A TEI Project

Interview of Peter Olney

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1.1. Session One (December 26, 2013)

GOMEZ
It's December 26 [2013]. This is Andrew Gomez. I am in my apartment in West Los Angeles, conducting an interview session with Peter Olney. Mr. Olney, if you can tell me your date of birth and where you were born.
OLNEY
I was born on November 28, 1950, in Boston, Massachusetts at the Boston Lying-In Hospital.
GOMEZ
Could you tell me a bit about your parents and what they did for a living?
OLNEY
My father worked in personnel management and he retired from a business that he founded called Olney Associates, which was a management consulting firm, did a lot of wage-and-hour comparative studies, did comparable-worth studies, work mainly for hospitals and banks, determining salary and compensational levels for employees. My mother raised us as children, and then when we got out of the house, she became a librarian at the local high school in Andover, Massachusetts, and also became a town librarian in Andover.
GOMEZ
What do you remember about your neighborhood growing up? Was it a religious community?
OLNEY

Our neighborhood was what I would call a middle to upper middle-class suburb of Boston, 25 miles north of Boston, due north toward the New Hampshire border, very close to the New Hampshire border. Andover was famous because the Andover Academy, Phillips Andover Academy, is located there, and was a town of mill owners and supervisors from Lawrence, Massachusetts, which is due north of Andover. It's Lawrence, the great textile manufacturing center. So I remember growing up in suburbia, a very white, upscale neighborhood.

GOMEZ

You grew up in the Unitarian Church, right?

OLNEY

Yes. My grandmother was a Scots-Irish child of immigrants from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, raised in the Presbyterian Church. She and her husband moved to Malden, Massachusetts, during the Depression in the thirties, and they had three young children and they wanted a church school. She went to the Presbyterian Church; they had no room. Went to a number of other Protestant denominations. Finally ended up at the Universalist Church, and the Universalist Church had Sunday School room for my mother and her two brothers. So my grandmother, who was an extraordinary woman, got involved in the Universalist Church, became head of the Universalist Women's Federation nationally, and then when the Unitarian Universalists merged in 1963 to form the Unitarian Universalist Association, she was the first national secretary of the association, so she became very active in the church and the church's causes, and of course that meant she was marching with Dr. King in Selma, was at the March on Washington in August of '63. So because of her association with the church, we were raised in the Unitarian Universalist Church, and I got very involved in a group called Liberal Religious Youth, which was the youth movement of the Unitarian Church. Of course, that was a group that had a lot of close ties and synergies with a lot of the activity of the church in the South, particularly around civil rights, so my summer camps were spent hearing from Freedom Riders coming back from the South. And that's really what started me on the road to thinking critically about the United States and then, of course, about U.S. foreign policy in terms of the war in Vietnam.

GOMEZ

Your parents, I mean, they were typical Massachusetts Democrats, I'm assuming.

OLNEY

Yes, they were liberal Democrats, but as you can imagine from my father's occupation, he was not a strong union supporters, so we had our clashes and debates over the question of class.

GOMEZ

Even as a teenager?

OLNEY

Yes. Well, early on in my senior year in high school, I participated in a protest against the war in Vietnam during a Memorial Day parade at the Academy, and I actually was a student at the Academy and I was given the honor of carrying the flag at the head of this parade, a Memorial Day parade, and I decided, in solidarity with the people protesting the war, that I would wear a peace armband, carrying the flag. So that created tremendous controversy. We had police surrounding City Hall because they thought we were terrorists. We boycotted the local coffee shop that refused to serve people with peace armbands. So it created this huge stir in little, quiet, placid Andover, Massachusetts. So after that, the Dean of Students, who'd been a friend of mine, called me into his office on the Monday after the parade or the Tuesday, I forget, and said, "You've got to be careful about who you associate with." It was a very clear warning to back off of these activities. My father got very concerned about that too. It was partly the times, you know. You can imagine young people everywhere, you know, getting pretty charged up and turned on and revolting, and for a lot of parents, even liberal Democrats, that was pretty challenging. So we started to clash from then on, and really for the rest of our lives we clashed over—my father passed away in 1996, but we clashed over this issue of class and unions and whatever.

GOMEZ

Do that was your senior year. So then you go to Harvard for a couple of years.

OLNEY

I go to Harvard. Mainly my time at Harvard was spent playing football, but also participating in politics and marches and rallies, principally against the war, and on-campus politics around the war. Then I went to Italy for a year to study abroad, and that really

radicalized me, because Italy was, like, popping, and I did a lot of political work over there with some of the extra Parliamentary Left groups, and that's where I really got honed in on the class question as the key to everything, and started to read Marx and the classics, and really tried to understand better class and its relationship to race and empire. So when I came back from Italy after a year over there, mainly spent indulging in politics in Italy, is when I decided to quit school and start working, so I started off working as an elevator operator in a candy factory in Cambridge, called NECO, New England Confectionery Company. They make the NECO wafers. You've probably seen them.

GOMEZ

Yes.

OLNEY

I was an elevator operator there, and then from there I moved to a machine shop in Roxbury, which I organized into the United Electrical Workers. And from there on I became what's called an industrial salt, going into non-union facilities or union facilities and strengthening the union in the union facility or bringing a union in in the case of a non-union facility.

GOMEZ

Would you talk a bit about that, about being an industrial salt?

OLNEY

Yes, sure.

GOMEZ

The dangers of that. [laughs]

OLNEY

Well, at the time, as you can well imagine, given the war in Vietnam and the Civil Rights Movement, revolution was in the air, so a lot of young people of my generation, I have friends to this day who were made in industrial workplaces and risen to positions of leadership in unions. So there were a lot of us at that time, cadres of young people going to work in factories, to organize and to build a revolutionary workers' movement, so that was my orientation and that's why I did it. It was challenging because here we were children of middle-class, upper middle-class upbringing, had very little experience with the working class, knew even what workers were, and were suddenly going to work in these industrial workplaces, but it's a good experience because it both taught you humility, trained

you to listen to people and learn from people, but it also taught you that there is potential among regular workers to rise up and take control of their lives and take control of destiny. So it was a double-edged sword. It was a very interesting experience, a very humbling experience at times. I'll never forget the first job I had. I think I was a janitor in an apartment house and I was really revved up on politics, and a discussion started in the lunchroom about some injustice that the employer had committed, and I jump up on the table and start talking about the need for socialism. And I'll never forget this guy from South Boston, "Shut up, you asshole!" [laughter] You know, so you learn. You learn humility, you learn to listen, and you learn the complexities of working-class life. And if you didn't grow up with that, that's an important feature of learning to be an organizer.

GOMEZ

You're talking about that discord, right? Because you grow up in a middle-class neighborhood, go to Harvard, become radicalized in Italy, all these kind of unique experiences, but then you—I mean, there's a discord. Like you said, the guy says, "Sit down, you asshole."

OLNEY

Yeah. Well, I think again that goes to this issue of where are people at and how do you meet people where they're at and grow with them and develop them. I've always found that in the course of battle, people grow and change, and I've seen that happen over and over. In my forty years of doing this, I've seen it happen over and over again.

GOMEZ

And as an organizer, is there this question of, like, legitimacy if you didn't come from a certain background? They're kind of skeptical?

OLNEY

Well, that's the other issue, too, and a very good point. I mean, if you're a salt, yes, people realize to some degree that you're different, but the fact that you've committed yourself to doing that and you're there with folks, sharing their lives and sharing their struggles, makes a huge difference in terms of your legitimacy. So, yes, it's a challenge. Some people aren't made out for that. We had some folks that went to work in factories and workplaces and they weren't cut out for it, either the physical labor they couldn't handle

or just the rough edges of that life, they couldn't handle it. But other folks did great and really prospered. I loved it. I found the work interesting. I learned. Each job I had, I learned something new and different. I met new and different people. I learned trade. I actually went to school and learned to be a refrigeration mechanic. So, you know, it was a great experience. I did that for about ten years before I came to California.

GOMEZ

So when you were in Massachusetts recruiting, who were you recruiting? Where were these people from? What was their sort of background?

OLNEY

I say revolution was in the air, so there was this whole new Communist movement of people that were forming these organizations, young people mainly out of college, who were excited about revolutionary politics. We said, well, the way to realize your commitment is to go to work in a factory, so we had General Electric, we had General Motors, we had General Dynamics, we had these three Generals in the Boston area. One was a shipyard, one was heavy electrical equipment, machinery, and the other was an auto assembly plant. So a lot of us went to work in those facilities and did organizing there. I wasn't successful in getting into one of those places, but a whole lot of people, and even to this day, the General Electric plant is probably filled with young warriors who went in there to organize and colonize.

GOMEZ

The idea was what, that you were sort of selling out if you did go to college, if you went that route?

OLNEY

Well, yeah. I mean, there was a lot of sort of ideological, we'll call it struggle. That's putting it sort of placidly. But, you know, it was a lot of struggle over which direction are you going to go with your life. A lot of people were challenged to make a commitment to the working class by actually going in to the working class, which I think was an overall positive. It certainly was a positive for me. I mean, it's opened—my horizons have been incredible because of that, because of that decision to go in that direction versus, you know, a traditional go to law school and whatever. I mean, it's amazing,

talking to my classmates from Harvard and the directions they've gone versus the direction I went. It's pretty interesting.
GOMEZ
So they must have thought you were nuts when you originally—
OLNEY
Well, I'll never forget I was an elevator operator in Boston City Hospital. I was running the elevator for the main surgical building. They still had hand manually run elevators, and I was sitting, running the elevator. It's a great job for organizing because you could stop the elevator between floors and hold a captive audience with workers. But I'll never forget a surgeon getting on the elevator, a young intern who was working at the hospital, and I recognized him. He was a guy I played football with, a big guy. He's looking at me and I could tell he was like, "I know this guy," but it was so foreign that a guy he'd played football with at Harvard would be running a freight elevator—not the freight, the elevator at Boston City Hospital, where he was interning. He just—I could tell he just shut down. "No, that can't be him," and he just got off. And I eventually said hello to him and we reacquainted ourselves. But, yeah, that was, "Does not compute. This can't be."
GOMEZ
All right. So you do that for ten years. You move to California because that's where you met your wife.
OLNEY
Yes. My wife is from—she's actually a home girl. She's from El Monte, California, and she was living in Los Angeles, but we met—I was on vacation in San Francisco. We met up there. She made the supreme sacrifice of moving to Boston in the middle of winter, so I decided I would make an even supreme sacrifice by moving to Santa Monica, California. So in 1983 I moved. April of '83 I moved to Santa Monica, and when I got here I was going to work as a refrigeration mechanic because that was a trade that I had learned in Massachusetts, and before I could take a job, I was going to work for Boulangerie, which was a bakery. I don't know if it's still around. But I was going to work for them, keeping their product cool.
A friend of mine from Massachusetts got me connected with a thing called the LA Coalition Against Plant Shutdowns, which was a labor community coalition in the late seventies and early eighties, fighting against the wholesale massive closure of industrial plant machinery

in the L.A. Basin. So I became the director of that project, and that was a great experience. I got to know the Labor Movement in Los Angeles. I got to do a lot of exciting work fighting the closure of a community hospital in Long Beach, working with the Coalition to save General Motors Van Nuys. I worked with what is now the Labor Community Strategy Center, the folks doing the bus stuff, but their origins are out of that auto plant up in Van Nuys. So I got involved in helping them fight the closure of that facility, and it really opened my eyes to the L.A. Labor Movement and what was going on.

GOMEZ

What was your original impression of L.A. when you got here?

OLNEY

Well, L.A., for me, it was fascinating because you couldn't pick a more polar opposite place from Boston, Massachusetts than L.A. I just thought it was one of the most exciting places I'd ever been in terms of the recent history, and of course L.A. is so much part of the American idiom because of Hollywood and all that. I just thought it was a fascinating place, so much bigger and more dynamic than Boston, and the communities of color, and particularly the huge Mexican community, I was astounded. I'll never forget I got here, I was working for this coalition, and the Garment Workers' Union [ILGWU] had a strike going on at a pleating factory in downtown Los Angeles called Southern California Davis Pleating. The strike went on for thirteen months. When I got there, it was like eight months in. I'll never forget going to the picket line. There were like five hundred Mexican women with red and black flags, which is the symbol of the strike, basically a [unclear]. But marching around this factory and I'm like, "Wow. I'm in heaven here. I ain't in Massachusetts anymore," you know. It was incredible, the dynamism, the power of particularly the immigrant thing, and Latino immigrants. And that's really what turned me on about Los Angeles. Of course, I had some relationship to it through my wife, who's a Chicana, so I got to know her family and all that stuff. But I was really turned on by that, and that's what I kind of devoted the rest of my time in Los Angeles to, was try to build that sort of what I called the subjective social dynamite of the million immigrant Latino workers.

GOMEZ

So how did you get involved with the [ILGWU] workers' union?

OLNEY
Well, what happened was I was working for this Coalition Against Plant Shutdowns. Then I decided I needed a little more training, because I was getting a little tired of running into companies telling me, "You don't understand the finances of this business." I said, "I'm going to get an MBA." So I went to UCLA and I got an MBA at the Anderson School. It actually wasn't called the Anderson School; it was called the Graduate School of Management when I started. And so I got an MBA. I was there from 1984 to '87. I got an MBA, and after I finished my MBA, I had been doing volunteer work with the ILGWU, the Garment Workers, so I started working for them as an organizer and a researcher. I produced a sectoral analysis of the whole garment industry in Southern California in around 1986, '87. I worked for them as an organizer. They sent me to Northern California to run their organizing up there, and then my wife and I were up there and then we decided we wanted to come back, so in '89 we came back.
A friend of mine was running the Furniture Workers' office out of Huntington Park, and I went to work for them as an organizer/coordinator. I worked for them for a couple of years. That was also very exciting and challenging. It immersed me in Southeast Los Angeles. I really got to know that part of the city, which is, as you know, a real cauldron of all kinds of demographics and Latino politics, some kind of ugly, as we've seen in the city of Bell. But I got involved in that. In 1991, Jono Shaffer and Bill Regan convinced me to come work at the Janitors. They had just won in June of 1990, was the big June 15th Century City, they had just brought like three, four, five thousand members into the union, but they had no infrastructure to deal with dealing with the needs and interests of those members, so they asked me to come in and set up the representation structure for the new membership. So I became the director of the building service department and Jono was the organizing director. That was kind of the division of labor. So he was responsible for new organizing and I was responsible for making sure the newly organized were involved in the new organizing, as well as dealing with their concerns. So I started working for the union in, like, April of 1991, and I'll never forget meeting with Jono a couple weeks before I started. He said, "Wow,

Peter. You know, here at the Janitors, we expect you to mobilize probably five hundred workers ever week to march."
I was like, "Say what?" You know, I worked for the furniture workers a whole year. We never mobilized more than a hundred of our members for anything. I'm like, "You expect me—?" "Yeah, that's what—." I said, "Okay," and sure enough, you know, for a number of reasons, one, because of the demographics of the workforce, the fact that people were newly organized and had that passion and had seen a difference and change in their lives because of that, and because of their schedules, too, because they start work at 5:00 p.m., so they're free during the day, we did indeed succeed in almost every week turning out hundreds of members to march and protest, to try to conquer more jurisdiction for the union.
GOMEZ
So what are the challenges you faced? You mentioned you were working in Southeast Los Angeles and then later for Justice for Janitors. What are some of the challenges you faced in organizing?
OLNEY
Well, challenge, I mean, I was fortunate to be paired up with a brilliant organizer with the Furniture Workers named Jesus Jimenez, who was a guy who was from Jalisco, a passionate Chivas fan, and a brilliant, just a brilliant, instinctive organizer. You meet the guy, he had a speech impediment, so he would stutter. They used to call him ametralladora. [laughter] Workers would call him ametralladora. So he had this speech impediment, so if he was sitting here talking with us now, he'd stutter, but if he got angry and was on a picket line leading chants or dealing with an employer, strangely enough, his speech would be perfect, and he was a brilliant mariachi singer, even though he had a speech impediment. So, just incredible guy, and he taught me so much about organizing. We would drive around in his car, and he had an asador in the back of his trunk, and we'd go to parks where there'd be soccer games, and he would just show up and he'd pull the asador out, start making carne asada, and he'd organize impromptu organizing meetings right there. I'll never forget meetings in these parks all over Southeast.
So he just taught me a lot about sort of being of the people and really immersing yourself in the lives of these folks. I'd seen that with some other organizers at the ILGW. Their organizing director

there was a brilliant man also, also from Jalisco. These were workers, you know, without probably even a high school education, across the border, had gotten work, because of their work ethic had become, you know, a cutter in the garment industry. Jesus was a skilled upholsterer, which is the most skilled job in furniture. But they had these natural abilities to organize and immerse themselves in the lives of people, and to this day, that's the challenge for a guy like me. Here's this gringo, you know, very foreign, cultural differences are vast, but, you know, being respectful of those qualities in organizers always enabled me to work well in these situations because I knew my own limitations. I can speak Spanish. When I was working at the Janitors, I really didn't speak any English; it was all Spanish all the time. I learned the language, but for me to say that I really understood the culture deep down would be a lie, you know, but what I was smart enough to do was understanding other people's abilities and really either, if I was supervising them, harness them, or if I was working with them, learn from them and partner with them and bring to bear what I knew how to do, which was corporate research or deal with the boss in English, whatever, you know. So that's the kind of stuff that—but to this day, that's what I value in organizing.

I have an organizer I just retired from the ILWU as the organizing director, but my lead organizer in Northern California is another guy from Michoacán, a farm worker thirty years. Even though he had a degree in agronomy from the university in Guadalajara, he came over here as a worker. His ability to just immerse himself in the lives of workers, listen to them, understand what makes people tick and understand when people are afraid because of immigration, even though they wouldn't tell you that, I mean, just—so those are the challenges I faced as a gringo, you know, and you've got to kind of understand your own limitations. You're going to learn a lot, but you also have to learn that sometimes you partner with others who are brilliant at that stuff and you bring to bear your strengths. I've had that happen over and over again in this work in California, where I've been able to work with some incredibly gifted Latino organizers who are just brilliant at moving people, motivating people, which is, after all, what organizing is all about, fundamentally. I mean, you can construct brilliant strategic plans and do this research and, you know, understand the employer and

all this mumbo-jumbo, but if you're not able to motivate and move workers, fundamentally you're going to fail.

GOMEZ

Something you mentioned earlier when I was speaking to you was this—you used this phrase "the natural dynamite" for the workers you were working with.

OLNEY

Yeah. I call it the subjective social dynamite of the immigrant community in L.A., and I wrote an article called "The Rising of the Million," which described the potential here for a million industrial and service workers to—if you could capture that social dynamite and move it, what an incredible force that could be.

Now, to some degree the Janitors did that. Hotel workers have done that. We tried to do it around manufacturing with this project called LAMAP in the early nineties. Ultimately we were unsuccessful, not because of subjective social dynamite isn't there, but because the unions wouldn't throw down and commit. But, yeah, I think it's an amazing thing, and that's what turned me on about L.A. I just saw this—I don't know if you've read Mike Davis' book.

GOMEZ

City of Quartz?

OLNEY

No, he wrote a thing on Southeast L.A. where he actually quotes this concept of the rising of the million. I think it's part of a whole book on Southeast. I forget the name of it, but there's a chapter where he talks about the workers and the rising of the million, this concept. It's worth looking at. He's a wonderful writer and chronicler of Southern California also. I think the Janitors—that's the point I was making to you before, Andrew, that I think the Janitors in many ways, the success of the Janitors in L.A. is a lot because its embedded in that broader social milieu of immigrants.

GOMEZ

How long did you say you worked for J for J?

OLNEY

I worked for J for J from 1991 to '94, so about three years.

GOMEZ

It's interesting. How do you think the movement gets remembered, and how is that different from what you think or how you remember it?

OLNEY
Well, I think the movement gets remembered as a community labor nexus strategy, you know, that here was an organizing based in the Latino community, and remembered because of the sort of strategic insight around rather than allowing the laws to dictate how organizing gets done, fundamentally the organizers said, "Look at the structure of the industry. Look at where de facto power is versus de jure power, and then construct a program based on that." And I think it gets remembered for those two things. What I would add is a couple of other factors which I mentioned to you on the phone, which I think are fundamental. One is this idea of the workers themselves, you know, that this campaign doesn't work everywhere. I use the football versus the soccer metaphor. In other words, in soccer, as you know, the game moves back and forth and there's constant pressure back and forth, and at some point, you never know when, because of the pressure you're putting on your opponent [slaps hands], you break through and score. And so it's a game that's extremely dynamic and fluid and relies on people being in incredible fitness and shape and moving back and forth, tremendous grit. That metaphor versus the U.S. football metaphor, which is these gigantic guys who are basically good for, like, running for fifty yards, then they're gassed, who huddle, who take a time out, and they have a TV time out, then they run a play, and then they stop and regroup and run another play. Well, that's kind of the U.S. working class in a lot of ways, U.S. working class because of history and, you know, various factors. It is not the same dynamic as immigrant workers who have run up against incredible challenges all their lives. Just getting here has been, like, often a huge fucking deal. So for them, this thing of constantly marching and demonstrating and putting pressure on the opponent and never knowing exactly when you're going to break through and win is an appropriate metaphor and works for them, versus trying to do the Janitors, which really relies on that kind of an approach, a soccer approach versus we're going to run one demonstration and win, you know, it works and it doesn't work. They tried to run it in Atlanta and it really didn't work in Atlanta. It's not to say that other workers aren't willing to fight and sacrifice and haven't done so, but I think the particular characteristics of the Latino immigrant community made for that victory in L.A. The media, the music, the

culture, the language, all of that stuff gave a certain coherence and cohesiveness to the movement. I think that needs to be raised up more as the decisive factor.
Then the other thing is the importance of the existing membership, and this is the point around you have a fortress here, where you have New York, Chicago, you have San Francisco, where you have good contracts. You have power with a lot of the employers who were double-breasting here in Southern California. So it wasn't just the way the Walmart campaign is or the fast food, where you have a blank slate where nobody is in the union and you're trying to create something out of whole cloth. This was something that already had power. The geniusness of the Stephen Lerners and the Jonos and whatever was to grasp "We've got power, but we're going to lose that power unless we grow." And the importance here specifically in Los Angeles of the first thing that was done here in the late eighties, when Cecile Richards was the lead organizer, now she is the head of Planned Parenthood, came to town. Jono worked for her and a bunch of these other people you probably interviewed worked for her. The first thing they did was reorganize the downtown market in a contract campaign. In other words, they went in and they ran a traditional "We want better wages and conditions under the existing contract for the downtown membership." And that was important because that was a way to give the existing membership some sense of confidence in the union so that they would become acolytes for the union, rather than people who said, "Fuck the union. Can't do anything for me." And that's an important dynamic that often gets left out of the story, you know, that you cannot—organizing is always based on a lot of assets, and without some of those assets, it's very hard to organize. It's very hard to start something fresh and completely new, you know.
The CIO didn't come out of nowhere; it came out of unions like the ILGWU, the Amalgamated Clothing, Sidney Hillman, David Dubinsky. These were guys who already were in unions that had an industrial structure because of the nature of their industries. Even though they were AFL unions, they put tremendous money and resources into the CIO. The CIO itself, you know, all the Communist and Socialist cadres all over the auto plants and the steel plants—
GOMEZ

Pushed the AFL to the left.
OLNEY
Yeah. So stuff happens based on assets. Rarely do you see asset-free out-of-nowhere organizing happen. The janitors is a good case of that. Janitors, ironically, is a story of what I call fortress unionism, even though that's sort of like—fortress implies we're sitting behind the walls of a castle and hunkering down, versus the janitors, which is the story of growth and expansion.
I actually commend to you this article by this guy Rich Yeselson. I don't know if you've had a chance to look at it. He was a very gifted organizer, worked on the janitors, worked on a bunch of these campaigns. He's in On Democracy, which is an online blog. It's called "Fortress Unionism." His name is Y-e-s-e-l-s-o-n. I encourage you to look at it, because it's sort of counterintuitive. People think of the janitors, janitors isn't about fortress; it's about going out to the community and growing and new and exciting work. Well, it is, but it's based on existing assets, and that's an important thing to understand. A lot of organizers get caught up in these narratives of beautiful new stuff, blank slates, you know, workers who are the lowest-wage workers, the most oppressed workers, "We need to go out and work with these workers." Well, we do, but how do we do that in a meaningful way so that they can get some power?
GOMEZ
Because, I mean, wasn't this an issue? Because after the big victory in Century City, I mean, the national Labor Movement, did they just think that they could replicate that everywhere?
OLNEY
Yeah. Exactly. That's the insight, that it became like a panacea. "Oh, we did the janitors." And it's still—I don't know if you saw this—I did an online forum on In These Times about the fast food—
GOMEZ
Yes, I did see it.
OLNEY
Well, you know, Mary Kay Henry and this guy from the SEIU were saying, "Well, we did the janitors, after all, and nobody thought we could do the janitors." True, but the Janitors is not fast food. The janitors has the existing assets, has the base in downtown Los Angeles, you know. It's not a blank slate, and it's important, so, yeah, your point's exactly right. We can't just take one situation and

think we can superimpose that on everywhere without really understanding the lessons of what happened there.

GOMEZ

Right.

OLNEY

And that's why I think this is so important, because otherwise people, "Oh, yeah, we did it with the janitors. We'll do it with fast-food workers. What could have been harder than janitors?" Well, janitors have been organized. The SEIU was a building service union. That was in its heart and soul, its history. John Sweeney came out of that. George Hardy, his predecessor, they come out of building services. The union had a base there. They had power there, you know. That's important. Otherwise, you go off on some cockamamie stuff.

GOMEZ

Before we get to LAMAP, because I want to ask you about that, I was interested in you saying you brought up Jesus Jimenez, that you worked with. He was a mariachi singer. Could you bring up the importance of demonstrations in L.A. almost functioning as performance pieces in a way?

OLNEY

Yeah. Well, yeah, I mean, the janitors movement as well as the hotel workers, I mean, they've taken a whole 'nother level. We used to do stuff around what it was like to clean a building on the streets, and now the hotel workers have maids making beds in the middle of the main intersections of Los Angeles. So, yeah, there's been a lot of incredible cultural creativity on use of the media. In general in Los Angeles, a lot of stuff is fueled by radio, you know, Piolín, you know. These guys really moved a lot of this stuff on May 1, 2006, that and the hometown associations and Mexican consulate all mixing in together to make for that million-person turnout, you know. So, yeah, the cultural stuff is really, really important. Again, that's something that I don't have any competency, really, to go there. I mean, I'm respectful of if. I kind of understand it. I know the importance of it. But you've got to find people that can dig down and do that stuff. Sports is an important part of this, too, culturally. For LAMAP I commissioned a student at UC Berkeley who's doing his master's thesis, and I had him do a survey of all the soccer clubs and leagues in the L.A. Basin as an analytical piece to try to

understand what are the indigenous forms of organization, the organic forms of organization that exist, you know, because that's a whole tradition in this country, of industrial softball leagues. There's also industrial soccer leagues. So we used to use that too. We used to go to soccer games and try to meet the workers who worked in a particular company and stuff. But that, again, was all stuff that I relied on people like Jimenez or Miguel Machuca or this brilliant organizer named Joel Ochoa, who worked with me on LAMAP.

GOMEZ

So what was the seed idea behind LAMAP? What were you taking from your J for J experience and trying to apply?

OLNEY

Well, the idea was really based on this "Rising of the Million" concept, that you have the power of this community, largely Mexican but also Central American, coupled with this incredible concentration of manufacturing, particularly along the Alameda Corridor. L.A. at the time, there were a million manufacturing workers in the early nineties. There were a million manufacturing workers in L.A. County, and probably half of them were concentrated from downtown to the ports, and over half of the workers in that industry were Latinos, Latino immigrants.

There was a great piece in the L.A. Times called "Blood, Sweat, and Tears," which was written in 1993, which kind of inspired me. This guy did an investigative piece on Latinos in manufacturing and the number of industrial accidents, people losing limbs and lives and stuff in manufacturing, and he did all the demographics around the composition of the workforce. I was working at the Janitors, and I said, "Wow. I've always wanted to organize in manufacturing again, and this is it. I'm going to start this project." So I hooked up with Goetz Wolff, who's a lecturer at the Urban Planning School of Public Policy, who had helped me with industry studies, and we started to launch this project and it started to gather steam. We got the guy from the AFL-CIO, David Sickler, who was the regional director at the time, to take it up as his project, so he sold it to people in Washington, and we started to gather steam. We had ten unions that bought in at $25,000 each for the sort of initial prep research strategic planning phase, and it was pretty exciting.

GOMEZ

You alluded to it earlier, but why didn't it work out?

OLNEY
Well, they jumped in for the strategic planning. We laid out kind of the industries we were going to go after, and then we kind of got caught in the nexus or the shifting terrain around the new AFL-CIO, so if you remember in ’95 at the convention in New York City, Sweeney’s elected. We had founded LAMAP in ’94, and so the question is, does John Sweeney support this LAMAP project. Given our origins were with the regional director of the old AFL [David Sickler], a wonderful guy, universally respected, and a very good friend of the Labor Center, and with Kent Wong, and helped found that construction academy, we were seen as kind of a project of the old, of the Lane Kirkland, Tom Donahue, ironically. The great irony is if Donahue had won, we probably would have gone forward with LAMAP. Because Sweeney won, it’s not a pox on Sweeney. I think Sweeney was a very good leader for the U.S. Labor Movement. The powers that be at the AFL decided to say no to our project. “We’re not going to fund it. We’re not going to push the affiliates to fund it,” and stuff. So in 1997, we basically closed the doors. We did a lot of exciting work. The Teamsters, ironically, were the biggest supporter of the project. They put almost three-quarters of a million dollars into supporting LAMAP, and we ran this very exciting strike of tortilla drivers for Mission Guerrero, which we won. Then we had people salting in tortilla factories in Southern California. We were ready to move into production and organize production. In the Teamsters we got caught in the Hoffa-Carey thing, so that the Hoffa people thought that Carey, the Carey administration, the Teamsters, was funding LAMAP in order to launder money through its campaign, and of course that wasn’t true, but we were investigated by the Department of Labor. They came to my house and took all my financial records and then brought them back six weeks later. Of course we were clean. But they were suspicious of what we were doing, so the people in the Carey administration decided to avoid any suspicion and tinting of their campaign, and they cut us off.
GOMEZ
Right.
OLNEY

They had been big boosters of our campaign. We worked very closely with Teamsters Local 63, which is the big local out in the Inland Empire there. [interruption]

GOMEZ

Okay. So after LAMAP folds, so what do you do?

OLNEY

Well, one of the unions that was involved in Los Angeles Manufacturing Action Project was the International Longshoremen Warehouse Union. They were one of the ten unions that supported the sort of start-up research phase, and they offered me the job of organizing director in December of 1997. They had had a convention in June of 1997 in Hawaii, where the union committed to 30 percent of its budget would go to organizing and that they would hire an organizing director. So they offered me that job in 1997, so I've been basically with the union ever since, and just retired in November of this year. But within that sixteen-year period, I think there were two and a half years when I was at the Institute for Labor Employment at the University of California. I was based in Berkeley, but at that time it was a statewide initiative, and that was a great experience because I got to spend those two and a half years doing a lot of projects, but one of the most important ones was a comprehensive research project on the employment trends and structural changes in the marine supply chain, which we produced in 2004, and then I took that back to the union with me, with the intention of using that as the sort of template for organizing.

GOMEZ

We talked a bit about this on the phone. So you moved to San Francisco. Talk a bit about the difference between organizing in Southern California and organizing in Northern California.

OLNEY

Well, first of all, everything in Southern California is bigger. The numbers are bigger. The communities are bigger. Every community here is, you know, the second or third largest Mexican city in the world, depending on what Guadalajara looks like on any given day. So, you know, just the demographics are so massive here. I felt also like the willingness to experiment and try new things here is greater. It's less of a closed kind of community.

San Francisco in some ways reminds me a little bit of Massachusetts or Boston, you know, a lot more sort of people sort of growing up in the parish and graduating into city politics and that kind of thing. Less open, less willing to try new things than Southern California. I just found the atmosphere here much more open, people willing to accept you on the quality of your ideas and your initiatives rather than, "Were you in St. Anne's Parish? St. Cecilia's? Who do you know out there?" That kind of thing. I just find it much more exciting and interesting, much more dynamic down here, and I've always argued that. I think it's funny, after the Rodney King stuff happened and some of the turmoil down here, I think even some of the sort of self-satisfied Leftists in the Bay Area began to realize that L.A. was really an exciting place to be, should be respected rather than sort of denigrated. People constantly talk about, "Wouldn't you rather live in the north?" I always say, no, I'd much rather live in Southern California. They kind of look at you like you're a zombie or something. There's something wrong with you, you know.

GOMEZ

Could you talk a bit about what was it like going back to a university setting? Because your previous experience, you were at Harvard during the Antiwar Movement, you know, there's revolutionary fervor in the air. You go back in the early 2000s, I guess, to go back into Berkeley.

OLNEY

I went to business school in 1984. I was here from '84 to '87. In Massachusetts, before I left Massachusetts, I had gone back to get my degree in Spanish. I studied at the University of Massachusetts in Boston with a bunch of Cuban immigrants, émigrés, who were actually progressive. They were not gusanos. They had been part of the revolution and then they were kind of disciples of Camilo Cienfuegos, and they were sort of left of Castro, and left when Cienfuegos died in that plane crash.

So I had professors from that wave of immigration. They were great. They were both Left and also brilliant. So I studied Spanish literature and language, and got my B.A. in Spanish at the University of Massachusetts in Boston before I came out here. Then the MBA thing was great because it was a chance to do sort of what I call "study behind enemy lines." I got to learn about accounting

and strategic planning and financial management and marketing and all these sort of management tools, and I learned the discourse and the language, which is half the game, you know. So that was very helpful and it's always been very helpful to me.

GOMEZ

By the time you're back at Berkeley, though, did you find that your students were more apathetic about the Labor Movement?

OLNEY

Oh, when I went to the Institute?

GOMEZ

Yeah.

OLNEY

I don't know if I would say that, Andrew. I mean, I wasn't doing a lot of teaching. I would do lectures here and there for professors. My role was mainly to coordinate programs like union training programs or this research stuff that I would gather professors together to do research. I didn't do a lot of teaching of students per se. I would meet occasionally. I think I'm a little hard pressed to even assess that for you.

GOMEZ

All right. Think about the past several years. Could you talk a bit about the Union Movement and how it's sort of aligned itself with other related movements, like Occupy Wall Street and the Immigrant Rights Movement, and the importance of that? It's kind of revitalized the Labor Movement.

OLNEY

I was very inspired by the Occupy Movement and I really pushed hard to get unions to take that moment seriously. I actually argued very strenuously with the AFL-CIO organizing department that they should convene a conference call and specifically talk about Occupy, and we actually did it, but it just didn't resonate with a lot of the unions. I think they were very skeptical of it. And then the moment kind of passed too. It partly was this problem of occupying public space, and that was a real challenge. But I thought in terms of shaping the discourse around the economics and the haves and the have-nots, I thought it was brilliant, a brilliant moment, and some unions took advantage of it and saw the importance of it. In New York I think the unions played a major role in preventing the Zuccotti Park from being cleared early on, and I know in San

Francisco we were out there on the Embarcadero preventing the removal of Occupy San Francisco and succeeded in doing so for quite a while, preventing the mayor from dislodging the Occupy folks. So we played a role in that there. In Oakland it was a little more trying because Oakland Occupy was pretty sketchy, edgy, and it posed a real challenge to our union because they were insisting on protesting outside of marine terminals, and the challenges that our guys, because of our history and our integrity, don't cross picket lines, so they were using the fact that we have this sort of solid situation at a key node of international commerce and constantly throwing up these protests to shut down the port, and put our union in a very difficult position because they weren't consulting with us. In fact, they didn't care what we thought. They thought it was their right and destiny to shut down the ports and shut down international commerce. So it became a real challenge in the Bay Area.

GOMEZ

I would imagine for the Union Movement that was part of the skepticism, right? It was kind of like this amorphous movement that was hard to rein in, I guess.

OLNEY

Yeah. I mean, on the other hand, you know, the Occupy Movement and the specter of Occupy played an important role for us in settling our situation in grain at this export terminal up in Longview, Washington. It was the threat of an Occupy sort of invasion of that port and that town, and that really was what spurred the governor of Washington to get involved and to get a settlement, was the specter of Occupy showing up. So to some degree it played to our advantage in that situation. In fact, the first thing the employer said after the ink was dry on the settlement was, "Well, what are you going to do about stopping Occupy?" That was their preoccupation. Of course, we didn't control the Occupy at all, and that was kind of the beauty of the thing, because in some ways having a force out there that you couldn't control became an asset, so some of that stuff wasn't all bad.

GOMEZ

I mean, that sort of had its moment, but right now the immigrant rights thing is still a big deal. You go to SEIU-USWW, there's no difference between the Labor Movement and the immigrants rights.

[laughs] Could you talk about that, how the Labor Movement tried to sort of align itself with it, and what do you think the impact of that—

OLNEY

Well, I think, I mean, this harkens back to a moment in 1994 when we were doing LAMAP. If you remember—I don't know if you were here then, but Pete Wilson was governor. He was running for his second term, and Kathleen Brown, the present governor's sister, was running, and it was a pretty hotly contested race. She had a shot to win. Prop 187, which was this diabolical kind of Sensenbrenner-like or Arizona-like immigration reform, it would have been a total clampdown on California immigrants, was on the ballot. So some of us in the Labor Movement thought, "Well, we've got to ally with the immigrant rights folks and oppose this thing." It was very interesting because at the time the SEIU, the real politic folks at SEIU, their political guy named Dean Tipps and Eliseo Medina decided, "Oh, no, we can't be seen marching with these Mexican immigrants because then we're going to throw the election to Pete Wilson because "Encino Man," this white Reagan working-class guy in Encino in the Valley, is going to turn against us and vote for Pete Wilson." And I'll never forget being in a meeting and this guy Dave Sickler, who was this good ol' boy from Golden, Colorado, who had been a Coors worker, who was the AFL-CIO regional director, gets up in a meeting with all these union leaders, says, "You guys are wrong. If we do not march with these immigrants, we're going to set back the Labor Movement twenty, thirty, forty years, by a generation. We have go to march with them, Mexican flags and all."

GOMEZ

Right.

OLNEY

So 20,000 union members did end up marching against 187, and that was really a seminal, important moment of people who had the vision to see that, you know, we've got to be part of this social ferment, this subjective social dynamite, or we're going to set back the Labor Movement. So to some degree the development of L.A. labor and development of L.A. politics is really driven by that nexus between the immigrant community and labor, but it hasn't always been a clear path and it hasn't always been the leaders of the

unions you would expect, who show them the light and show them the way.

GOMEZ

I can imagine it's been difficult. I mean, the AFL doesn't have the best track record.

OLNEY

No. No, it doesn't. And that's why the stand that was taken by Sickler and others was so fabulous. And also don't forget that IRCA passes in 1986 under Reagan, and it has this double-edged sword. On the one hand, it has employer sanctions. On the other hand, it has this path to amnesty and citizenship. So again this guy Sickler and others saw the moment. They said, "Hey, yeah, the law is flawed, but let's use the part of the law that works to our benefit." So we started this organization called the California Immigrant Workers Association, CIWA. It was based in the labor's office over in mid-Wilshire. They started working with people to legalize, and got deep into that, several unions, the ILGWU, Hotel, other unions got heavily involved in that process also. That was a way to, again, wed the Labor Movement with the Immigrant Movement.

GOMEZ

Now that you're retired, you've seen the Labor Movement through so many different iterations over the course of your life. When you think about the future of the Labor Movement in this country, are you an optimist?

OLNEY

Oh, yeah, very much so. I mean, I think that the challenge is this thing about the old and the new. How do you take what we have, which is still considerable, 15 million people, tons of money, buildings, all kinds of assets, how do you take the existing assets in organizations that are oftentimes very crusty, very conservative, very slow to move, very structurally impeded by their own setups, how do you get those organizations to move and change? And then how do you take the folks that are doing the new stuff and get them to understand don't write off the old, tired, white Labor Movement, understand the contradictions within that movement, understand history and how the old has always played a role in birthing the new, and figure out how do you work with that? That's our big challenge, I think.

So we're going to need new forms of organization. We can't get hung up on collective bargaining as the end-all and be-all. For instance, the port truckers is a great story. Here are 13,000 drivers down in the ports of L.A.-Long Beach, you know, huge strategic workforce that's crucial. If you're going to think about organizing warehousing in the Inland Empire and South Bay or whatever, you've got to have those trucks. You've got to have the link between the docks and the warehouse, and without that, it makes it very hard to organize those facilities because your leverage in strategic power is very limited.

GOMEZ

Yes.

OLNEY

So you've got to organize those truckers. Well, those truckers have historically done a lot of organizing on their own. They've self-organized into associations of independent owner-operators that wielded power, you know, shut down the ports, raised the cost of moving a container, reduced the wait lines in front of the terminals, based on industrial action, even though they're not workers per se statutorily.

So the question is how do you organize those people, and the Change-to-Win folks took a valiant—they took a good shot at it by constructing this whole regime where they were going to force an employer-employee model on the port through using the power of the city of Los Angeles and the Harbor Commission. And they even got it through the Harbor Commission that if you were going to operate doing [unclear], moving containers into port, it had to be a truck with an employee of an employer, the argument being in order to deal with environmental issues and have late-model trucks and upgrade their emission control systems, you needed capital. You can't rely on independent owner-operators to do this. Well, it was a brilliant idea to solve this issue of how do you organize owner-operators. The problem is that it ran aground on the Ninth Circuit, and they ruled it basically preempted by federal labor law and federal maritime law. So here you are struck. You don't have these truckers organized. Is it impossible to organize them without that gambit? No. You go to those truckers. A lot of them like being independent owner-operators. It doesn't mean they like making minimum wage after all is said and done in terms of paying for their

trucks and their gas and their insurance and their tires. So you have to go to them. Again it's this question of orientation and ideology. Go to those truckers and build an association of owner-operators. Have the Labor Movement fund and bankroll a lot of that stuff, not be hung up on, "We have to get collective bargaining," or, "It has to be statutory employees." That has to be done. That's a crucial campaign. And I would argue it can be done. The volatility in that employment is always there, and you have these incredibly—I hate to use the word—entrepreneurial folks who are, like, tough, resilient, and resourceful, who can be organized and have organized themselves historically.

So that's an example of a place where some of these issues of ideology and orientation become crucial, because I would argue we've spent a lot of time over the last twenty or thirty years kind of developing our capacity to do research and do financial analysis and understand the structures of industries and make these great regulatory environmental moves, but a lot of times the thing we don't have is the ground game. We don't have those organizers like the Jesus Jimenezes or Joel Ochoas or the Miguel Machucas who are absolutely immersed in the culture of workers and understand how they think and what you have to do to motivate them. And without that, I think we've got a lot of problems.

GOMEZ

How does this relate to, then, the effort to organize service workers, then? I mean, this is the big issue now with McDonald's workers, Walmart workers. How does the union—

OLNEY

Well, it relates in the sense, I would argue, that unless we're willing to throw down over the long haul, in other words, not a year's investment and see what happens amongst service workers but a ten-year plan to build in every major metropolitan area a fast-food workers' association that would be permanent and ongoing, funded by unions to deal with wage-an-hour or abuses on the job, to build organization in individual fast-food chains, to move a program for a metro increase in the minimum wage, unless you're willing to make that kind of commitment versus a year of doing a lot of flashy activity and a lot of media with good message and good narrative, but what there is there, that's the concern I have with that campaign and the Walmart campaign.

GOMEZ
Right. There's also a battle with public perception, right? I mean, the public is now probably more skeptical of unions than ever. How do you go about fixing that?
OLNEY
Well, I think, I mean, dramatic winning battles, high-profile winning battles can do it. Chicago Teachers Union is a great story of a union that spent two years preparing for their contract by building community-labor alliances with parents, and when they finally struck, they won the battle of public opinion in a very difficult situation. You can imagine with poor and working folk, a teachers'' strike, not only what it does to the education of their kids, but they have no childcare and can't work. I mean, that's a huge deal. So the fact that they won, that they won the battle for public opinion is a testimony to that kind of work I've been talking about, versus the situation in Northern California with BART, where the union did not do that, so they end up the public opinion turns against them in not only that particular situation, but has driven a lot of the negative public opinion around unions in general because of the failure to do that kind of community-based building among the riders, the working-class people who are riding those trains. So it can be done, but it requires long-term preparation and commitment. All the great labor struggles have always been founded on that kind of—you know, the Teamsters UPS thing, the guy who ran a lot of that program is a very good friend of mine. He started it two years ahead of time, before the expiration, preparing the locals and the members to run this high-profile campaign around "Part-time America Doesn't Work," the thematic that was developed around that in 1997. But there are wonderful examples of victory and positive results, but it's all about a lot of preparation, a long-term commitment, and fundamentally an orientation towards the base and not towards media, strategies, and narrative-changing stuff, but towards working with workers, your existing membership, working with community, all of that needs to be done, and there's no quick fixes.
GOMEZ
Right. Right. So to wrap up, last question. So what do you think about the future of Justice for Janitors nationally and how it could

influence the direction of the Labor Movement? How do you see that?

OLNEY

Well, I think Justice for Janitors was a fabulous campaign and remains an important issue. I'm not up to speed on their latest, you know, work, but I think the example, if examined profoundly and in all its facets, rather than limited to, you know, certain facets, I think if examined in a holistic fashion and really taking into account everything involved in those wins, I think it's a huge demonstration of what can be done with labor. It's actually, ironically—that's why I want you to read this article, "Fortress Unionism," because it's very controversial and a lot of people react to it as this is a recipe for just turning the lights off and going to sleep.

GOMEZ

Right.

OLNEY

I don't think so. I think it's a recipe for doing a concrete analysis of concrete conditions, understanding your assets and your strengths so that you can grow. There's this thing in Marxism called freedom and necessity, and I think he talks about it in the "Grundrisse," but it's basically the concept if you understand necessity, then you're free because you understand the constraints, so you're free to act. If you don't understand your necessity, then you're going to get fucked.

GOMEZ

Right.

OLNEY

And I'm afraid if we don't understand Justice for Janitors in its entirety, then we're not able to apply the lessons because we didn't really learn the lessons. And that's my story around the Janitors. I think it's a fabulous case of brilliant organizers coupled with this strategic social dynamite making history, but it's in the context of existing power of the union, you know.

GOMEZ

Right.

OLNEY

I mean, you know the Century City story where the police riot happens and Gus Bivona, President of SEIU 32-BJ, says, "Hey, if

you don’t settle that situation, I’m going to pull my buildings in New York.”

GOMEZ

Right.

OLNEY

That’s crucial. Without some of that, the thing doesn’t happen.

GOMEZ

Perfect. [End of interview]

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