like to do is get together a bunch of trade union organizers or trade union people who are socialists and let's start a core with them, see, and see how we can develop that idea." And he was very much for it so I got a hold of a number of people that I knew and we had some meetings, several meetings, but the thing petered out, see. Because the library had nothing really to offer us. At that time he was just beginning to get an idea about expanding that building at 6120 [South Vermont Avenue], building it up.

DONAHOE

But he was down there by that time?

FIERING

He was down there by that time, and he had big ideas about developing that building, and what I had in mind fitted right in with that. He was going to build a room for us so we would have classes of trade unionists and we would have discussions. That was that first purpose of that one room when you come in on the left--now it's stacked with books--but the purpose of that room was for just that, to have classes and meetings and a place where we could have union meetings, too. We would get the word around to local unions that here was an available meeting place. It's set in the black area. There are a lot of black union members, a lot of unions with heavy black membership who live in that area, who would find it much more convenient, see. They would find it much more convenient coming to a meeting in 8 place like that than they would having to travel to other places to a meeting. And I thought we could get local unions to agree for minimal rent--even sometimes for free if they couldn't

afford it--to use that place for their local meetings or for classes for local unions. That was what we wanted to build up there, see.

DONAHOE

Oh, that would be so good.

FIERING

And that idea just fell flat, because it took so long to build that room. With all the difficulties that went into it, the group petered out that I had, and it was too bad. But that was my idea; it would be that kind of a center. It has never developed into that kind of center. Hopefully, with what they have going now with these people whose names I have given them as contacts they are making around the trade union movement they can start something like that. These are people who are key people in the trade union movement; they are not, you know, just lowlevel officials. The names I gave them are people who are top officials in the labor movement locally. And hopefully, if they can involve them, we can begin to have this kind of a thing. But also not to hide the fact that we are a socialist-oriented library, primarily interested in discussions on socialism and labor problems, and to build that kind of a center. Well, that was my hope. And so I agreed to join the board.

DONAHOE

In '82.

FIERING

'Eighty-two. And from '82 on that board to me has really meant nothing; it has been one boring session. I'll sit through a whole goddamn meeting, and I am turned on only to myself, and whatever problems I got going someplace else, or if I am paying attention to the meeting, I'm wondering what the hell am I doing here? What am I doing here? Finally, I articulated that here a few months ago that it just had no relevance at all to what my concerns, my interests were. And that's not negating the fact they need money. Sure, they need money, but it was not my thing; I'm not a fund-raiser. I don't know how to do it, it's not my interest. But this was the main concern, that was the main agenda for the library. Well, it meant survival so I'm not knocking it, but it didn't leave any room for what I wanted, that was the thing. So I thought very

seriously about just dropping out of it, and more than once. I don't know why I hung on.

DONAHOE

But there were two labor programs though, weren't there?

FIERING

They had the Harry Bridges dinner. ["A Salute to Harry Bridges," February 9, 1986]

DONAHOE

Before that there was like an all-day conference.

FIERING

Oh yeah, they had that and see, I participated very heavily in that, and I felt very good. I made a real contribution to that thing.

DONAHOE

That was really important.

FIERING

Organizing it, getting people to it, and all of that.

DONAHOE

All the workshops.

FIERING

Yeah, I felt very good about it.

DONAHOE

That was '84?

FIERING

This was '84, yeah.

DONAHOE

'Eighty-four, yeah. I forget, it was just called the labor conference.

FIERING

Mm-hmm. "Labor's Response Crisis."

DONAHOE

Then the Harry Bridges dinner.

FIERING

Then the Harry Bridges thing, in which I played somewhat of a role.

DONAHOE

And then this last, the ILGWU [International Ladies Garment Workers Union].

FIERING

The ILG[WU] thing where I gave them key people to contact. They were nibbling around the edges, looking how they could sneak in.

DONAHOE

So they have had like three major labor oriented-

FIERING

That's right, yeah, and they could have a whole lot more, see. See, there's something the left doesn't appreciate. They say they do. At least they voice it, but I don't know if they fully appreciate it. And I didn't even myself until relatively recently how wide open everybody is for discussion in the labor movement. I still carry that baggage about the fear of red-baiting, and yet, I can see now how in the present ambience that's not a real problem. Not that it doesn't lay there dormant, but it is not a real problem. And most people are open to all kinds of discussions, see, and the library is just the perfect place for that kind of thing, so you can talk about the library and you can talk about what the library is to anybody, including the fact that it is a socialist-oriented thing. Many people today articulate a sympathy for socialism without really knowing what it is, but it is just the idea that it is anticapitalist, see, and they have so many grievances against the system today. So the library offers a lot of opportunities if they would zero in on what's possible, and what's possible with the labor movement first. True, they can expand it to the whole community too, there's that too, but I'm thinking about the labor movement.

So once you are grounded with that and you've got a base in that, then you are secured, and you don't have to worry about vicissitudes and all that, calamities hitting you. Anyway, so I was on the board and I talked to Ida [Monarch Fiering] once about, "What the hell am I doing there? I'm not saying anything, I'm not doing anything. Why am I wasting my time?" But anyway I was drawn to that, I had some allegiance to Freed. I felt for the guy, had feelings for the guy and what he had done, and I suppose I had some hope that maybe some good might come out of it. I know the people I was dealing with were well-intentioned people.

DONAHOE

And that was their aim, what you wanted.

FIERING

Yes, I know, I know. And if I was the ulcer type I would get ulcers just sitting there through meetings listening to these people. So anyway, but I am loosened up on the thing by now, you know, much less fear about it. I don't go to many board meetings, and I am now being drawn more and more into what I proposed with these suggestions on the labor movement, so anyway that's-- So if you want my view on the library, I think it's a good thing. I think up until recently it has been outside of these events that it has had, it's really been a kind of a dead outfit. It's supposed to be a source for research you know, but how many people use it for research? Very few, very few, if any. Once in a while they get somebody.

DONAHOE

They do have a lot of materials that you can't get anywhere else.

FIERING

I know that, I know that.

DONAHOE

Because I have sent people there.

FIERING

But you've got to create a desire to use it. don't think they have hit on that key yet, see. Maybe when they effect these contacts with the unions, they'll

maybe develop the key, but they haven't yet hit on a key. If that thing was at UCLA, which wanted it at one time--I don't know whether you know that, but UCLA wanted to take it over.

DONAHOE

I think a number of universities wanted it.

FIERING

USC [University of Southern California] wanted to take it over. But, of course, they wanted to control it.

DONAHOE

Cal State L.A. [California State University, Los Angeles].

FIERING

They wanted to control it, yeah, they wanted to control it. And the leadership of the library wanted it to remain independent, and I'm for that, I'm for that. But if it was there at either one of those universities, I'm sure more people would find their way to the material than where it is on Vermont Avenue. But it's worth holding out as long as they can support themselves. Hopefully, a turn will be made and it will be the kind of institution that becomes highly prized in the community, you know, sought after, and I think it should be. Like you say, it has got stuff in there that you find no place in the world. And it's valuable; it's important to researchers.

DONAHOE

Right, right, on all issues, not just labor, because I had a friend that went there and did all kinds of investigation about the school system. Found all kinds of things about the whole integration struggles and everything in the forties and fifties.

FIERING

Well, you saw the Hollywood Ten [television program] on PBS [Public Broadcasting Service], and among the credits they listed the library.

DONAHOE

Right, so they have an enormous amount of information on that. But why do you think it's so slow, like what's happened? Why hasn't it turned around?

FIERING

The reason it's slow is because nobody has been able to make the proper kind of noise about it.

DONAHOE

But even Emil, I mean he couldn't.

FIERING

No, he couldn't; he wasn't that kind. You are getting a bunch of people in there now who can, people like Bill [William] Doyle and Dorothy [Doyle]. I am impressed with [John H. M.] Laslett, but more so the Doyles who really are gung ho, out and around, really aggressive, you know.

DONAHOE

They have been working in it for years.

FIERING

A number of years, yeah, and I have hopes that now we'll see what these contacts bring forth. Maybe that will help open it up. But there's nobody who does a real PR job. Outside of the publicity we get around affairs, like the vets' affair [niNo Pasar&n! A Tribute to the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, 1937-1987," March 1, 1987] and the Bridges affair you know, it's not constantly brought to the attention of the community. Nobody does that for them. If somebody did, people would start beating a path to it I think, because there are enough scholars in town who would want that kind of stuff and don't know it's there.

DONAHOE

Yeah, it seems like, but maybe it's these problems, these impressions, that it has been affiliated with, like the Communist Party.

FIERING

Yeah, you mean Freed's past affiliation. Well, think-

DONAHOE

Not so much the affiliation, but maybe just people just connected in their minds or something. Do you think so?

FIERING

I don't know that that's a -

DONAHOE

You don't think that's a factor?

FIERING

No, and that's the point I want to make, that with the current atmosphere that's less and less.

DONAHOE

It doesn't matter.

FIERING

Now, it may have been true many years ago whenever they mention Freed and the library, they mentioned that he was a CPer, and this is sort of an off-shoot of the CP. But it doesn't make any difference today, and besides, of course, it's not so true today. And it's much more acceptable today. In fact, if you took all the stuff, the crap that was hurled against Freed years ago and you did it today, it might even be an inducement for some people to find a way to the library in today's atmosphere, but that's not the case. That's not even an impediment of any kind, see, and if they could somehow get some PR done on it--well, you got to do things too for PR I suppose. So anyway, that's off the top of my head.

DONAHOE

Well, now they want to I guess set up some, like these trade union classes.

FIERING

Yeah. Now, if they establish good contact with trade union leadership and this thing they have got ,going with some of them--this idea about developing the history of the unions--that's what it's all about.

DONAHOE

In Los Angeles?

FIERING

In Los Angeles, right. But all these various unions, they'll establish contact, and develop contact, and they will be able to have a class, the kind of classes which involve these very people we're seeing. And also involve more programs with a lot more content and with socialist ideas in discussion, because they never hide the fact that they are a socialist-oriented group.

DONAHOE

Right. Yeah, and it would be very different than any programs that exist anywhere else, I think.

FIERING

There is no place else here for that thing. Nobody else is doing it; not even the unions themselves are doing it.

DONAHOE

No, not at all. And Trade-Tech [Los Angeles Trade-Technical College] just does technical things, you know like stewards training and labor law, things like that, but they don't do the history of the unions here, per see

FIERING

Yeah, and your department doesn't go into that kind of thing. Those are individual oral histories.

DONAHOE

No, we are trying to develop that. It hasn't been done in Los Angeles too much. I had just heard that Emil had really taken this on himself, the whole library, that he didn't really get the support of the party, that they were opposed to it.

FIERING

No, I don't know about being--No, I never heard they were opposed to it.

DONAHOE

I heard it from other people, I don't know.

FIERING

No, what the realities were, the party was under attack, they had all they could handle without worrying about creating a library. But Emil decided this was going to be his bag, and he went about and he did it. So as he did it, people just didn't stop him, they didn't criticize him. They didn't say don't do it.

DONAHOE

Yeah, but he didn't really get support, financial support.

FIERING

He didn't get support, but nobody stood in his way either, nobody stopped him from doing what he wanted to do. So he wanted to collect books, they said, "Go out, be my guest. Just don't bother me, I got plenty, I got trouble of my own. I can't do anything for you."

DONAHOE

That certainly was a good vision.

FIERING

Yes, it was.

DONAHOE

And we are glad he did it. We wouldn't have all this material if it wasn't for him.

FIERING

Yeah, I think time will prove that. I give him a lot of credit for it; it is no easy job. But it's interesting how it became known throughout the left movement that "Emil is collecting books, don't throw your books away, give them to Emil."

DONAHOE

To this day people say the same thing. If you have books, bring them to the library once they start getting more than you can handle.

FIERING

But nobody was antagonistic. If you heard the story about the party being antagonistic to him, I don't think that was so.

DONAHOE

But yeah, [it was] just that they didn't support him.

FIERING

They didn't support him because they couldn't, they couldn't. They could barely keep their heads above water; they were drowning for Christ's sakes.

DONAHOE

I don't know how he did it on his own. It's incredible.

FIERING

They still haven't come up out of the water, but that's another story. What else can I tell you about the library?

DONAHOE

I guess that's about it, just in terms of you know how they were going to try to turn this around.

FIERING

I admire the people who are in it, got their hearts in it. They're really putting out for it.

DONAHOE

Well, I think that your role has been important because they've wanted a person with a labor perspective all time.

FIERING

Yeah, well, it was important because they had a specific thing under way and I could play a role and I played a role. But you think in terms of what kind of a steady kind of contribution could I make, they never thought in such terms until just now, see, when I came up with all the lists of names for them and

that suggestion. That came about when I exploded one time and I said, "I don't know what I am doing here?"

DONAHOE

Well, it was good you exploded.

DONAHOE

So, you know, I think it definitely has a good future with these possibilities.

FIERING

I do, I do. Yeah, I love the people who are in it, what they are putting out for it, and if they keep going, I think it will go somewhere. It has already established a reputation for itself with the ILGWU, you know. Good job. That's a permanent relationship Laslett's got an ongoing thing now with Steve Nutter, who is the director of the ILGWU, a fine young guy.

DONAHOE

And some materials have come out of that conference.

FIERING

Yes, they are writing up a report.

DONAHOE

A report and some kinds of publications.

FIERING

That's right, which the ILGWU can prize and put out to its members, and it comes from the library. Now they are hoping to do the same thing with [United Steelworkers of America].

DONAHOE

And then hopefully [United] Auto[mobile Workers], hopefully UE [United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America] so that would really be great. And they can really build up some archival material too. Okay. Did you have some other ideas about the labor movement?

FIERING

Well, I forget where the hell we were at on that thing. I think you were asking me what do I think about what direction it was taking and all of that.

DONAHOE

Well, we were talking about-

FIERING

About its leadership.

DONAHOE

--that you know everyone is saying that labor is taking such a beating today, that there has been such losses in terms of conditions and the contracts and benefits. The percentage of organized workers to the total labor force has decreased. And I was asking how do you view this? Plant closures, there's just so much negativism.

FIERING

Yes and what about the leadership of the labor movement, what kind of leadership was it giving in view of these conditions.

DONAHOE

Right.

FIERING

\*[Well, we covered my view a little bit ago concerning the confusion on labor's priorities. The labor movement was completely unprepared for Reaganism when it burst on the scene with the discharge of over 11,000 a~r controllers and the destruction of PATCO (Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization). Nor were they prepared for the profound changes in the American economy. We have been on the defensive since. It's only recently that you sense a change in the mood of working people. They're sick and tired of taking a beating and, in my opinion, are ready for leadership to fight back. Is the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations leadership up to the task? I think the kinds of differences we've seen recently in the national AFL-CIO reflects a struggle for a new policy, taking the offensive against Reaganism. Something has to give there, changes in that power structure to reflect a new, young, aggressive leadership or further

deterioration in labor's position. I think the American worker is ready for his union to take a really independent, a fighting approach against capitalism.] And, of course, some things of great significance have happened since that time, you know. The convention of the AFL-CIO has taken on a marked turn in a more progressive direction. That was significant in many ways, not the least of which is that it was probably the sharpest turn it has taken since, Christ, since the fight with the CIO when you think about it, because, historically, even though CIO merged with the AF of L in 1955, or '57, whenever it was-\* Mr. Fiering added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

DONAHOE

'Fifty-five, yeah.

FIERING

'Fifty-five. There was no basic change in the program of the CIO at that point, except for, not its political organization, but its attitude on participation in politics. But as far as its programmatic orientation, there was not any significant change. It was business unionism, it remained business unionism, it supported capitalism without reservation. And it stayed that way. But the one significant change was that the CIO brought with it its political participation, its participation in the political process, much more so than the AFL had ever allowed itself to. But the character of the leadership from [Samuel] Gompers to [William] Green to [George] Meany to [Lane] Kirkland, in terms of it being a right-wing leadership, really never changed. Probably the most progressive of all of those four people was Gompers.

DONAHOE

I think you are right. [laughter]

FIERING

But they always went hand in hand with the policies of the government, in terms of foreign policy, no matter how reactionary the administration was.

DONAHOE

Especially even recently with Central America when they came out with the union's involvement in the demonstrations.

FIERING

Whatever it was. Which in large part accounts for the position that the American worker finds himself in today. There was never any really independent approach or a fighting approach against capitalism.

DONAHOE

No alternatives presented.

FIERING

That's right. That paved the way for plant closings, the deterioration of the American industrial structure, the multinational corporations and the exported jobs and everything else because people like Kirkland were there backing up a foreign policy which was detrimental to the interest of the American worker. But for the first time in the history of the AFL-CIO, there was division on fundamental foreign policy issues.

DONAHOE

Oh yes.

FIERING

You can see what is happening inside the labor movement. It offers a lot of hope, and it was bound to happen, which is why I was not ever really negative about it. These things come in curves, ups and downs, and now you've got a new young element coming in that's ready to come to grips with some of the problems and is carrying the fight, and a part of that I am happy to say is my own union.

DONAHOE

They are affiliated--Oh, they have been part of this, of course, yeah.

FIERING

They are taking among the most progressive positions in the AFL-CIO.

DONAHOE

Did they just have a convention recently?

FIERING

AFSCME [American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees]?

DONAHOE

No.

FIERING

Oh, the AFL-CIO, of course. That's when the [International Brotherhood of] Teamsters affiliated.

DONAHOE

I know, but I missed all of this.

FIERING

You weren't here then?

DONAHOE

No.

FIERING

That was the other thing that happened, the Teamsters reaffiliated.

DONAHOE

Oh, that's what I was trying to figure out what happened here.

FIERING

Oh sure. But the problem, for instance-

DONAHOE

So they just had their convention and the Teamsters reaffiliated.

FIERING

That was one of the very significant things that happened. And, of course, there's a lot of concern about the full significance of that politically because the balance is going to shift rightward, everybody's concerned, see.

DONAHOE

With the Teamsters.

FIERING

And that was one of the reasons why the people fended off the thing. The thinking is, help make it possible, because they saw how the winds were blowing and they know that Kirkland is not going to be for long, and when the contest comes up for leadership to succeed Kirkland, the balance of forces may lean towards the left of center. And so in order to obviate that possibility, negotiations with the Teamsters was encouraged, and with the Teamsters coming in, it shifts the balance again to the right, you see. People who are looking ahead to possibly running for the leadership of the AFL-CIO are at the core of that. It is hard to say exactly which one it is, but it is one of two or three people, either the building trades guy, [Bob] Georgine, or [Tom] Donahue, who is the secretary to Kirkland, or [John J.] Sweeney who's the-

DONAHOE

Sweeney you think?

FIERING

--who is the SEIU [Service Employees International Union] president.

DONAHOE

He's pretty good.

FIERING

Pretty good and pretty sharp. Yeah, he's good, but you see, on an issue like this, well, actually he is the better of the three.

DONAHOE

He has a very interesting approach, much more historical.

FIERING

Well, you want to remember that his base is really the old-line worker, the old craft worker. It's only in the last, in recent years, in the last, well-

DONAHOE

But he comes out same as [George] Hardy?

FIERING

That's right.

DONAHOE

But he takes a much more historical, education-type approach I thought,  
Sweeney.

FIERING

Yeah, well, he is more an intellectual than George Hardy, but don't underrate  
Hardy.

DONAHOE

Oh no.

FIERING

I know him very well, and I like him. I like him and I think he is a shrewd article.

DONAHOE

The library should contact him.

FIERING

He is one guy who would outsmart a dwarf. But the library should contact him.

DONAHOE

He's an excellent person to contact.

FIERING

Absolutely. As a matter of fact, I gave them his name.

DONAHOE

Did you?

FIERING

Yeah, I gave them his name. DONAHOE; Because he would really be terrific.

FIERING

The guy, what's on his mind is on his tongue, no bullshit.

DONAHOE

I know.

FIERING

No bullshit. He talks just like a worker, but it's true that, you know, he's more conservative. He has somewhat of a business view of a union perhaps, but he has done the job. He is the guy opened up his union to elements outside the janitors and made a better union out of it, and Sweeney came along and followed him, see. Sweeney is more the intellectual, very bright. So anyway, there is that part of it, but most significant is that fact that the program the AFL-CIO adopted, probably shows the sharpest turn politically of any program that they have adopted ever since CIO days.

DONAHOE

Like what specifically, since I missed everything.

FIERING

The simplest example is Nicaragua.

DONAHOE

They took a position?

FIERING

Good position. Can you picture that in the AFLCIO?

DONAHOE

No, I can't believe it, after all that criticism about Central America and criticizing the unions.

FIERING

That's right, and you know that was not Kirkland's position, but he was forced to it.

DONAHOE

So they took a position against aid to the Contras.

FIERING

No, no, not against aid to Contras. Took a position in favor of the Arias plan for peace. But on the larger issues of foreign policy, they had been to the right of [Ronald W.] Reagan on that particular issue, Kirkland was.

DONAHOE

Yeah I know, so that's amazing.

FIERING

But they took a very forthright position on that and a lot of other issues, international issues. I'm waiting to get ahold of the results of the convention.

DONAHOE

When was it?

FIERING

This was just in October.

DONAHOE

It's usually in the middle of October?

FIERING

It was in OOctober, about a month ago, that's right.

DONAHOE

Well, I must have just missed it.

FIERING

You just missed it, that's right.

DONAHOE

It's usually in Miami or--?

FIERING

It was Miami this time.

DONAHOE

But Kirkland, he wasn't up for reelection.

FIERING

No, he's up every four years--the next convention. Oh, he won't be defeated, but he's pretty sick and everybody knows that. One of the leaders in that movement was my union.

DONAHOE

In this whole move to-

FIERING

Yeah, my union, the UAW, the machinists union [International Association of Machinists]--and CWA [Communications Workers of America]--they are a core of the progressives, and they represent four of the largest unions in the AFL-CIO. My union was the largest, and now the Teamsters coming in makes them second largest.

DONAHOE

Oh my gosh, you mean the Teamsters are the biggest?

FIERING

They are now the biggest union, yeah. But, of course, when you boil it all down, you take out the Canadian membership, they aren't any larger than my union, see, as far as their American membership is concerned. And there's a lot of misgivings about their coming in, but my own view is, misgivings and all, in the long run it's probably better. [Jackie] Presser probably is not going to be there for long.

DONAHOE

Oh, that's who you are saying, Kirkland was ill, yeah. '

FIERING

Yeah, he is probably going to go, and Presser may not survive in another few months. Perhaps, it opens the door to changes in the teamsters union.

DONAHOE

Did they take any other kinds of positions like about plant closings or anything like that?

FIERING

Oh, yeah. Their whole program contains all the positions reflecting the needs of the unions, foreign trade and plant closings, etc. Of course, the issue of foreign trade is kind of a debatable thing, I don't know exactly, without being an expert on it, exactly what's involved in the thing, but that something has to be done is obvious. And they took positions on that, but their positions were contrary to Reagan and the administration, strong positions.

DONAHOE

, It's so unusual. It's just like it happened in a matter of months, because when was that union participation against involvement in Central America, the big demonstration we had? It was this year.

FIERING

It was this year.

DONAHOE

June or something or May?

FIERING

April.

DONAHOE

April. And they came out so strongly against it. Kirkland was just terrible.

FIERING

Now it's kosher.

DONAHOE

[laughter] That's amazing that they changed so drastically. So you should be getting a report, a full report.

FIERING

Yeah, well, I should be. In fact they wrote up a short synopsis of each one. And these are synopses of what is going on in AFSCME and the labor movement.

We had one here, just little pieces of stuff, a few weeks ago; I should have kept it.

DONAHOE

About the conference?

FIERING

About the convention, convention decisions, yeah.

DONAHOE

So this you see as a really positive development in terms of the labor movement.

FIERING

Oh yeah, in terms of the labor movement. Of course, I hope it is going to be translated into good election results. It had better be because my own feeling is that we are going to be heading for a depression, and with that, with a Democratic administration, we probably can do a lot of things. With a Republican administration it may not be so possible, but it will help the general atmosphere. \*[When I retired as executive director of AFSCME in July 1976, I had intended it to be a retirement from the labor movement, but that was not to be. I really had my mind set on developing new interests that I had fantasized about for a long time. Ida and I had made great plans. Immediately on my retirement, I was under great pressure to retain ties with my own union with the specific promise I would assist a couple of key locals in their contract negotiations the following year. They offered to put me on a consultant status. The conditions were good, so I accepted. When Ida and I got back from some traveling to Europe and other places, Bill Robertson asked me to serve as the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor rep on the HSA (Health Services Agency). This was set up by Congress under a public law with the aim of bringing the consumer and provider elements of the health community together in a cooperative effort to reduce health costs. I spent time for a couple of years with that. To make a long story short, it provided a lot of money to make-believe and a few good-paying jobs for a handful of bureaucrats. I left in disgust, in disagreement with its policies, with the L.A. Federation of Labor. But I made enough noise to contribute to its demise. In

1977, I did, as I committed, again become involved in AFSCME negotiations. The new director, Ron Coleman, whom I had brought in to replace me, I felt, however, was uneasy with my presence, because I was told he felt he was constantly being compared to me. I appreciate it was difficult for him. Yet he was pressured to accept my presence there. The relationship with the AFSCME probation officers maintained through 1985. I began to like the arrangement free-lancing as a consultant, avoiding the stresses and strains of elected union leadership, but contributing my expertise to help solve problems. It meant no direct responsibility. The director of the UCLA Institute of Industrial Relations division, Jack C. Blackburn, asked me to teach an eight-week class, which went off very well. So that was repeated once more. As that was coming to a close in 1978, Marty Morgenstern, who was "Jerry" [Edmund G.] Brown [Jr.]'s chief personnel officer, offered me work teaching the state's management staff the whys and wherefores of AB 838, the new collective bargaining law for state employees. All this still allowed Ida and myself to enjoy traveling and other activities. The work with the state went on for about a year. During 1978, the new general manager of SEIU Local 660, Steve Cooney, approached me and offered me a consultantship to 660, a huge station, but with a host of problems. He had been pressured by Harry Gluck, his predecessor, to come after me. This was the union that had sought shelter nine years earlier behind an AFL-CIO label. Though I had given up challenges when I retired, I could not resist this offer under these circumstances. So I plunged into a round of teaching and training of union leadership and staff as well as significant negotiations. It was all very ego-satisfying. I still maintained my connection with AFSCME and was the only person who was acceptable to both unions, who were strong competitors. It was a special status. I handled key negotiations for 660 with Los Angeles County management, clerical workers, eligibility workers, nurses, all key bargaining units, and helped pull them closer to the union, and I helped keep the union together. This went on through 1983. In 1985 I did some work for SEIU Local 434, the Los Angeles County hospital union, as well. At the end of 1978, Ida decided she wasn't going to sit home waiting for me. In 1976 when I retired, I had insisted she quit her job at the Westside Jewish Community Center so we could enjoy retirement together. So in 1979, after some courses updating her teaching credential, she went to work for the L.A. Unified School District as an adult ed teacher in a minimum assignment. We enjoyed life like we couldn't on full-time jobs. But

by 1985 I had had it. That year negotiations had become burdensome, and I wasn't taking any chances at that age, seventy-two, suffering stresses and strains, so I notified all and sundry, no more contacts for me. In 1987, Ophelia McFadden, general manager of Local 434, asked me again to take such an assignment, and I refused. It was difficult to say no, but only because I would have liked to do this for her. Instead, I finally conceded in 1986 to being a senior citizen and accepted an invitation from Bill Robertson to act as chairman of the Federation of Retired Union Members [FORUM]. This was a volunteer job. That's where I am at the moment, except that I have just been offered a paying job as administrator of a medical information and referral service for retired union members. I don't know much more about it than that it sounds interesting, while Ida does her thing until she gets tired. She does what she does and is as much appreciated as I am in the FORUM. Other than the usual illnesses we're prone to at this age, we are enjoying ourselves. Of course, we both fantasize that we'd love to pick up at a moment's notice and take off to some strange and faraway places any time we wish. But given we're not that well situated financially, never having thought until very late about the financial implications of retirement, we are enjoying ourselves. So I am still in the labor movement at this stage of my life, but in ways I hadn't foreseen ten or twenty years ago. On occasion I remind myself when I think about my life, "Hey, don't forget your priorities." My priority, of course, is my life with Ida first, then my kids and grand-kids, then any service I can give.] \*

Mr. Fiering added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

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