

*Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee: William Lucy
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Interviewer: Emilye Crosby
Videographer: John Bishop
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Emilye Crosby: Alright.

John Bishop: We're recording.

Emilye Crosby: I'm Emilye Crosby, working with the Southern Oral History Program, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. And I'm here today conducting this oral history as part of the Civil Rights History Project, which is an undertaking of Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History and Culture and the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress. This is June twenty-fifth, 2013. And we're here today with Mr. William Lucy at the Smithsonian offices. And the other people present at the interview are John Bishop, who is filming, Elaine Nichols of the Smithsonian African American Museum, and Sharmen Townsend.

Mr. Lucy, would you be willing to tell me a little bit about your family and growing up? I understand you were born in Memphis and moved to California.

William Lucy: Born in Memphis, Tennessee. My family, my father was from Catherine, Alabama. My mother was from Uniontown, Alabama. I grew up in Memphis, up until about the age of seven plus. We moved to California in about March of 1942, just after World War II started. I actually grew up in Richmond, California, from about seven plus years old until I left Richmond in 1966.

EC: Was the—1966 is when you left Richmond?

WL: Yes.

EC: Was the war the reason that your family went from Memphis to California?

WL: Yes. My father worked for Memphis Light, Gas and Water up until, you know, the war started in December of 1941. He, along with any number of folks, were recruited for the war effort. They left from Memphis and went to the Bay Area and went to work for Kaiser Shipyards.

EC: Did they have any trouble leaving Memphis, do you know?

WL: Not at all at that time. The government was recruiting for the war effort.

EC: Yeah, yeah. So, do you have any memories of Memphis from those early days?

WL: Well, I went to elementary school in Memphis up to about the fifth grade, I think it was, fourth or fifth grade. And Memphis was pretty typical of most cities in the South. It was as segregated as it could get. The political participation was under the thumb of a fellow by the name of E. H. Crump. My father received his job from Mr. Crump and worked for Memphis Light, Gas and Water until we left in—*he* left in 1941 about mid-December. We left in about March of 1942.

EC: Um-hmm. So, after you moved to California, what was it like for you there?

WL: Well, in the early years, it was a total war effort, up until the war ended in about 1945. I finished elementary school in California, and then went to junior high and high school in California. And California was radically different than Memphis, Tennessee. Of course, I was young and didn't know the significance of the difference. We all lived in wartime housing projects. Everybody lived together. The Kaiser Industries had developed four shipyards in Richmond proper. And virtually everybody in Richmond worked for either Standard Oil, Ford Motor Company, or worked for Kaiser in the shipyards.

EC: When you say, "We all lived together," that's the workers?

WL: The workers. I mean, there was a tremendous amount of defense housing built for the war effort.

EC: And is this integrated housing?

WL: It was then.

EC: Okay, okay. So, do you have good memories of those years?

WL: Very good memories. Our schooling was good, segregated but good.

EC: Yeah.

WL: Through junior high school, it was a good environment. And when the war ended, the assumption was that people would go back where they came from.

EC: [Laughs]

WL: It turned out not to be quite true.

EC: Yeah.

WL: You had a number of people who went to different states, but the bulk of the African American community remained in Richmond until it came point in time to really remove the

defense housing. But our early childhood was pretty good. The education system was radically different than Memphis, Tennessee, both through junior high school and high school.

EC: Well, were you aware of that at the time? I mean, was it very noticeable to you as a child?

WL: The only thing that was noticeable was that we didn't have [0:05:00] a substantial number of white people there. We had Mexican Americans and African Americans all living in the same area.

EC: Okay, yeah. So, after the war, did your father continue to work with Kaiser?

WL: No, at the close of the war effort, he opened his own business. He was a mechanic, I guess self-taught. He worked on automobiles, trucks, heavy equipment, construction equipment. He did that for a number of years.

EC: Can you describe your parents for us, tell us about them a little?

WL: Well, I think they were typical people from the South, primarily from the rural South. And my father, I'm not quite sure of the level of education that he achieved, but he was fundamentally self-taught. He worked, as I said, for Memphis Light, Gas and Water, and what was interesting, I saw his work papers, and he was described as an "unskilled laborer" prior to the war effort. Six weeks after he went to work for Kaiser, he was a journeyman welder.

EC: [Laughs]

WL: And the lesson I drew from that is when the government has a priority, it can be achieved by whatever they have to do to make it happen. My mother was a seamstress for many years and then opened a restaurant. I'm not quite sure the years, but she ran that for a number—for some time.

EC: Did you have brothers and sisters?

WL: One brother, Joe Lucy, Jr., who was two years older than myself.

EC: Um-hmm. And so—are there significant memories that you have from your childhood, things that were important or formative for you?

WL: Well, I mean, we had typical growing up experiences as youngsters. In junior high school and high school, we did the sports thing: baseball, basketball, football. After graduation from high school—I attended El Cerrito High School, as opposed to Richmond High School. And our sort of growing up years was just like thousands of other kids in the similar situation. We all went to school together. We all played together. We all grew up together, and many of us still maintain contact now.

EC: Um-hmm. And after you graduated from high school, you went to Berkeley?

WL: I went to work first for the Mare Island Naval Shipyard.

EC: Okay.

WL: And worked there for two years. In 1953, went to work for Contra Costa County in the Engineering Department. And during the course of that work, went to the University of California at Berkeley in their materials and research courses. I shouldn't say worked in that, but studied that for a couple of years at the same time working for the county.

EC: Was that something where they would pay you to go to school? Or it was something that you were interested in pursuing?

WL: No, this was done, essentially, to enhance my opportunities for promotion on my regular work schedule. I worked at Contra Costa County in the Materials and Research Laboratory, and at that time, this was a very new area of study for highway construction, roads, buildings, dams, bridges.

EC: So, what was your work in that at that time?

WL: I was initially what was called an engineering aide, which was the entry-level position in the laboratory system. I worked at that for about three years and then transferred to the—same department—to the Surveying and Right-of-Way Division. Came back into the laboratory and ultimately worked 13 years for the county, all but one or two of them in the Materials and Research Department. When I left employment with the county, I was assistant materials and research engineer for the county.

EC: And how was the work you did then different than your entry-level work?

WL: Well, there was a series of positions in the laboratory. It involved both laboratory testing, and it was basically quality control and design and materials for highway construction. Entry-level was basically taking samples and doing sort of the fundamental test activity. When I became what was called a supervisor and materials tester, I ran the laboratory with about seven or eight personnel under my supervision. The series were civil engineers, assistant civil engineers, junior civil engineers. All of them [0:10:00] were working on quality control tests for highway construction: water, asphalts, oils.

And in 1953, I believe, when President Eisenhower passed the legislation that created the interstate highway system, under the system, states had to be responsible for the quality control of materials that went into construction. And the counties assumed the responsibility of farm-to-freeway road development.

JB: Can we take a little pause?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're back on.

EC: How did you get involved in working with the union?

WL: While I was working at the county, I was invited to join the union. So, I joined what at that time was an employee association. During the course of the association work, the issue became, "Why are we not a union?" I mean, we were in a very heavily unionized county, a very heavily unionized state. And we were a civil service organization, and there were many of us who believed that the civil service system did not meet our needs. The civil service in those days had gone far beyond its original mandate of testing for qualified employees to be submitted for hire. The civil service systems had begun to make decisions on wages, on benefits, etcetera, which I basically felt were issues that should be decided upon by the employer and employees in some sort of a formal bargaining process.

So, we discussed and debated and put the issue to sort of a yearlong forum on whether we should be a union or continue to be an association. And the employees who were part of our membership voted to seek out the ways and means of becoming a legitimate union in the true sense. And we had an election. The pro-union group won the election, and we set out to become a true collective bargaining vehicle.

EC: It sounds like you were pretty actively involved in that discussion?

WL: Well, I'm sure there were others who were perhaps more active, but at least I put a good deal of time into the issue, because I thought it was so basic.

EC: Yeah. What were the things that struck you as most important at the time about being part of a union?

WL: Well, the process in the civil service system, which is a good system, was a good system in our county, but the issues of wages, hours, and conditions of employment, I mean, as an association and a civil servant, you could protest *after* something had happened to you.

EC: Okay.

WL: You didn't have a whole lot of rights in that process. We thought that there should be legitimate grievance procedures with a defined process for resolution of just day-to-day problems. And we certainly felt that, with regard to wages and benefits, employees have a basic right to be a part of that discussion that determines that.

EC: Do you have—looking back, were there influences in your growing up or your experiences that predisposed you to that perspective?

WL: Well, in my—while I was employed with the county, I met a number of people who were old trade unionists.

EC: Yeah.

WL: I think probably the two that had the greatest impact and influence on myself was a fellow by the name of Ben Russell, who worked for county government at that time in the civil service department, and another fellow by the name of Red Aiello, who was a blacksmith. And you couldn't have a wider difference between the functions, and both of them felt very strongly about the need to have a trade union truly representing people in the trade union system. And I think Mr. Aiello probably had more to do with the formation of thought. But the two of them, you know, had tremendous influence on how I felt about our rights as employees to a process where we were recognized as participants in decisions that affected our work life.

EC: And am I correct that you went from working for the county to working for the union? Is that—is that so?

WL: Yes.

EC: Can you describe sort of how you made that evolution to actually become a full time employee for the union?

WL: Well, our union—after going through this yearlong discussion and debate about trade unionism versus association functions, [0:15:00] I learned a lot and I think grew a lot. And in the course of the union's action, the contest between who did we want to join, since we had made the decision to be a union, what union and with who? And during those days, there were not many unions who thought there should be great activity in the *public* sector. If you recall, President Roosevelt, when he passed the Wagner Act, specifically excluded public employees. And we used to make the case of what's the difference between a bus driver in the private sector who drives his bus ten blocks and then a public employee who drives it another ten. They're both doing the same thing, requiring the same skills, and should therefore have the same basic rights to wages and benefits.

And so, we caught the attention of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, at that time, who was led by a fellow out of Wisconsin, a Mr. Arnold Zander, who had grown up in the public service. He was the president, but he was being challenged by a fellow out of New York by the name of Jerry Wurf, who had a very clear vision of what workers in the public or private sector ought to be entitled to.

EC: Yeah.

WL: And so, they saw us, they saw what we were doing and what we were talking about, and in 1964, in the contest for the leadership of the union, Mr. Wurf was successful. So, we replaced a pro-civil service leader with a pro-union leader. And Mr. Wurf, in about a year or so, saw the work that we were trying to do and the kinds of issues we were focusing on, and asked would I be interested in coming to work for the national union. And I was a little reluctant because I had only been out of my zip code one time.

And so, we talked about it, and the question of what can we do if we have the sort of pro-worker sense about ourself in the public sector? Collective bargaining was very, very new. And it was my belief that if our union was able to impact on issues, both work issues and social issues, maybe the union as an institution could be a good vehicle for social change.

EC: So, as a result of that thinking, you went ahead and made the leap, despite your concerns?

WL: Yes. Yes, I left the county service in about June of 1966 and came to work for the national union as the associate director of the Department of Legislation and Community Affairs.

EC: And so, what—you know, you said that one of your hesitations is that you'd only been out of your zip code one time.

WL: [Laughs] Well, from Memphis to California.

EC: [Laughs] And what was the new job going to entail? Was it going to be relocating or travel?

WL: Oh, it meant relocating from Richmond, California, to Washington, D.C.

EC: Okay.

WL: The scope of the work was very unclear. What we did see, however, was the growing influence of the federal sector in the affairs of state and local government. I don't mean negatively, but funding programs, rules and regulations that related to how things were to be done. In our union—we were a growing union in the public sector—we felt we had to have a presence in those discussions, whether it was social welfare or whether it was employment security, that we had to have at least a voice in the process in order to be sure how it would affect our workers.

EC: So, during this same period, the southern Civil Rights Movement is taking place.

WL: Um-hmm.

EC: So, from probably when you're a—what, a young adult?—to this transition to the national union, so what was your awareness of that?

WL: Well, if you live in the South, you're aware of civil rights, either presence or absence, all the time. Much of our thought centered on two areas. There was a great struggle among agricultural workers at that time, and particularly farm workers. [0:20:00] Cesar Chavez and another fellow by the name of Larry Itliong was in the process of forming the United Farm Workers union, and they were engaged in a big struggle in central California with the Gallo Company around the grape industry. Later on, it went on to lettuce and other things.

So, our union and many of our folks identified with that, so we were quite aware of the power and the pressure that major agribusiness could put on workers. The same in the civil rights struggle; the real issue of the southern civil rights fighting was really about economic exploitation, the same as it was with the Mexican farmworkers.

EC: And so, did you think about that through that time period? I mean, were you—?

WL: We thought about it, but there wasn't at that point a whole lot we could do. I believed, like Dr. King believed, that trade unions as a vehicle, as an institution, can have great impact on the processes that govern people's lives. But I didn't understand how those could be implemented.

What probably had a major piece of influence was when we took on the simple question of survivor benefits for the survivors of those who ultimately dug the Panama Canal. The descendants were without any benefits whatsoever, even though our ships were sailing easily through the canal. There's probably about three hands full of these people left. The government

has a basic responsibility, I think, to do something for them. So we, under the affairs of our department, began to look at this issue.

Secondly, the whole question of minimum wages and the areas that were left out for consideration for minimum wage status. These areas were, by and large, African American workers, in contrast to the others, who were workers from all up and down the southern hemisphere. But these were workers who were denied minimum wage coverage, people who worked in private hospitals, nursing homes. As we thought about this, this really required some involvement of the union, if we were going to raise the issue. And we did, and we ultimately were victorious in getting coverage under the Interstate Commerce Clause for *these* workers.

EC: Was there a minimum wage change in 1966 that extended it to agricultural workers?

WL: I don't recall that, but I think it was about '66, '67, under the Interstate Commerce Clause, that they extended it to private hospitals and nursing homes.

EC: Okay. What I'm thinking of, and I'm not exactly sure of the date, but there was a period, I think, sort of right after the Voting Rights Act passed, sort of in that timeframe, where there was, I think, a dollar-an-hour minimum wage for agricultural workers, which became the impetus for plantation owners in the Delta to sort of finish mechanization and just completely run people off the plantations, which is part of what led to the poverty, the sort of extreme hunger that led Marian Wright to propose the Poor People's Campaign with King. And so, I was wondering if you were aware of any of that?

WL: I'm just not aware of that, but it's clear that the minimum wage is both a blessing and a curse, I mean, because the employers simply take advantage of workers in certain categories. And there's a real need to see the minimum wage, really, as almost a floor for the

improvement of the quality of life for folks who are either sub-skilled or unskilled, but doing menial work for which the employer decides the value of it.

EC: Can you—in your extensive work, do you have ideas for better ways to protect workers' rights and access to living wages and minimum wage?

WL: Well, I think collective bargaining is a simple, pure system.

EC: Yeah.

WL: I mean, where workers have only their work to put into the game, employers have to measure the value of that, and you can't do it unless the two of them come together. On the workers' side, they have the right to withdraw their labor. On the employers' side, they have the decision to make about profit versus [0:25:00] fairness, and generally they choose profit.

EC: Yeah.

WL: And so, absent a vehicle for workers to participate fully in the decisions that affect them, you are going to always have exploitation.

JB: [Can we pause]?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back on.

EC: When you came to Washington, working for the union full time, were there people who were important influences when you moved into that new job?

WL: Yeah. The fellow who was president, Wurf, sent out to talk to me about it was a fellow by the name of Al Billick. And our union was very—I mean, our union was not new, but our philosophy had changed substantially, and we were making the case that public employees had the same rights as private sector employees. I mean, there's fundamentally no difference in what many of us did. And the fact that the civil service system, as I said earlier, had gone far

beyond its mandate, we felt that we were entitled fully, if workers so chose to organize, to organize, be recognized, and bargain the contract like workers in the private sector.

And that was so very new. And the proof of its newness was that public sector workers were joining us by the thousands, because they had never had or heard this kind of a presentation to them as their rights. And there were no—there were one or two states that allowed the process but did not necessarily have the laws that protected workers in that process. There were many elected officials who saw the unfairness of the system who were prepared—who actually bargained with public sector entities and proceeded to politically achieve the results of bargaining. I mean, the old argument was that the city, the county, the state is sort of a supreme power, and the taxpayers pay the way. Well, the fact is that they *are* sovereign entities, but their basic responsibility is to provide public service. And so, they are employers at the same time.

EC: How did you end up being involved in the Memphis strike?

WL: Well, like a lot of people, I got caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. [Laughter] I was, as I say, doing legislation and community affairs, which is something that I was in the learning phase of. This was in 1968. I ran into the president in the hallway one day, and he says, “What are you doing for the next couple of days?” And I said, “What I’ve been doing for the last couple of days.”

EC: [Laughs]

WL: He said, “Well, I’d like for you to go to Detroit and do some work there,” and I agreed to do it. And he called me back a little while later and says, “There’s something going on in Memphis. You’re from Memphis. Perhaps you could go down, take a look and see what it means.”

The Sanitation Department in Memphis, Tennessee, was sort of in turmoil. You had men who had worked there the better part of their adult life and still earning wages that allowed them to qualify for every poverty program that existed there. As Dr. King once said, it was really the true story of the working poor. They were caught in a political squeeze between a brand-new mayor, who had got elected in a brand-new system of government. And he won his election on probably some of the strongest racial themes that had been seen for a long time. So, he felt he owed the black community nothing and certainly in his newfound power was not going to tolerate a union, talk about safety and health and wages and those kinds of things. So, a stalemate developed between a brand-new mayor and a brand-new system of city government.

Prior to the strike starting, there had been an attempt by these workers to influence the city, and they were enjoined by the local court from that. The catalyst to this new effort was men getting killed in the back of their garbage truck by the packing mechanism that scooped up the garbage and forced it into the back of the truck. This system and the equipment had been [0:30:00] complained about for some time, but the city—new government, new mayor, old problems—they didn't see the need to address any of those problems at this time. This sort of festered for a while, and then the catalyst, as I said, was the men being crushed in the back of the truck. The remaining workforce just said, "We've just had enough of this."

Well, the last thing you need in a city like Memphis, Tennessee, in February is a garbage strike. I mean, strikes don't come because workers are mad. Strikes come because they are frustrated and have no ability to resolve the issues that contribute to their frustration. So, they were preparing to strike or to do something. And I went from Detroit to Memphis just to get sort of a look at what was going on. And it was clear that this was a major issue that wasn't going to

resolve itself in 24 hours, because the city was entrenched in its position and the workers were in theirs.

And I sort of passed this on to the president, and we thought about it for a minute. We were subsequently notified by the *Washington Post*, a fellow from the *Washington Post*. I can't recall his name now, but he was coming back, oddly enough, from a meeting in Marks, Mississippi, that Dr. King had been in as a part of his early movement towards the Poor People's Campaign. And so, they called us and said, "Looks like there's a strike in Memphis, Tennessee." We said, "What do you mean, a strike in Memphis, Tennessee?" They said, "You ought to check it out." So, we did again, and it was true. The men were in the process of refusing to go to work. And ultimately, they took that position.

And I was there to work with them, myself; a fellow by the name of Jesse Epps, out of Clarksdale, Mississippi; one other fellow by the name of Joe Paisley, out of East Tennessee, I think, Nashville. And what we tried to do was just give some direction and some support to the workers until we figured out exactly what we were up against. And the strike just got bigger and bigger. It was a classic confrontation between a city with total power and a group of workers with no power, other than a good idea.

And the strike lasted for 67 days. And clearly the story was Dr. King ultimately saw this as a great contradiction, you know, in the rich nations and certainly rich cities, yet you have people working for wages for which will not allow them to bring themselves out of poverty. I mean, if you work every day, you ought to earn a wage sufficient to allow you to raise our family and so forth.

During the course of the strike, in the early days, Roy Wilkins came down, Bayard Rustin, ultimately Dr. King. This was a very quiet strike. I mean, it was not well-known outside

of the city of Memphis. And we tried to ask people to come down and take a look, identify with it, who would bring some press with them, because the southern press don't give you a whole lot of play on workers' activities. When Dr. King came, because he was traveling with the national press, people had the opportunity to see exactly what was taking place. And my hat and heart goes out to the men who participated in that, because, I mean, whatever they had, it was on the line in that struggle.

EC: How did having Dr. King come in change the dynamics of the strike and what you were trying to do or able to do?

WL: Well, we had spent a good deal of time trying to keep this as an employer and employee issue. And because we felt pretty strongly that if it became a question of a racial polarization, that there would be little sympathy for the men themselves because nobody knew anything about sanitation workers. But it was impossible to do that. I mean, all of the elements, you know, suggested that you were going to ultimately wind up there. What Dr. King did was made this analogy that here is the problem [0:35:00] in America. You've got people who work every day that don't earn a sufficient enough wage to get themselves out of poverty. We did an analysis of all the workers in that participation and 85 to 90 percent qualified for public aid, yet they worked every day.

And, as we sort of talked to people, we really began to understand that people had no sense of the role that sanitation workers play in the social service system. I think many of them thought that they just put their garbage out and it just disappeared overnight, as opposed to somebody getting up at four o'clock in the morning and coming by, picking it up, putting it on their shoulder, taking it around front and throwing it in the truck.

EC: So, was this people in Memphis that you're talking to about this, or every—the world?

WL: I think at that point in time, it was people generally.

EC: I mean across the country, yeah.

WL: I mean, the last person you generally think about is somebody who picks up your garbage. I was on a radio show once out of New York, and Westchester, which at that time was—and probably still—pretty well-to-do. So, a lady called in and was talking about, or making comments about, “You're paid for the value of what you do.” And I said, “Well, that's not quite true.” [Laughter] She said, “Well, you know what I mean.” And I said, “No, I don't know what you mean.”

I mean, if you wait until about June or July, a garbage sanitation worker is somewhat more important than a lawyer, in the context of the impact they have on public health. And so, it was very quiet for a little while on the phone. And she said, “Well, thank you for your answer.” “Well, I thank you for your question,” because there is a lack of assessed value of public services. And the well-to-do tend not to need public services. And so, you have these contradictions. If you get into a debate about a tax increase for sanitation work, you're probably not going to make it, so—as opposed to if you want to build a sports arena.

EC: Um-hmm. Yeah.

JB: Can we pause?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

EC: There was quite a bit of organizing throughout the Memphis community in relation to this strike.

WL: We had to first get people to understand what was taking place, because these men, as I said before, had never been seriously thought of. What we asked them to do, because they touched every home in the city once or twice a week, and we asked them if they would do two things if they had decided to make this confrontation. First of all, they needed to go back home and talk to their wives, because the last thing you need is home pressure if you're in the middle of a confrontation. And the second thing is to take a simple leaflet and leave it at the home of every home you touch in the course of your day's work and explain to people what it is that's taking place. So, at least they're neutral at best, and hopefully some would be supportive.

And that's what we got. We got pretty much solid support in the African American community, because these are the people who live next door. We got lukewarm support in the white community, because, bear in mind, they just had an election for a new form of government and new political leadership, and the belief was that the national union had come down to take advantage of the city of Memphis, some of this fostered by the Justice Department under the leadership of J. Edgar Hoover. But, for a union that's somewhat mature, the last thing you're going to have in the winter is a garbage strike in Memphis, Tennessee.

EC: Right.

WL: And we were able slowly but surely to attract the religious community, at least to listen to the discussion and debate. Ultimately, we wanted them to support us, too. But, I mean, it took a while, because the South, not just in the white community, but in the black community, also, was not tuned into public sector trade unionism.

EC: I know that the slogan that you see on the signs, "I am a man," and I know a historian who's written some interesting things about sort of what that means in terms of men and women, and that some people have really focused on this as something about [0:40:00]

manhood. And she says you can look at pictures and see the huge numbers of women out on the streets, protesting this, and so, she argues that it's a lot more complex than that.

WL: Oh, it is. In spite of the wages and benefits and lack of safety and all that kind of stuff, there were no tangible demands on the table that was the core of the strike. It was the lack of respect, the absence of dignity, that caused these workers to say, "We've just had enough." And it was just really so hard to define. I mean, if you talk to a reporter, and he says, "What's this about?" And you say, "Respect and dignity," and he says, "Oh, yeah, right." Well, there was just no understanding of it. And the men themselves you could listen to them talk and you could see that, for many of them, this is their first stand against a system that had virtually robbed them of any self-respect, both as workers and even in their homes, you know, children who really didn't believe they were doing anything worthwhile.

And so, James Lawson, who joined the strike in the early days, had a press conference one day, and he was defining racism. And he says that racism, in the context of what we're talking about was when a person treats a man like he's not a man. And we didn't think about that much at that point, but it became very clear that we had to have something that held this thing together. So, one of the local ministers and myself was charged with going out, figuring out something. [Laughs] So, we sat down one evening at the Peabody Hotel there in Memphis, Tennessee, and we just started sort of playing with words and what-have-you. And what came to us was the statement that James Lawson had made earlier, and we tried to put it as simple as possible. And if you've seen one of the signs, they're sort of block letters, you know, four words, and it simply said, "I am a man."

And the impact of that on the *workers*, I mean, it defined for them *all* that they were about, because these were not young workers. These were men who were middle-aged or older at

that time. And I think they were replaying some of the disrespect they had heard, because, you know, in the South you could go from boy to uncle to grandpa, without ever stopping at man. And so, they were so proud that this sign defined what they saw as their struggle.

EC: And can you talk about how you can have that slogan, and my understanding is it doesn't exclude women, that they're still—that the women identify with this issue, not in the same way, but in a significant way that invites their participation?

WL: Well, I mean, if it had not been for the women, we'd still be on strike in Memphis. I mean, women—wives and neighbors—did so much to give their support to the effort. This was in no way a sort of a macho kind of thing. It was much more an emotional kind of thing and an expression of the frustrations that they had experienced over time, not being able to play the simple role that a man would play in a family setting. There was just tremendous women support, and everybody had a role to play.

EC: Can you talk more about the different kinds of contributions different people, different groups made?

WL: Well, by the time we got into about midway the strike, we had logistical needs like you wouldn't believe. We had feeding needs. We had all kinds of economic needs. The churches' role became sort of spiritual. Every day we had to have an activity that gave people a chance to vent. So, the women would cook, the women would do the office work, the women would march on the picket lines. I mean, they did everything that they needed in order to make the strike successful. And, I mean, there's a tremendous story that needs to be told about the role that women played in the Memphis sanitation strike.

EC: And what about Reverend Lawson? You mentioned him a minute ago.

WL: James Lawson was one of the unique individuals who had been a longtime aide and ally [0:45:00] of Dr. King. Jim had studied Gandhi tactics, or studied under Gandhi, I'm not sure which one, maybe both. But was a very strong spiritual leader in the Memphis community. And he identified with the strike very early and sort of earned the reputation of becoming the most hated African American in Memphis, [laughter] which was fine with Jim.

But he brought to the strike a sort of new kind of vision, in a very both emotional and intellectual context. And he helped to mobilize other ministers to come to the aid of the strikers. The story that the black church was right there instantly is sort of, you know, literary license by whoever writes it. Because the African American church had little if any experience with unions, period, and public sector unions, probably none whatsoever. And so, people did not want to be dragged into a fight that they didn't understand.

So, it took some time for them to become very clear on what the issues were and why the issues were having such impact on these men. I mean, many people thought they would go back to work the next day. But they didn't. They chose to strike. And no union can force people to strike. Workers strike out of frustration that their problems are not being dealt with.

EC: I'm sure there is—I know there's a lot more I could ask you on Memphis, but I want to make sure we touch on a couple of other things as well.

WL: Let me just make this last point—

EC: Oh, yes sir.

WL: About Memphis. Dr. King saw this, as I said, as the ultimate contradiction for people who work every day, but still cannot lift themselves out of poverty. So, he aligned the Memphis strike with the Poor People's Campaign and he was just totally committed to it. He came to Memphis twice. The first speech he gave was just, as we say, a barnburner. And his

second preparation for the march—he was killed on April fourth—Dr. King gave what has now come to be known as the “Mountaintop Speech,” which was one of the better bringing-together of the struggle of workers and contrasting it with the richness of the country, the freedom, the struggles, because many of these men had fought for the country in World War II. He just saw this as the great contradiction.

And the tragedy is that the powers-that-be in Memphis did not listen to what he was suggesting, because his assassination did not have to take place. And I’m not one of those who still convinced that that James Earl Ray as a lone person did this. I mean, you’ve got a burglar who gets from Memphis to Europe with no support. That’s kind of a stretch.

EC: How did—?

JB: Let’s pause for a second.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay.

EC: I know that one of the things that people talk about, in terms of King coming to Memphis and the two visits, is the issue of nonviolence.

WL: Right.

EC: So, maybe you could speak to that.

WL: Well, there were young folks in Memphis who thought that the tactics were not sufficient, and they were anxious to get engaged in the strike support effort. There was a group there called the Invaders, Coby Smith, a whole bunch of young kids who were community-minded and certainly committed to the benefit of the community. But promoting violence—that wasn’t them. As the record shows, and certainly the Senate committee hearings conducted by Senator Frank Church a year or so later, showed that many of those who participated in the

violence were provocateurs, some from the FBI service and I guess some from other places. But on the day of the last King march, the window breaking and all of the violence and damage, this was a combination of things, and it was not young people by themselves. It was provocateurs. And the sad part, there has never been a full [0:50:00] review of that participation.

EC: Yeah.

WL: And I think the effort was to ruin King's image as not being able to, at that point in time, hold a nonviolent assembly, whether it be a march or a rally.

EC: I know that there was concern for King and others in SCLC about what the implications of this would be for the Poor People's Campaign, bringing so many people to Washington.

WL: Well, I think that was the, I think, the thrust and probably the lynchpin that made some folks decide to help the violence. I mean, trade unionists are well-disciplined people. I mean violence is not an asset. And what they used it for on that day was to polarize the city, the county, and the state. And, I mean, they succeeded in doing just that, because the strike, we think, would have been shortened, absent the violence. The mayor brought in the National Guard, and a whole new set of dynamics were put into the play.

EC: What were your interactions with Dr. King in that context?

WL: I met with him only once, at the Rivermont Hotel at the end of the march that was broken up that day. I forget the date. And it was just an analysis of what took place. I was in meetings where he was present with a lot of other folks, but that day he simply talked about the downside of what had happened.

EC: And what was that like, that meeting like?

WL: It had been a pretty exciting day, I mean, and we were trying to assess it. We were trying to figure out what do we do next. And of real concern was what are we exposing these men to, or what are we allowing them to expose themselves to? And the word was: There has to be another march.

EC: Yeah. So, what kind of impact did his assassination have on, from your perspective, the Memphis strike, and maybe you personally?

WL: Well, let me do the last one first. It had an incredible—it was a life-altering experience on me personally, because, you know, it was just *unbelievable* that something like this could happen, totally unnecessary. But in the context of the strike tactics, we heard one reporter from a local paper wrote an article that said he was just so sorry that Dr. King had been killed in Memphis, with emphasis on *in Memphis*. So, for us who were staff, I mean, our commitment was pushed to the hilt. I mean, we had to do something with this thing.

But we at first had to resolve the question of street violence, not so much by strikers—by other people who were just so frustrated over the assassination of Dr. King. And then, you had a whole lot of wackos from other places, Arkansas, Mississippi, etcetera, who saw this as an opportunity to act out some of their pent-up hostility. So, we in Memphis had to get a system of safety for strikers. We had to sort of help the church and the other parts of the community provide a sense of protection for people who were going to be exposed since the police were just openly hostile. So, we had to work on that, and at the same time have to decide what the men want to do. And they were ready to go back, as they say, downtown, because the marches were from Clayborn Temple to City Hall, so to speak.

So, after the memorial service, you know, which was held, I guess, a week or so later, a couple of weeks later, after his funeral service in Atlanta, we got back to strike tactics. President

Johnson gave us a tremendous amount of help—I shouldn't say *gave* us, but in an effort to resolve the issue, assigned Undersecretary of Labor James Reynolds as a mediator in this process. [0:55:00] And Mr. Reynolds searched out and found a fellow by the name of Frank Miles to work with, because the mayor just refused to negotiate, refused to discuss—you know, postured for the cameras, and etcetera. And it was really time to resolve this. And, in contrast to the fact, we had resolved this strike *twice before*. [Laughter] So, I mean, Dr. King's passing, I'm sure, put some pressure into that situation.

EC: Yeah. I know you said initially you were trying very hard to keep it as a labor issue.

WL: Right.

EC: Clearly, with King's involvement, it becomes very identified with civil rights.

WL: Well, it became that before King came.

EC: Okay.

WL: There were civil rights activists in town. There were—not necessarily who knew anything about the union, but they just saw men on strike. And the fact that 99.9 percent of them were African Americans, you know, sort of said what it said.

EC: So, how did that—I mean, in the end, did you think that was a good thing? Or did it change your thinking on that at all?

WL: I think for a while, I thought we—ultimately thought we should have identified it as a racial issue from the start.

EC: Yeah.

WL: And our hope was that rational thinking white Memphis would see this for what it was. It was a labor dispute, and the conditions, I mean, could be reviewed by anybody. What did happen, we found a way to take some well-to-do white women to visit the homes of not-so-well-

to-do African American women, husbands of sanitation workers. And they obviously couldn't believe what they were seeing. And we had hoped that they would become a voice of moderation and observation in this process.

There was enough pressure generated to get the mayor to participate in some forums, Q&A kind of stuff. And when people heard the conditions under which the men worked, the other factors, you could see people's minds changing. For a long part of the strike, people just blindly committed to the positions that Mayor Loeb took without any discussion of whether or not they were accurate.

EC: Um-hmm. You mentioned just a few minutes ago that the strike had been resolved twice before. Can you talk about what—?

WL: Right. We—in the early days, one or two days after the strike started, several of the staff people, including myself, was in the mayor's office, talking to the mayor, trying to explain to him what was going on. And it was a very simple process at that point. The men say they want to have the union speak for them, and they want to talk about safety and health, because they've just had these men get killed.

And the mayor took the position that this was an illegal strike, and that he would not talk to people who were breaking the law, which was about as backwards thinking as you could find. So, we said, "Look, this is not complicated. Let us sit down and talk about what we're trying to solve." And so, he allowed, appointed this fellow, a fellow by the name of Genotti, which was one of the city attorneys. Mr. Genotti and a couple of us went into a side room and started working on what do we think it would take to get this resolved. And so, we came up with what we called a recognition clause, etcetera. We agreed with it. The committee agreed with it. And

since, Mr. Genotti represented the mayor, we assumed that he certainly wouldn't agree to anything that the mayor didn't agree to. [Laughter]

So, we took it back to show him this one paragraph or paragraph and a half deal, and the mayor went bananas, you know. [Laughter] And so, we kept saying—The hardest thing to do is to try to work with somebody who don't know what *they're* doing. And so, it was clear to us that they just had their hands full and had no background on what's taking place.

The second time sprang from a meeting that we had, which involved the mayor. And President Wurf was there. We talked about the issues, and each day this strike goes on, you get some new issues, [1:00:00] because—

EC: Yeah.

WL: People are going through a little bit more pain. So, we finally found something that we thought everybody could agree on. It didn't involve money, none of that. And the mayor said he thought he could live with that. Well, somebody from the mayor's side called the press following the meeting and gave them the story. And the next morning's headlines was, "Mayor Capitulates." [Laughter] And, you know, everything just unraveled.

And he was taking polls in the white community, how many was for him and how many was against him. And as long as he had his pro-support out there in big numbers, he figured why does he have to worry? So, he just walked backwards from the agreement we had reached.

And ultimately he never did come back into the discussions. He put some city council people—well, there was a—one point let me make. There was a fellow there who was not necessarily pro-union, but he was pro-fair. And he had worked with a number of the council members and had gotten enough—he was one vote short of getting the city council to get engaged and involved in finding a solution to this thing. And his name was Lou Donaldson. I

spoke to him years later, and he said that he was just so dismayed and really took the burden himself for Dr. King's assassination, because if he—he just said he could never have—he did not find the one more vote that he thought he needed, and that if he had been able to be more convincing, perhaps it never would have happened. I'm not sure I agree with that, but that was his stories.

But in the end, after the assassination, we found ways and means of putting language together to form an agreement. And the mayor stood back from it and allowed it to move forward through the city council. And by then, it *was* about money. And the mayor never put any money into the settlement. But one of the fairly wealthy industrialists there in Memphis, a fellow by the name of William Plough, who owned Plough Industries, put up enough money to satisfy the demands that were on the table, and we then moved the contract toward ratification.

EC: From what you were just saying and what I've read, it seems like Mayor Loeb was a big stumbling block.

WL: Well, he was *it!*

EC: Yeah.

WL: I mean, there was no—I mean, the city council once recommended a resolution, and apparently, they were jackhammered into backing away from that. But Mayor Loeb never engaged in it. He said it was an illegal strike and he wasn't going to break the law, which is a strange outlook for a major employer. But in the end, the city council ratified the agreement, the workers ratified the agreement, and Loeb just went his merry way.

And the irony is that Loeb became a protester *himself*. There was a big agricultural issue in '69 or '70, I forget, when the tractors all came to town here in Washington, D.C., and circled the Capitol, and did all this—well, he was a leader in the tractor protest movement. [Laughter]

EC: So, do you take credit for teaching him protest tactics? [Laughter]

WL: I kind of think that at some point in time he regretted having painted himself into a corner early in this strike.

EC: He certainly did.

WL: And it became a question of face-saving, even to do the right thing.

EC: Yeah. So, Mr. Lucy, I know you said you had a meeting to go to, and it's right about 12:00. Can I ask you just a couple of big questions about the rest of—some of the other highlights of—I don't even know if that would be the right—and then, you can pick and choose and answer what you—?

WL: Sure.

EC: So, I know that you were instrumental or crucial in organizing the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, and also the Free South Africa Movement. And, of course, we're approaching the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, and I know sometimes people miss that “Jobs” part of the “Jobs and Freedom,” and the economic issues.

WL: Um-hmm.

EC: And sort of related to this, to sort of the significance, I guess—well, I'm thinking in terms of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, sort of—AFSCME, I understand, was a pretty white union when you joined it, nationally. I don't know if that's right.

WL: Actually, when we joined it, the percentage of people of color was higher, [1:05:00] but the union was smaller.

EC: Okay.

WL: The Coalition of Black Trade Unionists came about, really, as a protest and reaction to the AFL-CIO's almost refusal to get engaged in the battle between George McGovern and Richard Nixon. And I believe—I forget what year that election was.

EC: '72?

WL: '72, I think. You know, the endorsement process is critically important. And we had watched Richard Nixon for four years, with his price controls and wage controls and his just overt disdain for the African American and poor community. So, at the convention of the AFL-CIO prior to the Democratic national convention, the AFL-CIO had taken a position of neutrality, which in our community suggests that one is no different than the other, or one is no better than the other. And we've got Richard Nixon with a dreadful record with regards to working people, poor people, black people, as opposed to McGovern, who had a progressive record, both in his participation in Congress, in the Senate, I should say, and otherwise.

So, our view was that clearly your decision to remain neutral does not take into consideration the impact that one candidate has had on our broad community. And we believed that there was a real need for our voice to be in that process, and not that the AFL-CIO was wrong or bad; it just simply had not considered in the context of *our* interests what Nixon was and had done and would do. And so, some of us decided that we had to figure out how to make sure our voice was in the room.

So, about four or five other colleagues—Nelson “Jack” Edwards from the United Auto Workers, Charlie Hayes from what is now the United Food and Commercial Workers, which at that time was Retail Clerks or something like that, Cleveland Robinson from District 65, there was one other, Bill Simons from the American Federation of Teachers—we concluded that we ought to really have a meeting and just talk about what had just happened and to see how we can

sort of influence this process in years to come. And we thought that rather than ourselves having all the wisdom, we ought to ask some other people.

So, we set a meeting for Chicago and just sort of talked to people, said, “Here’s what we’re thinking about doing. If you want to be a part of this conversation, come to Chicago.” We didn’t have a mailing list or Tweepsters or Tweets or email or any of this stuff. It was just word of mouth. At this meeting 1300 trade unionists showed up, and the surprise—we didn’t even know there was that many out there! But obviously, it was an idea that lots of other people had thought about, some of them had actually done. Mr. Randolph, A. Philip Randolph, had had the Negro American Labor Council, NALC, I think it was labeled, and they had worked for a number of years on some of these same kinds of issues, but it was never—it was not as serious as it was in 1972.

So, when we had the convention, we did not say, “We have formed the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists.” We said, “We ought to take about a year and talk about this, and it’s got to be talked about in all parts of the country.” And so, lots of people were given assignments to go here, go there, meet with workers, meet with labor leadership, black leadership, and raise the question: Is this a time for such as this? And it was not set out to be a Coalition of Black Trade Unionists.

At the end of the day, we came back into a second convention, and the answer in response to the question was, “Yes. We need an organization such as this to make sure our voices don’t get lost.” And we *intentionally* called it the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, I mean, with malice of forethought, I should say. [Laughs] And the idea was to get people to—I mean, there’s nothing wrong with diversity. There’s nothing wrong with people getting together to discuss mutual concerns. But we said we’ve got to be very clear the issues we’re going to deal

with, we're going to come at from a black perspective. [1:10:00] And everybody that—I mean, it's open to membership for everybody, but that's the focal point. And the convention voted to name it that.

And we've grown to some 55 chapters now, some just dynamite coalitions of workers, some, you know, label only. But it has brought to the consciousness of folks that there are unique problems that women have in the workforce, Hispanics have in the workforce, African Americans. And you can't sort of use a philosophy of 1948. I mean, it's a little bit different now.

EC: And do you think you've been able to have an impact through that on the sort of approach of the broader labor movement?

WL: Oh, I think so! I mean, our initial argument was that we're not in the room when these decisions are made. The executive council in those days was substantially smaller. Now, I mean, in 1955, we increased the council by 12 persons, aside from those who may have gotten elected on their own. But now, it's a diverse policy-making body, with women, with Hispanics, with Asians, with African Americans. So, when you take on domestic economic policy, when you take on foreign policy, I mean, you're speaking about folks who are experiencing the impact of it on a daily basis. Many hold high levels of leadership in their own individual organizations. In those days, Mr. Randolph, I think, was probably the only African American on the council, perhaps Mr. Dellums, C. L. Dellums. But the fact is that people have educated themselves as to the role and value of trade unionists, and they are full participants, and we call ourselves full partners. And we have lasted 43 years, a little bit longer than a lot of others. But I think—you know, we're still going at it.

With Mr. Mandela, let me just spend a moment on that. We have long since, we being the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, believed that apartheid was an abomination that should not

exist. And we have long held that there ought to be held free and fair elections, not just in South Africa, but across the undeveloped world. I mean, people ought to have an opportunity to participate in the decision as to who will lead them. Apartheid was a special brand of evil that a lot of people made excuses for, and it was “go along and get along.” In 1984, I believe it was, we just started to look at this. How can a free labor movement really work side-by-side with something like apartheid?

And, again, the American Labor Movement did not step up to the challenge in front of it. So, we took on the battle of sensitizing the country to the evils of apartheid. President Reagan, I believe, was in office at that time. And we set out with a specific goal to undo it, or disengage U.S. policy from Africa in general, well, South Africa, specifically. Under the leadership of Randall Robinson, we helped form what is called TransAfrica, and it was specifically a body to put black thought into foreign policy.

In '84, we took on the role of trying to form something that would spread this discussion and debate nationwide, so we formed the Free South Africa Movement out of a number of other movements. And it took a while, but we finally got there. Mr. Mandela was ultimately released from prison, ultimately became president of South Africa, and now is gravely ill. But we have seen Africa in general and South Africa particularly move from, you know, colonial domination to independent democracies in many cases.

EC: Why did you think it was important to bring Mr. Mandela here?

WL: I think on his tour of 1990, it had two purposes: one, to give him an opportunity to define and project what he sees [1:15:00] for South Africa, what he saw for South Africa, in terms of a nonracial society, and secondly, let's just let the country see someone who had spent 27 years in prison for expressing that thought in South Africa. And it was such an incredible

impact on the country as a whole. I think a lot of minds were changed. A lot of people were educated. A lot of people became much more knowledgeable about the fact that there ought to be engagement in foreign policy. I mean, we've been allied with South Africa since the apartheid inception and never complained about it once. And whether it was Reagan or any others who preceded him, both Republicans and Democrats alike, we found a rationale for continuing to relate to an evil system.

JB: Can I ask [clears throat] about, and if you think it's irrelevant, you don't have to answer, but after the apartheid was abolished in South Africa, there was a period of Truth and Reconciliation.

WL: Right.

JB: Do you think America needs such an acknowledgement of—?

WL: Oh, I don't think there's any question. There's lots of issues that could be put before a truth commission to have folks either admit their participation in it or argue for its larger existence, I mean, if they can make that argument. I mean, you've got just ongoing tragedies that grow out of our, you know, history and our systems across the South. I mean, we profess the need for democracy around the world, yet we sit quietly by while folks are denied the right to vote, or we rationalize the reason why they shouldn't vote. As opposed to South Africa, who—or Brazil, where it's mandatory that you vote. I mean, I think, if we want to really test our system, let's make voting mandatory. And you would see the divisions that exist in the country, with regards to who should participate in democracy.

And I think some of the past ills and racisms that exist not just in the South, but in the North, as well, or across the country, could really bear some airing out and have people simply share their views. I mean, it really goes back to what W. E. B. Du Bois said, "The problem of our

country is race.” I mean, we’re debating now, you know, comprehensive immigration reform. I mean, [laughs] who was here first? I mean, [laughs] everybody is an immigrant of some type, and we’re still debating those kinds of questions.

EC: Mr. Lucy, I want to respect your time, so I know we all have many more questions, but thank you very much for meeting with us today. We appreciate it.

WL: Well, thank you.

JB: Elaine wants to take a photograph.

[Recording ends at 1:18:24]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council