A TEI Project

Interview of Ernesto Guerrero

Contents

1. Transcript

1.1. SESSION ONE (May 22, 2014)

GOMEZ

Okay. This is Andrew Gomez. It's May 22nd [2014]. I'm here with Ernesto Guerrero at the SEIU-UHW in Commerce, California. Ernesto, if we can start by telling me your date of birth and where you were born.

GUERRERO

Is January 12th, 1969, and I was born in Mexico City.

GOMEZ

What did your parents do?

GUERRERO

Well, back in the day, I remember my dad, he used to work in a textile factory. He was the mechanic of the factory. And then my mom was—she took care of the home. She was at home. But then I think the biggest change in our family lives was when my mom decided to start working. She started working for El Seguro Social, which is kind of like the medical healthcare system in Mexico. She started working there as a medical assistant, and then obviously that improves the economy of the family a little bit, and then obviously my mom wants my dad to leave that factory and being a mechanic, so he also started working at the El Seguro Social. And like I said, I think that was a major step, a major change in our family because then now the economy was a little better, and not only that, my dad had more time to spend with us because it wasn't a full-day schedule. But then my dad, for whatever reasons, he started getting involved with the union at El Seguro Social, actually became the shop steward, became the shop steward El Seguro Social at the clinic where he started working at. And I just remember they had this very complicated system of electing shop stewards. They run campaigns, they have to print their own flyers, crazy stuff.

GOMEZ

Like a national election?

GUERRERO

Kind of like whoa. [laughter] Just for that small clinic. I mean, it was a small clinic for me, but, honestly, he used to work on that clinic, Clinica 75, who at the time was the biggest, the largest clinic in Latin America. It's huge. I mean, now I can see it's a huge

place. And I remember seeing him coming home with a bunch of flyers, and, "What is that?" And he's like, "Well, this is for my election for shop steward, my planilla," his [unclear]. Probably they have the shop steward and they have some other positions there. From there, he started really getting involved with the union as shop steward, but then something that I don't really, really understand in terms of politics, I just remember he's saying, "Well, now we have to go to this campaign to push this person, this politician to be elected." And now I understand. Of course that's how they used to run politics through the union, which is similar to what we do now. But he was very [unclear] on that.

GOMEZ

How man siblings did you have?

GUERRERO

I have two sisters and one brother.

GOMEZ

Are you the oldest, the youngest?

GUERRERO

I'm the oldest.

GOMEZ

The oldest, okay. Thinking about your father, then, talking to other people that I've interviewed for this series, they grew up in Central America, and organizing there in the seventies and eighties was very, very dangerous. Could you talk a bit about how it was like in Mexico City for your father?

GUERRERO

Well, definitely it's not like Central America. It's different. As shop steward, he—I mean, Seguro Social used to be one of those nice places to work, nice employer and with some of the best contracts in the industry. So as shop steward, he doesn't have to struggle too much other than enforcing the contract. I don't believe it was kind of dangerous at all. I think when he started getting involved with the El PRI, P-R-I, and going to some small towns in Estado de Mexico, Mexico State, at the beginning, wasn't any issues, but then as times were changing in Mexico, it became more challenging to push the PRI candidates through those little towns because then they start dealing with towns, little places, little towns or places, more places where the PRI candidate wasn't the only candidate, so they started having more challenges. Nothing crazy, nothing that, I believe—I mean, I'm not sure, but I don't think nothing that puts his life in danger. It's just the political arena in Mexico start changing. He was part of that transition. I remember myself, growing up and started thinking more about like, okay, what kind of options we have here? PRI can't be the only one, and learning about some of the political parties, and having arguments with my dad then, like, "Why PRI? They're stealing money. They're destroying the country." And my dad, "Whoa, but we have the [unclear] the way it is." Like, "Exactly. That is the problem." Those kind of arguments back and forth. But that was pretty much kind of like that major things, you know.

GOMEZ

I mean, you followed in your father's footsteps eventually. Now you've been working—

GUERRERO

I mean, I hated it. I hated politics, because to me, for a kid that was—I blamed politics and the union for the time my dad, you know, spent with us at home. Right? I mean, I remember those early days when he used to go to work in the morning. By the time we

come back from school, he always come back a second time, and we have the rest of the afternoon. I mean, you know, it was like family time. But now being involved with the union, he was always in meetings, he was always in campaigns, and I hated it.

GOMEZ

Because I remember you telling me that when you were growing up you couldn't care less about politics or unions or anything like that.

GUERRERO

Yeah, in a way, in a very structured way, right? Because, again, that relationship between having my dad or not at home for me was strictly the union and politics. That was the reason.

GOMEZ

What do you remember about growing up in Mexico City in the seventies?

GUERRERO

Well, I mean, right now what I remember, it was a happy time in Mexico. It used to be the Mexico where you can do a lot of things, you can go anywhere, you don't have that much crime. I mean, it wasn't that crazy. We always complain about corrupt politicians, corrupt public employees, things like that.

GOMEZ

That's just the rich Latin American tradition. [laughs]

GUERRERO

But that's just the regular things. It's like nothing really major like these days. I can't even feel safe if I go to Mexico because it's dangerous, right? So I remember it was a happy, happy life. I personally, we never have a lot of money, but we were able to live, go to school, have whatever we need through my parents' jobs. And I remember having the liberty to just express myself, and even though I hated politics, I remember since when I was twelve years old, I organized my first strike in my middle school.

GOMEZ

How did that work?

GUERRERO

Well, something that doesn't even have to do with politics, is the principal of the school, they cancel a festival for the kids for April 30th. In Mexico, it's the El Día del Niño. And from nowhere, they just cancelled it. A few weeks later, then they organize a festival for the teachers, so they expect us then to be—you're sitting there on the patio watching other kids dancing and doing things for the teachers. To me, that was, like, insane, like, "What the hell are these people thinking?" [Gomez laughs.] And myself with a couple of friends, like, "No, we don't do this. Let's talk to everybody. Let's bring everybody to a couple of classrooms, and we don't go." And that's what we did. Pretty much we brought the entire school to two classrooms. We packed those two classrooms with everybody and we locked the doors, and we boycotted that festival, you know. [laughter]

GOMEZ

So you didn't want it, but you were an organizer from birth, basically. [laughs]

GUERRERO

But at that time, I didn't process that that was kind of politics, that I was organizing. It was kind of natural. I was like, "This is something that is not right. We have to fix something that is not right." Of course, the consequences came up later when we were almost expelled from the school. But I remember this—I hated politics and I hate politics

and I hated that my dad was into politics, but when the principal called the parents of the group of kids who organize this, right, I remember—I never forget this for my dad. The principal was telling the parents, "I can't believe your kids, they were doing this and this and this and that." Of course I already told my dad what happened. So my dad just stand up and said, "Look. Wait a minute. Let me ask you this. That doesn't sound right. Why in the first place these kids did this?" And the principal couldn't answer, couldn't articulate an answer. And then my dad, he told him, "You know why? Because is that right that you cancelled the festival for the kids?" "Oh, yeah," whatever excuse. "And is that right that then you expect our kids to be on the patio in the sun, celebrating teachers? Is that okay?" And then the rest of the [unclear] is, "Yeah, that is not okay." So I felt like the way he backed me up, my god. [laughter] We ended up staying in school. Nothing happened to us. And, again, the way I understand that right now is like, wow, I organized and I have somebody who backed me up, too, who was my dad. But back then, it was like that was great, like give me again—I think that give me the freedom of, yeah, I can express myself, and just do it like that.

GOMEZ

So when you were in school, what kind of school did you go to? Was it a—

GUERRERO

Public school.

GOMEZ

—Catholic school or just a regular public school?

GUERRERO

No, no, no. Just regular public school.

GOMEZ

So when you were a teenager, what were you thinking about doing with your life?

GUERRERO

It was crazy. I mean, probably like a lot of kids, I was dreaming of flying planes, things like that. I even tried to enroll in the military just to become a pilot. Didn't make it. Somebody offers me, "Well, you didn't make it to the flying school, but you can go to the army, and then you can translate." I said, "No, no, no. I don't like the army. I like flying planes." [laughter] And that was the only reason. Thank God I never getting accepted to that school, because just the way I am, I couldn't take those directions from those folks, you know.

GOMEZ

Well, you ended up going into school for business, no?

GUERRERO

I ended up in, yeah, Escuela de Turismo, administration and tourism industry in Mexico. That was at Politécnico. And obviously, again going back to politics and organizing, when I started school, there was a big issue with the porros. I don't know if you're familiar with what the porros is. They called it porraficial, students who spend their entire lives at school, subsidized by the government or by the schools, who knows who, but by that time they were pretty much like a mafia in the school, where they sell protection to you, you have to pay, you have to give them money in order for them not to do anything to you. So they have all these kind of privileges. They had an office in the school. And again it's just going back to like, "This is not right. This is not okay," I joined a group who start fighting against the porros. We ended up organizing a strike at Escuela de

Turismo, and we get rid of the porros. The principal or the chancellor of that school was very involved with the porros, so they get rid of the chancellor, but they get rid of us too. [laughs] So that's how I wasn't able to even graduate from Politécnico.

GOMEZ

So thinking about your family, because I know you left to the United States soon after, where was the majority of your family? Because I know you had grandparents that were already here in the United States.

GUERRERO

Well, my Grandpa Anaclieto, who just pass away a year and a half ago, he was part of the Bracero Program back in the sixties in Salinas and Bakersfield, so I believe since back then he had that thing of coming back and forth from Mexico City, from Mexico here, right? But when I was a teenager, they were already here. They spend like two, three years here, then they went back to Mexico, all my life that I can remember. So I was like fifteen, sixteen, eighteen. Then they spend a lot of time here, like a long time. Then it was kind of like clear for the family that they were planning to stay for good, right? And to be honest, it wasn't my plan to just come here and stay. It wasn't really my plan. I started working in Mexico City, had a decent job with a p_____ company. But I was young, very young, trying to find myself. I remember my aunt, my brother, they really want to come here, right? They talked a lot with my grandpa. I almost didn't talk to them, never talked to them, but I talked a lot to them, and they were like, "Hey, let's go, let's go, let's go. Let's go to Los Angeles. Let's go to Los Angeles. We can do a farm, we can work, we can do all that stuff. We can learn English," right? I think that learning English clicked and called my attention. [laughter] I said, "Okay, let's go learn English." To be honest, it was my decision, and I think I'm fortunate or privileged to say this, because I know a lot of people, most people came here because they need, looking for something. I didn't need it, and that wasn't part of my decision. I decided to immigrate just because I have nothing else to do, or at least that's what I was thinking. So, came here and obviously land in my grandpa's, grandparents' house, but then I started realizing, like, what the hell I did. It's like I was leaving a decent, comfortable life in Mexico, having a job, and then I start here working in a sweatshop. I remember my first payday, I was so excited because I'm going to get dollars, my first dollar payday. And after working from seven a.m. to seven p.m., Monday through Friday, and then from seven a.m. to twelve p.m. on Saturday, lined off to get my pay. I received $40. Forty dollars, that was my first week's pay.

GOMEZ

Because when you came here, you were eighteen, no?

GUERRERO

I was eighteen.

GOMEZ

So could you tell me a bit about where you were working, the textile factory you were working?

GUERRERO

Yeah, it was a factory. I can't remember the name. [unclear], one of those sweatshops that you see in downtown L.A. on 7th Street. And it was just trimming, just kind of like doing the finishing of the clothing. They used to pay—I think they're still doing that—by piece. So you finish one piece, they pay you a few cents, and that's how it works or how it used to work. I never did my math, I guess, or it never crossed my mind that the faster,

the more money you get. So that's probably why the first week, it was like $40. [unclear]. [laughs] So I was able to buy only my pass for the public transportation, for the bus, and that was it. It was challenging.

GOMEZ

Who were you working with? Who else worked there? Where were they from?

GUERRERO

Well, I find a lot of those sweatshops, you have, like, families working, right? I remember there, there were, like, three families who—I don't want to say controlled the place, but three families who run that place in terms of like you had a family, who the whole family were the experts on the single-needle sewing machine. So you have all that family which is at the beginning of the production. They have another family who just to be like the ones who do the specialized sewing machines. They [unclear] and all those pieces, right? And they have another family, who kind of like they would do the finishing, the ironing and finishing the whole thing. So, families from Michoacán. I think most of them, I think everybody was from Michoacán. Well, this [unclear] right now. Yeah, they were from Michoacán. Guess where I met my wife?

GOMEZ

Oh, you met her—

GUERRERO

I met her and she's from Michoacán. [laughter] So I just realized that right now. I think my wife is from Michoacán because all of them were from Michoacán.

GOMEZ

So you came when you were eighteen.

GUERRERO

Mm-hmm.

GOMEZ

That was your first time in the States, right? You had never visited your grandparents before?

GUERRERO

No, I never visited, no, because they were immigrants, too. I mean, like I think they gather documents, right, through the amnesty. So before that, again they were here a few months, sometimes a couple of years, but then they went back. But when amnesty happens, then they decided to apply and to stay.

GOMEZ

So what was your impression of Los Angeles when you first got there?

GUERRERO

I mean, obviously, first it's like obviously looks different from Mexico City in terms of like everything a little better, better vehicle, better—

GOMEZ

The pollution's the same. [laughs]

GUERRERO

Pollution is the same. I mean, yeah. Well, living in Mexico City, pollution is worse over there, but that is still the same. But honestly, it's like living in Mexico City and having the life that I used to have, I started to think very soon, like the first two weeks, I started seeing like, okay, yeah, the U.S., L.A. is good, but it definitely is not as good as being in your own country, in your own city. Again, we never had a lot of money, but we have

like a decent kind of like lower-middle-class life. And coming here and seeing like, oh, shit. Instead of living in my own bedroom, having my own bedroom, I have to sleep in the living room of a very tiny, small house because that's the only thing we can afford. Of course, I mean, you see the nice houses, you see the nice places, but at the same time, reality kicks. It's like, okay, those are nice, but you can't afford that stuff. Then most of the people that you start meeting and that you know that they also came from Mexico kind of for those nice houses. We all live in small houses, small apartments, bunch of people. That piece, that was new to me. That's why I probably didn't like that much that change from Mexico City to the U.S.

GOMEZ

Yeah. I mean, and you came from a situation that you were were decent, like you said, lower-middle-class. I've spoken to other immigrants who come from poverty, and they still miss it, because back home they were somebody and they had their friends, they had their stuff.

GUERRERO

Yep.

GOMEZ

But here you're anonymous.

GUERRERO

And you don't. Oops, I'm sorry. [telephone interruption]

GUERRERO

Yeah. Right here you don't have—pretty much you don't have anything. I mean, it's been now over twenty-five years and you're still going out there. And my next-door neighbor, "Hey, Danny, hey, how you doin'?" "Good. How are you?" "Good." "All right. See you later." That's the interaction, for the most part. You know what I mean? That piece is way different. Obviously, when you go to Mexico, it's like the whole street knows you and you know them, and you talk to them. You interact in a real way, and that's different. Obviously, your friends, you have friends here, but I find—and, you know, for a long time, I thought it was just us, the immigrants who came here, trying to learn the culture, the language, but the more you meet people and you get to know people, it's like it's harder here to have longtime friends. For whatever reason, people are just busy doing their own things.

GOMEZ

What part of Los Angeles were you living in?

GUERRERO

It's a place—it's Los Angeles, but it's really close to Huntington Park, between kind of like the edge of Huntington Park and Los Angeles, by the Alameda Corridor.

GOMEZ

Okay. So you're working at that sweatshop. It's a terrible place to work. How long do you stay there?

GUERRERO

I stay there for—let me see. It was like about four years. But six months after I started working there, obviously the forty bucks a week wasn't enough to do anything. And then my way of doing things, I like to be independent, so I couldn't afford, myself, to stay that long in my grandparents' house. I mean, you didn't have to pay that much of a rent, but then you have to take whatever Grandma say, and then like, oh, food is good, but at same

time you can't do whatever you want to do. At eighteen years old, it's like, I'm sorry, but I don't think this is my thing. So I think it was like around six months later, I became the manager of that place. That's my dark side of the Labor Movement, because I was manager in a sweatshop. Can you believe that?

GOMEZ

Could you talk about that? How was that?

GUERRERO

Yeah, I mean, I can talk about it. But that's kind of like around the same time when I just like, "Grandma, Grandpa, thank you very much, but it's time for me to immigrate to my own place." [laughs] So it was a very small apartment, no furniture, just a couple of blankets, and that was it, but it was free. [laughs] That was the thing. Yeah, I mean, if you ask me, I don't know how to use a sewing machine. I don't know how to use it. But obviously I learned how the production works in the sweatshops, and I learned as fast as I can, so the owner, the Korean guy, he give me that position for my own place. I mean, it's tough in many ways. For me—and I'm not playing this as a victim. It's just like it was tough because I know that everything that we were doing there was wrong. Just like you know that, right? I organize the strike in my school because I think what was happening was wrong, and I fight about it. I organize a strike in my Politécnico because I thought was happening was wrong, and I did something about it. But here, I'm part of making things bad for people for the sole purpose of the business of this guy. So I mean, you feel horrible. First of all, it's like there's no labor law apply in that place, so nobody got paid by the hour. I remember I had to punch in the timecards for the employees just in case Labor Department show up. "Oh, yeah, we have timecards for everybody." But everybody got paid by the piece, that kind of stuff. No overtime, of course. Working people from seven to seven. That's twelve-hour shifts. And I remember when we had like big productions, like big number of clothing that we have to produce, sometimes we even keep people all night long working, so twelve hours. At seven, we had to close everything down, shut down everything. Tried to make it look like, yes, everybody is going home. We keep people inside, doors locked, because the security of the building want to make sure that everything was locked. Then once everybody was gone, then they turn on the lights and keep working again all night long. We brought just some food, Pollo Loco, for them, and they stay all night long. Sometimes I had to stay, too, just to make sure the production was working. That's horrible, man.

GOMEZ

So what was your relationship with your workers? Was your wife still working [unclear]?

GUERRERO

No, no, she wasn't. She joined that place probably like my last year in that place. But my relationship was I was the guy in charge of moving the production through the different sections. I knew how to put together the pieces. And it's a very weird relationship, how a manager work in a place like that, because just by the piece, people need manning nonstop, nonstop. So you have to keep feeding the line, the production line constantly, make sure that they have enough to do. At the same time, you have to create those relationships when where there's not enough work, you have to let people go because there's not enough work for everybody, but keep them somehow so when we have increase in production, then we call them back, "Hey, we have work right here."

GOMEZ

At peak production, how many people were working there?

GUERRERO

Let me see. I suppose like about forty, fifty people. And then in low production times, we had like five. From forty, fifty, to like five, six just to finishing small [unclear]. But you need to have them [unclear] to be able to bring everybody back. So that was kind of that relationship, that you need to make sure you have enough people when you have production peak, and make sure that you let them go when nothing was happening. So that's why I say those were my dark side, times.

GOMEZ

So why did you leave? What ended up happening that you left?

GUERRERO

I remember it was—again, I didn't feel good doing all that stuff. I remember now talking to my wife after we get married. And one night I was there and there was an accident with the boiler. The boiler that provide the steam for the irons almost exploded, right? And I just remember thinking about it, and the next day I talked to my—and I was there. I stayed that night. And I just remember talking to her like, "Can you imagine what could happen if something like that, like the boiler exploded, then the doors are locked? Nobody can get out of that place." I mean, that's crazy. So obviously those kind of things didn't really make me feel proud about being in that place. And then I think what really pushed me out is that there's not even loyalty from the owner to its employees, right? It's like the only interest from that guy was production, production, production, making money, making money. And I remember, like, it was close to December, [unclear] in December, the production were like really, really low. And he told me, "Hey, I think we're going to have to close the factory for at least two weeks until we have something back." I said, "Okay, that sounds good. I can go to Mexico, take my vacation, so just give me my two-weeks' vacation." And I remember he was saying like, "Well, what are you talking about?" Like, "Oh, yeah, you're going to close. You're still going to pay me, right?" Because I was getting [unclear]. He told me, "No. No, I can't pay you." Like, "What are you talking about? I mean, you're closing down, but I need my money." And he just told me, "Well, that's your business." Okay. That's how it is. So that didn't really make me feel like, oh, so not only we screw everybody else, but now you're screwing me, too, and, I mean, this is like all screwed up. And I think that pushed me to—I think I ended up taking my vacation. She ended up paying me for little vacations. But then when I come back, my Aunt Socorro, she started working for the couple. They were a couple of Koreans. And besides the sweatshop, they opened a restaurant in the same building on the first floor, and my aunt, she was a cook for a restaurant. That was like six months before I leave the place. She met a supervisor from the Guerrero Tortilla Company because they deliver to the restaurant. So when I come back from Mexico, from Mexico City, my aunt told me, like, "Hey, I met this guy. He said that he's looking for drivers. You think you may want to work there?" Like, "Well, I can try." That was—I come back on Friday. I went to the interview that same day, the same day I came back from Mexico. I was supposed to come back to the factory, to the sweatshop on Monday, but then over the weekend—I mean, they interview me and they said, like, "Okay, you can start tomorrow, Saturday." So, "All right. Nice." So I remember I met the Korean on Sunday. "Hey, I want to talk to you." So I met him in Koreatown, and I just told him, "Hey, I just want to say thank you for all these years, but I'm not coming back. I have another job, so I'm

leaving." I mean, I was his manager. After a few years, he pretty much didn't know the whole production, because I was the only guy. So he asked me, like, "Why are you leaving?" I said, "Well, because it's time for me to leave." "What about my factory?" "Well, that's your problem." [laughter] That was sweet. And that's how I left that place and moved to the tortilla company.

GOMEZ

So as a driver for Guerrero Tortilla—

GUERRERO

Guerrero Mexican Foods.

GOMEZ

So you're an independent— [interruption]

GOMEZ

Okay. So at Guerrero, how were you classified? Were you an independent contractor as a driver?

GUERRERO

Not really. I mean, they are right now, which is for some people, it's okay. For most of them, it's not. But when I joined the company back then, it was a weird situation where the drivers, they were employees of the company, we were employees of the company, but the company didn't have the trucks. The trucks were owned by the drivers, so we own our own trucks, and the company pay—give you some money for mileage and some money for the rent of the truck, which, obviously, compared to how much they will be paying that to a rental company or leasing the trucks, it was way, way cheaper, like—I don't know. I can't even remember, but something crazy like $200 a month or something like that for the rent of your truck, which is nothing, right? But we were employees. And I just remember I start in Canoga Park. That's where they used to have that warehouse. The big production plant is here in East L.A. It's right here, Olympic. But they have a couple of warehouses, so it was closer for the drivers to just pick up the tortillas, the product, from there and go the different routes. So Canoga Park, it was the distribution center for the entire, like, San Fernando Valley, Glendale, Ventura, all those areas. But just working there and—I mean, I remember I was now on the other side. This four years in the sweatshop, I was the manager, pushing, right? Now I was here being pushed by the managers. [laughs] And immediately—I mean, it was something that immediately, the very first day, seeing like how the supervisors treat the drivers, I was just like—I remember being there like at four o'clock in the morning and see, like, the drivers pulling up their trucks to load the product and seeing the supervisors yelling and screaming at them, and like, "Hey, don't be stupid! Move that truck! Hurry up! We have to load the other trucks!" That kind of language, to me, it was like what the hell? I was a manager. I never used that language [unclear], right? And then different things, the way they were treated, the way they just do whatever they want with drivers, and then learning by the days like how much complaints that they had in terms of there was no benefits, there were no vacation pay, like nothing. And on top of everything, they were with the same salary for the past ten years. Ten years with the same salary. I can't even remember how much was that, but, I mean, it's ten years. So two weeks into working in that place, I remember them talking about, like, "Hey, we need to talk to the owner of the company. We need more money." And they were organizing everybody to put money so we can organize a lunch with the VP of the company, not the owner, the vice president of the

company, to talk to him about we need more money. And I remember, like, "Oh, yeah, we can pay." So we put up the money, we paid for a nice lunch, some restaurant here—I can't even remember the name. It wasn't Steven's [phonetic]. Just some little restaurant right here in Olympic. And I remember, for whatever reason—I was two weeks into working at that place. For whatever reason, they pushed me to the committee of the workers who was going to be at that lunch asking for the money. Honestly, I can't remember myself like how I project myself to be on that committee, but I ended up on that committee, right? And I remember that the ask was to increase our pay by $50. That was the ask. That's it. Nothing else. That everybody, all the drivers, we needed $50 in our salary. We start the lunch, he ate, he drink, and then he just stand up and like, "Gentlemans, thank you very much. Lunch was good, food was good, but right now the company doesn't have any money. So I'm sorry. See you later. Bye." He just left. And we were like ten or fifteen—I can't remember now—and we just like—I remember this frickin' silence on that restaurant where, like, I don't know. Shit. [cries] It was bad because I was young, and I remember seeing those old guys put their money to give this asshole a lunch, asking for $50, and he just say no.

GOMEZ

Yes. Who was it that met with you? Who was it that met with you, the guy that just—

GUERRERO

It was the—I can't even remember the name. It was the VP of the company back then. I'm talking about like—this like, I don't know, fifteen, more like twenty years ago, something like that. I mean, it's a long time ago.

GOMEZ

But it's vivid.

GUERRERO

Yeah. I remember. I remember he just stand up, and the guy just stayed there, this ugly silence and nobody said anything. And I remember telling them, "Hey, you guys, I don't know how this works, but last week I met this guy who work for Bimbo, and he told me that they're union." I say, "I don't know what this union thing is, but he say that they get paid commission and that they have vacations and they have healthcare." What caught my attention when I talked to the guy doing my route the first two weeks is the healthcare, because working at the sweatshop, marry my wife and having our first baby, we struggled with that shit. I wasn't a manager, so we didn't qualify for medical benefits. I ended up trying to pay the whole pregnancy of my wife, and then everything got complicated. It got complicated, so the $5,000 that I remember was going to be the cost of the whole process ended up being like $45,000 at the hospital. And without healthcare, they ask me for three payments to cover the whole thing. I was like, "What?" So when I talked to this guy from Bimbo, he's like, "We have healthcare." "Oh, yeah? Healthcare, what is that?" "[unclear] the medical. They pay and we don't have to pay anything. We just [unclear]." "Oh, shit. I want that." [laughter] So in that restaurant, again, it was this big silence. I remember me telling, "Hey, I talked to this guy, and he say, like, they have union, and if we need some help, they can help." He give me the card of one of the Teamsters guys. And I believe that was the only thing. They couldn't see us as an option, because it was like when they throw cold water on you, they were just like that. We all were like that. And again, it's like, "All right. Let's talk to the guy." So we call right there. We made an appointment. I think it was next day, very quick. It was the next day

or two days later. We ended up meeting this guy. Teamsters, they used to have a building where union and James Woods, where the Curacao parking lot is right now, there used to be a Teamsters building, a big old building. So I remember the same committee we ended up calling to meet the guy—and remember I still on probation, but, like, I don't know. I just never thought about it. And we meet the guy from Teamsters. We tell him what was happening there, and he's like, "Okay. How many drivers?" and all that stuff. And I just remember he just opening a drawer, pull a bunch of authorization cards, and he's like, "All right. Sign everybody. Everybody. If you don't sign everybody, just don't come back. But sign everybody on these cards. Then when you have all this cards filled, come back." All right. Fuck it. That was the task, right? So then it was amazing, because it was like a self-organized drive by us.

GOMEZ

How many drivers did you have to get to sign that?

GUERRERO

We were 150. But the guy said—I mean, we didn't know about you need 75 percent, 60 percent.

GOMEZ

The NLRB regulation or any of that.

GUERRERO

No, no, you didn't know the rules. The guy just told us sign everybody, so our assumption from that beginning was, shit, everybody needs to do this, right? So we start organizing. Okay. I take care of the Canoga Park, I take care of the Rancho Cucamonga, and a couple of people from—right? So a few days later, we all come back together and we have every single driver on a card. So we come back to the guy in less than a week. "Here are the cards." I remember the guy is like, "Oh, shit. You guys really want to have the union." [Gomez laughs.] And like, "Yeah, of course." And then he's like, "Okay." He pull his calendar. "All right. Let's do a meeting, the first meeting, but I want every single driver. Every single people who have signed a card, I want them here. You don't bring me everybody, then don't even come back." Kind of the same dynamic, right? [Gomez laughs.] "Okay. We're going to bring everybody." So again we went out, and scratch paper, writing, probably—I remember I didn't have any paper. I used one of the bills for the tortilla to put the names and who was confirming that I was coming to this meeting. So I was in charge of the Canoga Park, right? And the meeting was like, I don't know, two weeks later, and everybody show up in trucks. So we fucking filled that parking lot with trucks, tortilla trucks all over the place in union. We had the union meeting. Then that's when he kind of like explained—not him, somebody else explained the process. We're going to be filing for an election. And they give us a little bit of [unclear], right? As soon as we file, the company's going to find out that this is a real thing, so you should expect this, this, this, and that. Yeah, that's how it was. We file. By the time we file, for whatever reason, everything stayed secret until they file, for whatever reason. I believe that saved my ass because I passed probation. So by the time we filed, I already passed the thirty-day probation. So, well, whatever the names, right? I just know that I was secure or whatever. And then once they file, frickin' company, man, they just have their union-busting company, like, really, really hard. I remembered they hired this Colombian guy, Restrepo. I can't remember the name. His last name was Restrepo. And he was like the consultant, right? That's how they call him. They call [unclear] consultant, and this

motherfucker was, like, talking to every single driver. He just drove to the routes, find everybody, and starts scaring the shit of them. But we were able to keep it together. We ended up filing charges against the company, ULP charges for direct dealing and intimidation, a lot of stuff. The owner of the company—no, not the owner. During the whole process before the election, obviously the company ID who their organizing committee was going to be, and I remember these Ruiz brothers. There's two brothers; the last name was Ruiz. And I remember the last name because that's my mom's last name, Ruiz. So they were there, the company organizing committee. So they organized this meeting between the president of the company—not the owner, because I don't know if you're familiar, but the Guerrero Mexican Foods is part of the GRUMA Corporation, which is back in Newton Monterrey. They're part of some other group in Monterrey. So they organize this meeting with this guy who flew from Monterrey to LAX just to meet with us, and the owner of the company, they want to talk to us. "Come on. Let's go to this meeting. Something good." "All right." So again the same committee—we were the same committee from the beginning all the way to the end—we agree and then we went to LAX to have this meeting at one of the hotels in LAX. They have this conference room ready for the meeting. But something that really caught our attention, is, like, we go into the conference room, they have food, sandwich, like they have all kind of shit. They have a videocamera. A videocamera. They want to tape the whole meeting. And we're like, "Why do you want to tape the meeting?" "Oh, it's just for the records for the company." "Really?" I mean, look, we were not organizers, just inexperienced people who tried to make a better life, but I think for whatever reasons we all have, like, common sense. [laughter] Like, this doesn't look right when you're going to have a meeting with the committee, and the owner of whatever the company is, and they want to videotape that stuff. So we say, "No. You know what? We're not having this meeting here." And I remember we just left. And then as we walk in the parking lot, the Ruiz brothers, "Hey, come on, you guys. You know all the guys is coming from Monterrey, they pay for all this." Like, "Well, that's okay, but come on. How come they're going to videotape this?" And then we tell him, "Bring the guy here. Let's have this meeting in the parking lot." So they talked to the guy. He ended up going to the parking lot. In the parking lot, we were meeting with this guy. A friend of us inside of a truck with a videocamera videotaped the whole conversation, right? [laughter] So of course he was offering, "If you guys stop this union thing, we can talk about more money. We can talk about, like, full ULP." On videotape, right? [laughs] So as soon as we show that to the Teamsters, like, "Oh, shit. This is [unclear]." [laughter] "What is the evidence? The tape." I mean, that was kind of the process. We ended up winning the union by 98 percent, so the two Ruiz brothers, they never [unclear]. But we brought the union in and soon we had the first contract. I mean, I don't remember the first contract being a big deal for the company, even. We were in negotiations for a couple of months, but we ended up with a wage increase which was like over $50 on the salary. I remember establishing the commission. So, besides the salary, then a commission. I mean, that changed our lives from a salary, no commission to a salary with commission and increase of pay on the rent of the trucks, the mileage, and the healthcare. That was my goal. Obviously I was part of the Bargaining Committee. [laughs] For whatever reason, I made it into those committees, so I was part of the Bargaining Committee, and healthcare has to be something. And that was first time,

myself, I got healthcare. We had to pay $100 a month, but that was nothing compared to not having healthcare. So it really changed our lives.

GOMEZ

So how did you stay connected with the Teamsters? Were you a representative for—

GUERRERO

Well, I became the Bargaining Committee, but I also became the shop steward. But the shop steward, I didn't know. Oh, como delegado, como mi papa, yeah, [unclear]. [laughter] Mexico still got those, right?

GOMEZ

Right, yeah.

GUERRERO

So I became the delagado. And then it's like, "Shit, I hated my dad when he was delagado." [laughter] Now I was delagado. My dad is going to hate me. [laughs]

GOMEZ

So how long did you do that?

GUERRERO

All the time that I worked on that company, was like seven years, about seven years.

GOMEZ

And so you kept the union the whole time, kept the—

GUERRERO

We kept the union. That was the first contact, and we were really—again, I don't know. That group is special, because now as a full-time organizer, I know how difficult it is to maintain that mentality even on members, right, of sell organize, of maintain the organization, of being in charge the your union. It's difficult now. For us, it was, like, natural. I was a shop steward. With my very, very limited English back then, I had to [unclear] my coworkers a shop steward, taking a couple of trainings from Teamsters and just, you know, being able to file reports, file grievances, have meetings with the supervisors, and being able to force a contract, we were in charge of that place.

GOMEZ

Who were your coworkers? You mentioned that they were older, a lot of them were older?

GUERRERO

Yeah, yeah. I was young. They used to call me "Guerrito" because my last name is Guerrero. So they called me Guerrito, right? "Oh, Guerrito!" Right? [Gomez laughs.] Yeah, most of them were older, a few from my kind of like similar age, but we were the younger generation of that group. So 1993, as we start getting ready for the second contract, right, to negotiate the second contract, the company, they want to convert all the drivers into independent contractors, again, which is the situation they have right now. And again, everything was like learning on the road, right, like what does this mean? Well, this means that now you're not an employee. You're going to get a higher commission. Yeah, but they didn't tell you, like, you're going to have a higher commission, but now you're not an employee, you don't have healthcare, you don't have vacations, you don't have workers' comp. You have nothing. Of course, we start organizing again, and, through bargaining, tried to push and tried to eliminate that. They don't want to do it, and we ended up making the decision to go on strike. Go on strike, that was 199—

GOMEZ

Three, is it?

GUERRERO

No, I'm sorry. We brought the union in '93, so the first contract, '92. First contract '93 to '96. Then '96, we ended up going on strike.

GOMEZ

So how'd the strike go?

GUERRERO

It was hard. It was hard. We were on strike for seven weeks, seven weeks. It was the summer of '96, and it was tough. The company, they were just ready to spend as much money as they can to win the strike. Like 80 percent of the drivers stay on strike, a few [unclear]. So the company ended up renting all the trucks from Budget. Instead of having a driver on each truck, they have two drivers, so they hired temporary workers. And then as the strike progresses, they have the rental truck, they have the two drivers, the two people in the truck, and then a security guard following each truck just to protect the trucks from us, I guess. It was brutal. I mean, the first week—the first day, like, you know, tried to stop the new hires or temporary workers, the scabs, from going in. Tried to stop distribution of the tortillas. That's when I learned, like, "Oh, shit. A strike is different here than in Mexico." In Mexico, when you have a strike, everything stops until the issues are solved. Here, no [unclear]. And it was hard, the first—I would say the first—the whole strike, it was hard, but the first week and a half or two weeks, it was pretty much like what I call Teamster-style, just, you know, holding the picket line, tried to stop deliveries, tried to stop the company from delivering the tortillas. But, of course, it wasn't enough. I mean, this company was ready to spend whatever money they have to spend. So that's when Peter Olney, Joel Ochoa, and LAMAP come into place. They already have this organization called LAMAP, Los Angeles Manufacturing Action Project—I didn't know them—which they were kind of like the consortium that existed at one time for SEIU organizing, kind of like for other locals, other unions. They were doing that for the Teamsters. So they offer to help during the strike, and obviously they came up with this comprehensive campaign to move the strike. When I say comprehensive, it is kind of like J-for-J style, right? You have to use politics, you have to use community, you have to use the field. I mean, we got all those components that we use in J for J, and, honestly, that was the only way we could win the strike, because we start aggressively boycotting key clients, boycotting the company, and put enough pressure, political pressure, besides us being on the strike, right? And we ended up winning the strike seven weeks later. Again, it was hard, but I'm proud of being part of that strike, right? We beat the company who was ready to spend millions—well, who spent millions. They probably spent more money during the strike than the cost of the contract at the end of the day. That's how bad. It was like, "Really?"

GOMEZ

Right. But they were just willing to spend whatever it took to—

GUERRERO

Yeah.

GOMEZ

So was that near the end of your seven years at the—

GUERRERO

Pretty much, because—I mean, I was just reviewing my history. I started with SEIU in 1998. So I started with SEIU in 1998. In August '98, I work six months with Steelworkers, and prior to that, I was working part-time with LAMAP right up to the strike, but I was combining LAMAP with the Guerrero. So I probably have my resignation letter, but probably I resigned from the Guerrero Mexican Foods sometime in June, July of '98. [End of May 22, 2014 interview]

1.2. SESSION TWO (May 30, 2014)

GOMEZ

This is Andrew Gomez. It is May 30th, 2014. I'm here with Ernesto Guerrero doing our second session in Commerce, California, at the Union Hall of SEIU-UHW. Ernesto, could you tell me how you started working with the SEIU in 1998?

GUERRERO

The way I [unclear] to SEIU was because I started first working for Steelworkers [unclear] they set up or they had in San Diego. We were renting just an office space within the SEIU Local 2028 back then, which was what they call amalgamated locals, because they used to represent different industries: janitors, county workers, healthcare workers. So after the project was closed in San Diego from the Steelworkers, I got an offer from Local 2028 to pretty much lead the Justice for Janitors campaign there at San Diego.

GOMEZ

So what did you know about Justice for Janitors already? Because you had worked with Peter Olney, who was part of it. So what did you know?

GUERRERO

I have to say as Justice for Janitors, probably nothing, because, like I said, I was coming from my own type of struggle within the Labor Movement as a truck driver. But, obviously, out of the strike with the tortilla company, Guerrero Mexican Foods, I guess a lot of the strategies that they mix, brought by Peter Olney to win the strike, it came from the Justice for Janitors campaign. So I didn't necessarily make that connection, and so I started working for the local and realizing that, well, that's how we pretty much handle that strike.

GOMEZ

Did you have any noticeable sense of how it was different to launch a Justice for Janitors campaign in San Diego compared to Los Angeles?

GUERRERO

Well, the workforce is different, definitely, and it's different in terms of, like, even the origin of the workers. In San Diego, you work pretty much with, I would say, 99 percent—just not to say 100 percent—99 percent of the workers of the workforce are from Mexico. A big number of those workers are from Tijuana, which pretty much they cross the border on a daily basis to work as janitors in San Diego. So they live Tijuana and they cross the border to work as janitors in San Diego. So that right there is very different. You have to deal with the Border Patrol in a more, I would say, threatening basis, right, that the threat of the immigration status is higher when you work that close to the border. So obviously the fear is higher. So that's kind of like a lot of differences. Also for a worker, somebody who lives in Mexico and know that the reality in Mexico is to

make 5 to $6 per day versus working for minimum wage, hourly minimum wage in San Diego it's different. You have janitors who kind of like live a middle-class, lower-middle-class life in Tijuana working as janitors, nonunion janitors in San Diego. So that's kind of challenging.

GOMEZ

So could you recall how some of the early campaigns went in San Diego?

GUERRERO

Yeah. I was hired to lead the [unclear] campaign. That means the new organizing, organize new janitors into the union. But obviously—and this is just part of the ideology of the J for J, right? You can't organize without having the members. You can't sustain the members without the organizing. They both go hand-to-hand. So as I was trying to ID who we can organize, we realized very soon, very early that the membership wasn't organized. And back in '98, the entire country started getting ready for the 2000 contract campaigns all over the country. So without having the membership organized, it was very hard to organize janitors, because the Justice for Janitors campaign is based on confrontation, militancy. And thinking about nonunion janitors, it's challenging to create that pressure and that evolution, that movement. So then I ended up first leading the general organizing, organizing the members for them to become active within the union, ID leaders, developing leaders to kind of like revive the movement, the J for J Movement in San Diego, move the contract campaign, and then at the same time, once we reactivate the membership, start organizing new members.

GOMEZ

So what did that look like then? Because the 2000 version of contract negotiations for Los Angeles, it's very—

GUERRERO

Huge.

GOMEZ

Yeah, it's huge, there's a memory of it, and so on. What was that like in San Diego?

GUERRERO

It was the same except you have to change the numbers, right? So instead of having—because the nationwide campaign was very coordinated. That's one of the things that keeps me engaged with SEIU and keeps me this long with the Justice for Janitors Movement is the coordination, the way we learn, the way we cooperate among the states, because we were dealing with the same building owners, pretty much the same companies, so it makes a lot of sense for us to all work together. So I remember in terms of like the players were pretty much similar players, the strategy was similar, but obviously again we have to deal with a different workforce and a membership that was more afraid to be part of the union than proud to be part of the union. So I have to say—I'm not saying that this is in all cases, but working with janitors who are from Mexico is, in a way, difficult, because they don't have the same militancy that working with janitors from Central America, particularly in El Salvador, who were part of a civil war in their country. The militancy is different, right?

GOMEZ

There's an urgency that's there.

GUERRERO

There's an urgency. There's anger, and fear is pretty much nonexistent, because being part of a civil war, organizing means you can be killed one day. In Mexico, organizing means you don't go anywhere but nothing's going to happen to you, kind of. It is different. So in that sense, that was part of the challenge, to motivate those members to fight for their rights, to be willing to put their jobs at risk, knowing that particularly those who live in Mexico, it's going to be equally very difficult for them to have a job where they're going to be making the same money back in Mexico. So it's different in that sense.

GOMEZ

So how did that play out then? So there was resistance within some of the rank and file to participate?

GUERRERO

There was resistance based on fear, right? And obviously—and I think this is similar everywhere, obviously the leads or managers from those cleaning companies, they play a huge role in terms of maintaining the workforce, intimidating them, and obviously the lack of leadership within the membership. So obviously the first steps that I remember taking in San Diego, it was to, number one, make sure that members understand that they were part of an organization, and it was their responsibility to make sure that their boys were here within the organization and obviously within the industry they work, made the union peaceful at all levels within the community, with other unions, with now their employers. And then I started developing those leaders who they ended up being the leaders of the movement, right? So the first two years prior to the 2000 strike was a lot of building, leadership, ID'ing, recruiting, and developing leaders who can then motivate, mobilize other workers.

GOMEZ

So what did those public demonstrations look like in 2000, in San Diego?

GUERRERO

We started with very simple things like billboards, billboarding on the main corners of San Diego, downtown San Diego, just to highlight the fact that the janitors exist and they're a workforce, that nobody know that they exist, but they exist, right? Most people go to those building offices, they find everything clean, but who did that? Who knows. Who cares.

GOMEZ

Right. There's an anonymity to it.

GUERRERO

Exactly. So it was simple in concept, but difficult in terms of making sure that happens, right? Because obviously for somebody who's not used to have those fights, the idea of being in a corner with a billboard saying "Honk if you support janitors," for a lot of people it was like, "Why are we doing this?" And the concept was simple, just, "Because they need to know that you guys exist, right? They need to know that this law firm is going to be able to conduct business because you guys clean those offices." So, understanding those concepts, I think was the beginning of the struggle in San Diego, enforcing the contract and fighting with companies, those union companies, to enforce a contract and enforce labor laws, like wage-and-hour violations, start fixing wage-and-hour violations within the union membership, and Cal/OSHA violations, health and safety. So that was kind of like the way we start building, bringing visibility within the

union and doing a lot of issue organizing, which is ID an issue that affects a large group and organize around that issue to fix that.

GOMEZ

So what kind of issues were you harping on?

GUERRERO

Again, enforcing the basic language of the existing contract, respect seniority, respecting overtime pay, like basic stuff. And then we moved to more complicated stuff like overtime pay, like OSHA violations, right, injuries that company put blind eyes and never send workers to the workers'-comp facilities. So those kind of simple, again simple but very useful issues that we can organize janitors around.

GOMEZ

So one of the benefits of the Los Angeles 2000 contract negotiations was that they had the support of a lot of the public in Los Angeles. Did the same happen in San Diego?

GUERRERO

Ended up happening, and obviously they're two different places. San Diego is a more conservative place. It's a tourist place. So a lot of the people who's not going to get to the reality of low-wage workers, they don't understand. It's hard for them to understand, like, why we're fighting. So again that's why part of the strategy at the beginning of the campaign is, like, to make sure that they know they exist, ID some of those groups that already fighting San Diego or were fighting San Diego for human rights or workers' rights, and make coalitions to work together, making sure we ID stories from the janitors and present those stories with real people, real members, making sure the public, starting with those most likely supporters, understand what it was to be a janitor in San Diego, what kind of struggles they have, and then moving to the rest of the community and obviously creating the crisis that start little by little affecting not just the building owner, but then the rest of the community in San Diego, right? If we conduct a protesting downtown and we create a chaos on the traffic, there was a reason why there was a chaos in the traffic. So I think that's kind of like how we started moving and gaining support from different places in San Diego.

GOMEZ

So what did you do after the 2000 contract negotiations?

GUERRERO

After 2000 strike, I mean literally, at the same time that Los Angeles was on strike, we were on strike for four weeks too. That was in downtown. Then we move into the suburbs to, again, contract negotiations for the suburbs, but then also now to organize some of the same of the same companies that were union in downtown, to organize them in the suburbs, suburban areas, like DMS, Diversified Maintenance, GMI, and some of the companies that work at the Westfield malls. So those were kind of like the main companies that we organized after the strike in downtown, and at the same time as we were doing the contract campaign for the suburban workers.

GOMEZ

Do you think that organizing in Southern California presents unique difficulties just because of how spread out it is? It's not a condensed urban area the way that New York City or Philadelphia is.

GUERRERO

Well, I mean, yes, definitely. That was part of the reason why there was even two separate contracts, right? One for downtown, which is a more condensed area, which obviously is a better contract, and then you have the suburban areas, where it goes all the way from the border to Carlsbad, right? You have seventy miles' difference right there. And then if you go east another forty miles, going to Escondido or El Cajon.

GOMEZ

So how long did you stay in San Diego?

GUERRERO

I stayed for four years, four years, and, again, it wasn't an amalgamated local. That means that local used to represent other workers. I really believe that the revitalization of the Justice for Janitors campaign, it gives the local as a whole a different face, because, again, due to the visibility of the campaign, the militancy of the membership, and the support we're getting from the community groups, the local was able to move other campaigns. So I stayed with the local, but it's been in organizing county workers, San Diego county workers, and they became as militant as—maybe not as militant as the janitors, but never in their history they had, like, big demonstrations and protests. After the janitors' strike, organizing the county workers, we ended up having demonstrations with over a thousand county workers, which that was never seen before. And, again, I think that is the potential of the Justice for Janitors campaign, that it brings a lot of energy to the organizations and to the different workers from different industries.

GOMEZ

So the Justice for Janitors model, when you're trying to move it, then, and trying to organize county workers, for instance, what do you have to change, if anything, or does the model basically stay the same?

GUERRERO

Well, you have to change—you don't have the—how do I explain this? It doesn't change in terms of kind of the strategy and the components you use for the campaign. When we organize the county workers, the main difference is county workers, they had an election to be able to be part of the union and have a different contract. That's the main difference. But in terms of moving the campaign itself, we use the same components, right? The fear component, which is the workers. Then you use the media and you use community, politics. So the idea is how can you transfer all those components and use them for those campaigns. So in that sense, it's the same. You don't have elections in J for J, which you have in other campaigns, but I think that's kind of like the main difference.

GOMEZ

Is it the same or easier or more difficult to organize middle-class workers as opposed to working-class workers?

GUERRERO

It's more difficult, and I think for a lot of reasons a middle-class worker doesn't feel that they have to fight to gain or to maintain what they have. It's more a middle-class worker always tries to see the union as a service piece. "I pay my dues. You have to serve me and negotiate this for me and gain these benefits for me." Low-wage workers, I think just by nature, they understand that they have to fight to get whatever, right? So it's more difficult in that sense.

GOMEZ

So maintaining a more active membership among middle-class professions is more difficult.

GUERRERO

It's more difficult. Now, I guess the basic from J for J, which is ID, recruit, and develop leadership, that applies to every worker. So that's why I believe that was part of the success of that local right after that doesn't strike, because we implement the same type of model, right, ID, recruit, and develop leaders to move a campaign, and I think that was the key.

GOMEZ

So what opportunity got you out of San Diego?

GUERRERO

I started my life in the U.S., in Los Angeles. Before I moved to San Diego, I had a house, my family. My wife's family was here in L.A. My family, my grandpa and grandma, was in Los Angeles, and we bought a house right before I moved to San Diego. Actually, that was right before the strike in '96. So there was a time where maintaining the house here in Los Angeles and paying the apartment in San Diego, it was kind of difficult, and then the family, it was a big component, a big reason why I started looking for how can I go back to L.A., but obviously thinking about what can I do in J for J in Los Angeles. So that's pretty much what I looked for. And as soon as an opportunity arise with Local 1877—back then we were different locals—with Local 1877, I just applied and transferred from San Diego to Los Angeles.

GOMEZ

So what was that like? So you get plugged into the L.A. circuit now. What happens?

GUERRERO

I was plugged into what we call internal organizing. So I was a union rep for the downtown area and some of the separate different contracts. I was part of the downtown. That was 2002, two years after the strike, February of 2002.

GOMEZ

So what was that like? Was there still the same sort of energy in terms of union participation in 2002? Was it easy to—

GUERRERO

I mean, I think based on my own experience, right, after you participate in a strike that was hard, it was difficult, it was strong, workers got tired. I mean, there's a big downhill after you move a campaign to the maximum point, which is strike. There's a big downhill in terms of member participation. Everybody just, "Okay, we're done. We got our contract. See you later." Right? [laughs] Definitely there was a lower scale in terms of participation. But when I joined 1877 in February of 2002, pretty much that was the time to start getting ready for the next contract, so we start again moving towards escalating and moving the membership to be active again. We never know what's going to happen, if we would have to go on a strike or no. We have to prepared. So, again, the same techniques, right, ID'ing the issues that were affecting a lot of members and organizing around those issues, organizing new janitors in Los Angeles. It was a big factor that helped to start mobilizing the membership again. Definitely there was a better understanding of the janitors in Los Angeles, better than in San Diego when I left, better understanding of union density within the industry, and that was something that was nice to learn. As I started working with those janitors here in Los Angeles, there was a better

understanding of how important it is to have union density within your industry. The more density, the more power and better contracts, and that was kind of like the way we mobilized membership and [unclear] leaders again, it's like every nonunion company around your company, it's a threat to your contract and a threat to your benefits and a threat to what you fought for back in 2000. And that was pretty much the model we used. We organized a couple of companies. We removed a couple of companies from nonunion buildings to have now union companies. That helps. I remember back in 2000 going to 2003, having weekly protests in downtown Los Angeles with two, three hundred workers, which that is something. That's a good number of membership active in a weekly basis, right, which was good. I focused my efforts in Los Angeles into a nonunion company—well, into a building owner, Mani Brothers. They were new within the real estate industry. They bought a couple of buildings and they bought the buildings. They bring a small nonunion company. So that really helps a lot in terms of putting the sense of urgency of the downtown workers to fight, to fight and to protect their contract, because here you have janitors from union buildings who were making back then $12 or more per hour, some small pension, medical benefits, and the very next day, the Mani Brothers took ownership of the buildings, they bring this nonunion company, they were fired, and they bring these low-, minimum-wage workers with no benefits. So that was a big shock for the downtown janitors, like [unclear] they have this company who just bought this nonunion company.

GOMEZ

Easily? Quickly?

GUERRERO

Yeah. So it was shocking, but at the same time it was, like, good to make sure that they reactivate themselves. So that's what I call issue organizing. That was a big issue that affect this group, and at the end of the day has the potential to affect more people, and they react.

GOMEZ

How long were you with the L.A. local?

GUERRERO

Twelve years.

GOMEZ

Twelve years. So when did you leave them?

GUERRERO

Last year, May 2013.

GOMEZ

Do you have a memory of around 2006 a big immigration debate and it played out most dramatically in Los Angeles? When do you remember when the union started looking at the immigration issue as the same thing, the labor issue and the immigration issue were the same thing?

GUERRERO

Well, I mean, with SEIU, since I started with SEIU, like, in San Diego, I remember that we started pushing and moving the immigration issue. After 9/11, obviously everything went down, and we focused on everything but immigration, because there was no necessarily something that's going to happen. But I think probably right after the 2003 contract campaign, when we were, like, free of the big campaign, we started getting

involved into the immigration protest, right, and marches. And obviously the Sensenbrenner bill, it was huge, and we have a lot of membership that was affected or potentially could be affected by that, so we see the immigration issue as a labor issue, the same. It's like thinking we need to mobilize the community. Well, the workers are part of that community, so there's no difference between community and membership. It's the same.

GOMEZ

Was there any issue with the national in the sense that the American Labor Movement historically has been kind of xenophobic, right? It has strains of sort of anti-immigration, things like that. So in the early going, was it difficult to convince the national, or was it always understood?

GUERRERO

From my eyes, coming from SEIU, we always have people kind of like putting the issue on the radar. I have to say that not until, like, Eliseo Medina, I think more aggressively start pushing the immigration issue, that it became a priority for SEIU. And originally that wasn't till he became the national vice—one of the VPs, right, vice presidents. He took that flag of the immigration movement. Before that, yes, you talk about immigration independently in the different locals. You push immigration based on the membership you have. You used to have locals who don't really push that issue a lot, and the immigration wasn't part of, like, any formal or official agenda on conventions or trainings and things like that. But nothing like other organizations, labor organizations who were completely on the other side, right, including the AFL-CIO, who probably agreed to support this until recent years. I would say recent years, right? You know the story, the history. But I would say that when Eliseo Medina started pushing the issue, it became more regular issue that was pushed, and it was moving the different agendas of organization to the point where we know now, right?

GOMEZ

Thinking a little later on, could you talk a bit about organizing and working and thinking about contracts in the recession and post-recession era and how that went?

GUERRERO

Well, I think in terms of for us, negotiating contracts is—you need to have the priorities very clear in terms of, like, what the members need, what the members want. So you need to be realistic, and I think part of our responsibility is to make sure members understand the whole picture, that they understand the reality and the consequences of taking one way or the other. And when you have the big recession time, recession years, obviously, and you go to the table, the first thing companies throw on the table is, like, "We have the money. We have a big vacancy rates," things like that. "There's no money. We have to cut, cut, cut." And that's where you really need to have your priorities, okay? In a recession time, what is more important, to protect your medical benefits or to put way more money into the wages? What was more important? And I think that's important to understand, because if the membership is not educated well enough to understand the bigger picture, you can go into fights that are going to be very, very hard to win, right? Let's say members wants more money. That is not even realistic in a recession time. You're into the risk of losing more than getting more. So you have to set the standards, you have to make sure that members understand what it means to fight for protecting the healthcare instead of more money on a paycheck on a weekly basis.

GOMEZ

So was there a lot of pushback from members for this most recent contract?

GUERRERO

I wouldn't say that, because, to be honest, if we compare the contracts that we negotiated after 2003 and so forth, there's always an improvement on wages, sometimes more, sometimes less. But something that is important is there's always a protection on the benefits, which is key. When we talk about benefits, don't forget the janitors have for a long time now in Los Angeles fully paid medical benefits, which that's expensive, right? We're talking about—I don't know. I can remember back in 2002, 2003, over 300, over 400, over $500 per month per member, and that's part of the benefits. So the key is to protect those benefits. And you have some members who don't probably see the big picture, but for the most part, most of the members understand, like, what is the value of protecting benefits versus gaining more money in the paycheck, and I think that's important.

GOMEZ

And so what prompted your recent move to come out here to the UHW?

GUERRERO

I would say after spending twelve years, obviously I still missed working with the membership, low-wage workers. That never going to change. I mean, low-wage workers, like I said, understand more the importance of fighting and being involved on fighting. And I think looking at the bigger picture, whether it's a low-wage worker or a more highly paid worker, the Labor Movement is dying, and I wanted to make sure that at all levels workers understand that they need to fight to protect what they have and to increase the standards for everybody. If highly paid workers—I mean, we represent some highly paid workers here, Kaiser members. They have one of the best contracts in the nation in terms of benefits and pay. If they don't understand how important it is to protect their contract, it's going to be hard for low-wage workers to even protect what they have, right? If the higher-paid members lower those standards, what can we expect for lower standards? To go lower, even lower. I think there's a big value in that, right? And professionally I think for me it was time to move, to do something different. In terms of the leadership that I feel like I want to work with, I think it was time for me to move to a different local. And also there's a component, of course, a big component of bringing what I learned over the years with the Justice for Janitors campaign, the militancy, the energy, the enthusiasm, and the understanding of the big picture, it's important for membership, like the [unclear] members, it's important for them to understand, to learn, and I think I can bring that here.

GOMEZ

Thinking for about Justice for Janitors and its legacy, and as you said, the Labor Movement is dying, I mean, how do you think the lessons of J for J can be applied nationally to try and increase union membership to what it once was in this country? I know it's a big question. [laughter]

GUERRERO

Yeah, it's a big question, but I think it has a lot to do with understanding the big picture and how being involved is the only way that is going to change what is happening in the country, because we have very few, very few people, rich people who's controlling everything, and the vast majority of the workers or the people in this country which is the

workers, for the most part have no say on everything that is happening, right? Everything is more expensive, but we're just still pretty much stuck in the same place. The policies are changing that is affecting families, and we have no power to say nothing because people is not organized in a very effective way. So, one, I think the militancy of the participation, the leadership development, I think those are key components that can really help to change the face of the Labor Movement, right? We need to ID, recruit, and develop leaders who can push and mobilize and bring clarity to other people, to other workers to understand the big picture, what needs to happen in this country. We need to organize ourselves.

GOMEZ

Because I would imagine one of the real tough tasks is, because anti-union sentiment is very high right now, and part of it is how do you change that, how do you reach those workers who don't belong to a union, don't want to belong to a union? What do you say to them?

GUERRERO

Well, I think it is tough and it's hard, and it's a tough question, right? I think we—when I say "we," the Labor Movement figured out how to move that in effective way. But one of the reasons why I'm happy here right now is we are encouraging and pushing the members to get involved in issues that not necessarily affect them directly, right? We just finished a campaign to enroll thousands of people from the community into ObamaCare. Directly it does not affect a member, but indirectly it benefits the direct community. We enrolled over 12,000 members of the community into ObamaCare. That helps to change the image, the perception of a union, because it was us helping the community. And don't get me wrong. U.S. [unclear] is obviously doing that, too, by getting involved in political issues and the immigration reform. I think that's part of how we can help change the perception of workers about the unions, right, that we don't care only about our contract and our wages, but members actually care about the issues that affect the community as a whole. Because if we don't change, if we don't do nothing to improve that, our members are going to suffer, right? So it's hard, it's hard, but I think it can happen.

GOMEZ

Yeah, I hear what you're saying, because I remember Jono explaining that, right, that the union, on the face of it, you're dealing with this employee and the relationship to their company, but that if you can get to other parts of their lives, right, of their community and so on, that's the more powerful approach to how to do it.

GUERRERO

Yeah. I mean, we have members—and that's probably the things that we do, right? We try to ID members who are leaders in other places, schools, churches, and how can we support their efforts to improve lives of people in the community. Being involved in the Social Justice Movement is not just about a contract, but it's also about immigration reform. It's about getting involved in issues that affect the community, right? Gay/lesbian issues, I mean, I think we have the responsibility to get involved on those issues so the community understand that we're not just about dues and dollar amounts, but how can we improve the lives of the people that obviously we represent, but obviously the people that we don't even represent, right? I mean, for us being involved in immigration issues, we have the potential to benefit people that we're never going to be representing, we're never going to charge dues for. That's okay. That's fine. It's improving the community

life. ObamaCare enrollment events that we held, most of those community members that we help are never going to be our union members, for example, but that's okay. That's not what we're looking for. We're looking for how can we make sure that ObamaCare was a success, is succeeding.

GOMEZ

Right. So, last question. In thinking about your time with Justice for Janitors and everything, people have written books about it, there's a movie about it. How do you think it should be remembered?

GUERRERO

I think the Justice for Janitors Movement is one of the best campaigns in terms of strategy, because it was able to figure out how to organize people, workers, who everybody else were saying, "We can't organize those workers." And I want to see the Justice for Janitors being recognized as the campaign that empowers workers, that empowers people, because that's what we do. We don't help workers; we empower them so they can fight. We provide development so they can understand why and who they're fighting, and I think that's what's important to be recognized about J for J. I think that's what I want people to connect and remember about J for J. This is a campaign that empowers workers and people. [End of May 30, 2014 interview]

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