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Interview with Joseph Keenan

by Joanna Skivenes

August 8, 1970

90 minutes

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Respondent: Joseph Keenan
Interviewer: Joanna Skivenes
Date: August 8, 1970

I. Tell me a little about your personal background.

R. I was born in the city of Chicago on the West Side. I come from a family of eight. My dad was a truck driver, and he was a member of the Teamsters Union. I went to two grammar schools. The first was the French school or the Notre Dame School. Then we moved, and I attended St. Jarlath's School until graduation.

I. What year was that?

R. That was in 1912. No, 1910. And I started working as an errand boy (for a firm known as Reich and Freeman. They were ladies' hat manufacturers, who had no union at that time. When a union was organized, I joined.

I. What was the name of that union?

R. That was the Ladies' Straw and Felt Hat Workers Union. And later it became an affiliate of the National Hatters Union. I left Reich and Freeman and went to work for Lepman Brothers. And in 1914, my uncle, who was a member of the Electrical Workers Union, Local 134, had me enrolled as an apprentice. I served my apprenticeship, went through the journeyman stage, and was appointed to a minor job as an inspector at the meeting in 1923. I then went on to become a recording secretary, I worked at the trade serving the apprenticeship with the Chicago Telephone Company. I became a cable splicer for that Company and then transferred to the Inside branch of our Local Union.

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I worked for a number of electrical contractors and then became maintenance man for the Checker Cab Company. Then I went to work for the Federal Sign Company and spent ten years with them as supervising electrician. I then went to work as an electrical engineer with the Sanitary District in 1930 until 1937 when I was elected Secretary of the Chicago Federation of Labor.

I. When did you join the union?

R. 1914. April 12, 1914.

I. And did you become active in the union immediately?

R. No, I had to serve my apprenticeship. After I got my journey man's card, I started to take an active part, and I've been active ever since.

I. Could you describe some of the early days of the electrical union here in Chicago?

R. Well, it was like all the other unions. It was always a very strong union, but in those days the work was limited. We were very, very fortunate when we were able to get a full year's work. Maybe the average work year for the members of 134 was 150 days a year.

I. What were some of the major issues in your bargaining initially?

R. There were just wages and working conditions, that's all. In those days you were very limited. The contracts were just three or four pages long. They dealt with the hours of work, the overtime regulations, and certain types of conditions. But they were very simple

and very compact. And, as I say, those are the issues. There may be other issues in the bargaining that amounted to something, but in those days you were limited to try and get the best wages you could.

I. Did you have any strikes?

R- In those days? Just the one in 1921. The only strike I ever took part in was the strike in 1921 that led to the Landis Award. We never won the strike. We worked out an understanding in 1935, after the passing of the Wagner Act. And what had happened there is that during the war we made some substantial gains in wages. After the election in 1920 when Harding became president, they had a theme or program known as "Back to Normal." The- "Back to Normal" objective was to get the wages back to what they, were before the war. So the bankers closed in on the contractors and advised them that they could cut them off unless they agreed to go to their employees, go to the unions, and have their membership agree to a dollar a day 'cut in wages. It was \$10.00 a day, and cut a dollar, a dollar off of that. Some of the unions considered it, but others wouldn't. In May 1921 they locked us out. The strike lasted for seven or eight weeks. Then they agreed to arbitration. Judge Landis, the appointed arbitrator, handed down the award instead of making a decision on whether to cut the dollar or not. He investigated the working conditions and everything else. And he varied the award. The cuts reduced

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wages from \$10.00 to \$8.80 for the bricklayers' and electricians' unions. They probably went as low as \$7.80 with some of the other unions. So they walked out on the Landis Award. That continued the strike a while. Then there was a committee appointed, headed by Donnelly, the printing man, known as the Committee to Enforce the Landis Award. This activity dragged on. A lot of this work was done non-union. Up to that time all the construction in Chicago was union, closed shop. And they then started an open shop program. That continued until '36 or '37 when they finally worked out an understanding and restored the conditions that existed prior to the Landis Award.

I. How were the working conditions during the Depression? Were you able to get jobs, or was it strict competition?

R. No, It was terrible. There was no work at all. People that worked -in our local union paid ten percent of their wages in order to help carry the fellows that weren't able to, get work. And on any job during that period the most you could work was three days a week. We tried to spread it as much as we could. The unemployment lasted for six or seven years. There was never any kind of full employment. In fact, it was very, very spotty until the start of the war. Things got a little better after 1936, but we never again gained the amount of work we had in the late twenties. The years from '25 to '29 represent the greatest boom time that I ever knew. Building was everywhere until the crash.

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- I. It must have been quite a contrast for your men.
- R. It was. Terribly. There were bread lines. Everybody was in the same boat. There were payless paydays. There was little of everything. People were hungry, and food and necessities were rationed out. It's a period that I don't like to think about. I hope that none of the people who are in the labor movement today ever have to go through what we went through from '29 to '36 or '37.
- I. Was it any more difficult in that time because of the open shop, in terms of competition from non-union electricians?
- R. We didn't get all the work in those days. We tried, but we never did any work in the steel mills or the auto plants. If union journeymen went in there they had to put their cards in their pockets or in their shoes. They couldn't show them. Work was bad. And jobs were scarce. People would, do anything to get work, in order to try and maintain their families. Of course, there were some die-hard union men that wouldn't work under those conditions no matter what happened. Then the war made a great change in the whole picture of things.
- I. In terms of the early days of the union, were the members largely of one ethnic or religious group? Or was it quite diversified?
- R. In those days, in the carpenters and then the painters and the laborers unions, you had different nationalities. You'd have a German local: you'd have an Irish local; you'd have a Jewish local. The carpenters and the painters had Jewish locals. The laborers union in those days

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was generally confined to the Irish, the Italians, the Swedes, and the Poles. The same held true for the carpenters. The carpenters would have an Irish local, a Swedish local, a Jewish local. Same with the painters.

- I. How did these different ethnic locals develop? Was it accidental, or was it fairly deliberate?
- R. In those days, these immigrants came into almost every section of Chicago. The Irish moved into the Irish settlement. And the Jews moved into the Jewish settlement. They, of course, got very clannish. Some of these unions still are.
- I. Today?
- R. They're not as pronounced as they were in those days.
- I. If you wanted an apprenticeship, say, in any local, did you have to be of that ethnic background?
- R. Not necessarily. You weren't bound to it. But if you were going to join a union, I guess it was just natural for a guy to say, "Well, if I have to join a union, I might as well join the Irish local, or the Jewish local."
- I. How difficult was it to get an apprenticeship when you started?
- R. Awfully difficult. You see, there wasn't much work. Mike Boyle, who was a legend here in Chicago with the electrical workers, had an old saying, "There's only so much meat on the bone." And they tried to spread it as much as they could. You see, there was no such thing as full employment in those days.

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I. Were apprenticeships pretty well limited to relatives and friends of members that were already in the union?

R. Yes. It was. Oh, it wasn't a hundred percent, but it was pretty much controlled. And you had to have a relative or good friend to see you through.

I. You mentioned Boyle. Could you describe him a little or tell about his early union activities?

R. I think Mike Boyle was one of the greats. There's a lot of bad publicity about him. They say a lot of bad things about him. But, with my experience of over thirty or forty years real activity, I would consider him one of the great labor leaders of this country. I think he had great foresight. He was a great student of the industry he operated in. He understood the problems of both the employer and the worker. And he was a man that understood human nature. He was a great psychologist. To me he was one of the greats, one of the unheard of greats.

I. How long was he in office?

R. About forty years.

I. Is there anything that stands out in your mind in terms of unusual union activities, other than the Depression and the hard times?

R. Well, I've had an unusual career. I was just a local officer here with the Chicago Federation of Labor, and I had a chance to see the ups and downs. I saw the good unions, what I call the wealthy unions, and the poor unions. You could go from one extreme to the other. When mechanics in the building trades and the metal trades were getting \$1.00 to \$1.25

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an hour, you saw people working in laundries getting 10, 12, and 15 cents an hour. You saw people working in the hotels, chambermaids and people like that, getting \$30.00 a month. I had a great chance to see the spread that existed. I always felt how fortunate I was to be able to become an apprentice in a craft union and get the benefits. First, I benefitted by being allowed to develop my skills, then I reaped benefits in worldly goods such as what I earned and what I was able to absorb.

I. You mentioned the Chicago Federation of Labor, What was your affiliation with that group?

R. Secretary. I was Secretary.

I. For how long?

R. 1937 to 1950.

I. Do you recall some of the activities of the Federation at that time that you were actively involved?

R. Well, one of the great activities, of course, was the radio station. And in those days the radio station was in poor straits. We were trying to keep afloat. In the Federation, the most interesting job was the grievance committee. That was made up of three or four officers, and I was the chairman. These unions I talked to you about, that didn't have the money to pay a full-time officer, we used to go out and help them when they got into trouble, and negotiate their agreements for them. That's when I had the chance to get a view of the cross-section and conditions of each. There were some strikes with the Ladies Garment Workers. We were very active. Then I took

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a very active part in '38 by trying to organize the stockyards. I was with the Butcher Workmen who were trying to organize Armour, you see. We tried to organize them all. But the Butcher Workmen competed with the Packinghouse Workers on the Armour properties. There was a long, bitter fight between the two unions. Of course, we had quite a little opposition from Armour, and we lost to the Packinghouse Workers. Then there was another very important campaign helping the Retail Clerks try to organize the chain stores. We had a bitter fight between two unions concerning National Tea. It was quite a bitter fight for both sides. Finally, it worked out.

- I. Could you tell us some of the details of the Armour Packinghouse struggle, or of the other one, the Retail Clerks?
- R. Well, you see, I'd get calls in the office. I remember one call I'll never forget. A fellow called and asked me if there was anybody listening. He wanted to know if he could talk without being exposed. I assured him he could. He wanted to know how about organizing a union, and I told him, "Well, come on down." And he said, "Oh, I can't come down." He said, "I'd be afraid to come down. Somebody might see me. And as bad as the job is, I need it." So I agreed to meet him. We met at Howard Avenue and Western Avenue about ten o'clock at night. I went out there alone to meet with this committee. They were getting fifteen cents an hour, and they were pretty skilled mechanics, too. The conditions were terrible. They were working ten hours a day, making about a buck and a half or two dollars a day.

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I. What -year was this?

R. This was 1936. You see, the Wagner Act was passed in '35, and people weren't too sure in the first two years of the Wagner Act. It was there, but the employers fought it pretty hard. There were unfair labor practices and a lot of other violations of the law. And we were never too sure whether the law would stand the test. But, once the Act was declared constitutional, things changed. Everybody broke loose. There were organizations everywhere. During those first three years of the Wagner Act there was great organization in Chicago. The Packinghouse case was one. You see, they stalled until after the law was declared constitutional. Going back a bit, I remember my early days as a delegate to the Chicago Federation of Labor. I was appointed in 1921, when I was just a kid. John Fitzpatrick was our president, and "back to normal" operations started. John Fitzpatrick was the vice-chairman of the Steel Organizing Committee during the First World War. Samuel Gompers was the president. And, of course, during the war, through the War Labor Board, they had made a bargain. So they sat down and tolerated us. When the war was over, we tried to get recognition. The steel companies and the Packinghouse Workers put their backs up and wouldn't talk. The Steelworkers' strike was a bitter strike. There were a lot of people killed in that period. I can remember when the Federation used to meet every two weeks in the old Musicians' Hall, and John would come back and report. After about four weeks it was pretty definite that we would have tough going. They broke the union after 7 to 12 weeks. The Packinghouse Workers' offices were right here on Randolph Street. They used to come to the union to the Chicago Federation

of Labor. Their secretary was named Denny Lane. Lane would tell of their efforts to try and get the Packinghouse people to meet with them. They ignored them. So John Fitzpatrick and some other people told them to hold on as long as they could, not to go on strike; but it was inevitable. That's when the riots broke out. They went down South and brought up colored people, and put them inside the yards, and put them in circustents. I don't know how many people were killed. There was a record of 43. There may have been no record of a hundred more. But that was probably one of the bitterest strikes that we've ever had around Chicago. They broke the strike.

Judge Alschuler, Chairman of the War Labor Board, was appointed by President Wilson to come in and handle this case. I'm a little hazy, but I don't think the Packers ever appeared before the arbitrator. Alschuler had by mandate set the wages, and the wages carried through. The packinghouses never accepted it. But they were part of the war effort; they had to furnish the food. They accepted whatever was handed' down, and accepted it 'til the war was over.

I. Do you remember what the wages were at that time?

R. Oh, very low. Twenty cents, twenty-five cents an hour. Very, very low.

I would hazard a guess that it wasn't over thirty cents.

I. To go back a moment, could you pick up with the story about the fellow who was afraid to come to the Federation to see you about organizing a union -- the one you met at Western and Howard Avenues?

R. We handled that case. We got a few of them to set up a local union, and they finally organized a fairly good one. But we had to go over all the

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hurdles. In those days it was a little easier to get decisions out of the National Labor Relations Board than it is today. They didn't have the technique of delay and observation. This was a small plant. but after it was organized, strange as it may seem, I forget the name of the company. I was in it from the very start. O'Brien and I got to be very good friends, and they developed a good union. They made electrical equipment for power companies. It was a really substantial company. But gee, they were anti-union in those days. The majority of the population was anti-union in those days.

- I. How long did it usually take to organize a union from scratch?
- R. It varied. sometimes, if some employers saw the' handwriting on the wall, they'd call you in and ask you what evidence you had. And in those days, we used the cards, you know, the certification cards. And if you came in and gave them a stack of cards, they'd check the signatures on them. They'd accept that. Others would fight you every bit of the way. There was no set pattern, If you ran into a decent employer, you were o.k. There were a lot of paternal employers in those days. They felt that each employee was their child and they generally took the position that they knew what the employees wanted better than they did themselves. And they thought that they were doing great by giving them every consideration in the world. Many of them would be shocked when they'd hear that these people went to a union. And sometimes they'd get bitter. But basically they were pretty decent people. They thought they were right. Many of them never did anything with malice or any intent of getting the best of their employees. They did just what they thought was appropriate. In those days many of the employers were immigrants that had moved ahead.

And those people were all right. But after a period of time they might get a little upset. But they generally came around, and things would work out.

I. You mentioned your affiliation with the Chicago Federation of Labor. Can you tell me a little about some of the important things that they did, or the troubles they had, when John Fitzpatrick and Ed Nockels were **there?**

R. John Fitzpatrick and Ed Nockels date back to 1900. They went through the real bitter periods. There was bitter internal strife. And they went through the real tough times. Potofsky was here during the Hart, Schaffner and Marx strike. That probably was one of the greatest strikes and the most successful strike ever held in Chicago. The conditions were so bad that the very wealthy people in this city, a number of them wealthy women, took an interest and raised the money to provide the strikers with food and things. That probably was the most successful strike, but it was a long strike. Then our own union had a very long strike with the Telephone Company, and we were also successful. That was about 1908, which was before my time, I only read about that. But I have a fairly good recollection of everything from the time that I first started in the Chicago Federation of Labor. The Chicago Federation of Labor was sort of an open forum where each union came down to report. We used to have a gallery there. Students from Northwestern and Chicago University came to observe, and they were welcome. It was a great debating society, too. And it had a function here. It was sort of the coordinator, to bring everybody together; And it was the place where the union could go to get consideration and help. We weren't very

wealthy in those days. Most all the work was done voluntarily. We all made great sacrifices because nobody had any money. And most of the unions were poor. Some of them, like the Milk Drivers and the Truck Drivers and the Cleaner and Dyehouse Workers, probably had some money. But the average union was hand-to-mouth, and the internationals were about the same. I'd say that during those days they were just existing. The only time that the unions, other than craft unions, ever got to mean anything was after the war. I'm talking about the Second World War -- they became great at organizing. And they were able to accumulate treasuries . Then they went out and got the other things, such social considerations that we, couldn't achieve before the Second World War.

- I. Going back to the twenties and thirties again, can you recall the . attitudes of people in general toward labor and toward unions?
- R. We had almost everybody against us -- the state's attorney, the judges, the mayor. There were around five or six judges around Chicago, in the circuit court, known as "injunction judges." There were also Judge Wilkerson, in the Federal court, Denny Sullivan, Carter and three or four more in the circuit court. The opposition could get an injunction any time, and they were sweeping injunctions] They were really tough. And we got no relief from that until 1930. We couldn't win a strike up to 1930. But with the passing of the Norris-LaGuardia Act, at least the the injunctions were taken off our backs.
- I. In terms of public opinion toward the unions, I don't imagine you got too much support.
- R. No, no, we had very little help there. And only people that knew us

associated with us. There were a lot of scandals in those days. And they'd try and build up this graft. Only a few were involved, but they smeared the whole movement.

- I. What about the workers themselves? Was there divided opinion among the workers as to whether or not a union would be advantageous? Did you have any trouble within the working group itself?
- R. Oh, it was tough organizing. We had the railroads; we had the metal trades, you see. And in the metal trades they had the blackball used against them. We got into trouble in the metal industry. They were the first open shop group. Once they put the label on you, you couldn't get work in the industry; You had to change your name and move' around if you wanted to stay in the industry. That wasn't the case in building trades. The building trades were a loose operation anyhow. You only had employment as long as the job lasted, and consequently they put up with a lot more. They didn't fight us as hard in the building trades as they did in the metal trades or the printing trades. They had some terribly bitter strikes here in printing. That, was also before my time. I understand that at the turn of the century, Donnelly and Rand McNally and all the rest were 100% union. They had a strike in 1902. Finally with the Wagner Act in the late '30's we were able to reorganize Rand McNally. But we never were able to reorganize, Donnelly. And I think there was a firm by the name of Conkey that moved out of Chicago and went over to Indiana. When they moved over there, I don't think we ever reorganized them.
- But it was during the '30's when all of these industries had those bitter fights. Many unions were broken at the turn of the century, then came back, and in many cases, after a long period of time reorganized these

people. I think they're still organized today.

- I. In terms of the organizing of unions, did you have any trouble with local prejudices?
- R. We never had time to think about that. We had our jobs. Anything that happened we expected. We had the police against us. I remember the Hart, Schaffner and Marx strike that occurred when I was a kid. The police used to wear high hats and carry clubs. When people would come up to picket, they'd break them up and crack their heads with the clubs. That was pretty much the condition until 1935. We never had a chance.
- I. I imagine fear was a pretty strong element then for many people.
- R. That's right. It was. There were active unionists that went out and took on the problems, only to get their heads cracked and wind up in the hospital . Some of them were killed. But there was a cause and they were the people that saw it through much like the Molly McGuires. These were Molly Maguires in a different field.
- I. What do you think of now, when you look back to the '20's, '30's and '40's as being very different from today?
- R. Well, one of the things today is that the things are coming so easily. Nobody has to put out much effort; it seems to come naturally. Nobody has any idea of what we've put into the labor movement to bring it to where we are today. There's not the dedication. They come in and things are made to order for them. They serve their apprenticeships and they get high wages. Once the department stores and the dry goods stores and these small shops, before they had a union, there was no

wage scale. Everybody had a different wage or had piece work. We had everything you can imagine. But there was no way we could fight back because we had everything against us. We kept fighting. We never let up. But today there's none of that. Take my own office. I pay a kid \$110.00 for distributing mail. When I was a kid, if someone got \$2.00 a week, he was earning a lot of money.

Was there greater cohesiveness and greater union identification?
Oh, yes. Yes, there was. Everybody was united then. One person's trouble was everybody's trouble.

Do you, think that could ever be recaptured?

Not under present conditions. I think we're too well off. I think the only thing that'll recapture this is some drastic happening in the country. I don't want to see it come. But that's the only thing I can see either a war, or the loss of a war, or something like that which you dread to think about. But, you know, catastrophe is what brings people together.

You think the Depression then was a great factor?

Yes. The Depression was a great leveler. During the '20's, the people would come to work wearing silk shirt's. They'd get a little soiled and they'd throw them away. They wouldn't get them washed or cleaned. In those days shirts didn't cost very much, and a dollar and a quarter was a big price for a pair of overalls. They never washed them. They used to wear them a couple of weeks, throw them away and go buy new ones. It was the same kind of extravagance that you see today on a smaller scale. But that wasn't everybody. That was the skilled mechanics and the fellows in the better paying jobs.

- I. Going back to the twenties again when it was fairly affluent, were the unions gaining much strength at that time, or did it really take the Depression to pull them together?
- R. No, we never got anywhere, We never made any progress. "Back to normal" was the slogan which meant back to pre-war conditions. There was a constant fight. We'd make a gain here, then we'd take a loss there. We never stacked it up. But when the bricklayers, or the teamsters made a gain, they kept it. I used to talk about this a great deal at the Chicago Federation of Labor. There was an hour set aside between three and four o'clock for reports of organizations. The Moulder, the Machinist, the Metal Polisher, the Baker, and all the rest were represented. They'd come in and they'd make their reports of progress in organizing. Over on the West Side here, there were a number of small foundries. And there were small machine shops. But the foundries were the worst offenders. These fellows would come in and finally they'd say they had the place organized and they were going to try to get an agreement. Well, in those days, if you got recognition, you were doing great. That was a great victory! And lo and behold, maybe a month later, two months later, while we were trying to get an agreement; management would report they had closed down the. plant on Friday. When the people went back to work on Monday, the place was empty. They had moved down to Southern Indiana, or over to Southern Wisconsin, or down into Southern Illinois because that was all open shop territory and we couldn't do anything. Public officials expressed their strong opposition to organized labor. Community leaders formed what were in effect vigilante committees to stop us. One of the worst offenders was Elkhart, Indiana. I remember going to Elkhart. I worked for Federal Electric. There was a, plaque in the center of the

city, saying come to Elkhart -- they'd help you build a plant. Tax concessions were offered. And, most of all, you didn't have to be bothered with labor organizers. They would guarantee you a wage scale at 30 cents an hour or 35 cents an hour. This was in the thirties.

- I. You said that in the early thirties everybody was against you. Were there any politicians or political aspirants that were able to assist you?
- R. You see, we had a complete change. In the Smith election of 1928, the Republicans first took everything and then proceeded to lose everything. The Depression came in '29. In the 1930 election there was a complete reversal. Everybody on the Democratic ticket was elected. They were a liberal group. They were all young people. We started to move. However, we couldn't upset the judges. Hut the election of '32, the election of Roosevelt,, that was the great change because young people came in with Roosevelt. Roosevelt initiated his New Deal, one of the greatest boons we've ever had. It all began with Section 7A of the N.I.R.A., which gave the unions the right to organize and appoint representatives of their own choosing. The Miners, the Ladies Garment Workers and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers benefitted from it. I believe the N.I.R.A. was knocked out because we started to move. When it was declared unconstitutional, Lewis went in and got the Guffey-Snyder Coal Act passed, which gave new life to the United Mine Workers, a union that was almost completely destroyed. I remember as secretary to the chicago Federation of Labor we used to make a \$25.00 donation to the Miners week after week. They were absolutely broke. The only semblance of an organization was what they had

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down in Southern Illinois. Illinois was the strongest area for the Miners in the country.

I. What about on the local level?

R. They changed. You see, they moved with the tide. Governor Horner was very sympathetic, He brought in Marty Durkin as the labor secretary, and they affected a complete change. It's been that way ever since. Chicago was a really reactionary city in those days. Mayor Cermak came in, and the labor unions always supported the Democrats in those days, in and out of Chicago. When they came to power they treated us pretty good. Mayor Kelly turned out to be a great friend, Kennelly was o.k., and Daley, of course, is 100 per cent.

I. What about the judges?

R. They got the injunctions and things. And they were strictly reactionary.

I. Did anything ever happen to you personally, or to your family, or anything like that?

R. Oh, we'd get these crazy phone calls every once in a while. The only thing that disturbed me was when they called my home. They never bothered me when they called me at the office. But, it bothered me when they called my wife and asked her how she'd like to be dressed in black, and all that other kind of business. But, my wife got used to it. In the early days, the first few of them, it kind of bothered her. It bothered the kids, too.

I. How many children do you have?

R. Two.

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I. Have they gone into anything in the labor field?

R. Both of them are working at the trade. One of the boys is active in a small way in the motion picture business. The other boy works at the trade, but they're both in the electrical business.

I. If you'd go back to the twenties and thirties again, what were the biggest, the strongest unions at the time that were able to help the others, through the Chicago Federation of Labor?

R. One of the biggest was the Streetcarmen. And the others were the Ladies Garment Workers and a third, the Milk Drivers. They were very, very generous. And the Laundry and Dye House Workers were a very, very liberal group. Some of the building trades were pretty liberal -- the Electrical Workers, the Bricklayers, and a few more. But, by far and away the most generous were the Milk Drivers and the Streetcarmen.

I. Were these people consistently represented on the Chicago Federation of Labor?

R. Always. Always. They were always vice president. The Teamsters, generally, in Chicago were always very, very generous, through their Joint Council, and gave of their money, and gave of their time, and gave of their representatives in these tough fights, like the Packinghouse Workers' that I told you about. They'd have a hundred men there in the morning for you, help you pass out pamphlets and not get anything for it. Absolutely nothing. They were just generous with their time.

I. Can you recall the difficulties when the C.I.O. split off and started its own organization?

R. Yes. I was a delegate to the '35 convention from the Chicago Federation

of Labor. And that's where we had the bitter fight -- in Atlantic City. You see, there was a combination of legitimate industrial union leaders, Communists and lefties of all kinds and do-gooders. But the make up of the Chicago Federation was pretty staid. They were elderly men, you know. And they couldn't quite catch up with this young group that didn't have much. They were moving in and were in places that were unorganized, so Lewis broke with the A.F. of L. Well, they all left the Chicago Federation of Labor. Overnight they all left en masse -- the Ladies Garment Workers, the Amalgamated, the Typographical Union, all of them left en masse. That just left the old staid unions like the Teamsters and the building trades and the metal trades; they stayed. We lost the needle trades. We didn't lose the Hatters. They stayed.

- I. Did you foresee at that time that, the A.F. of L. and the C.I.O. would merge again?
- R. I was on the War Production Board for five years, and I represented the A. F. of L. on that board, The more we worked on that board, the more we knew that we never could be effective if we were split. They used to play one against the other. If we were to be as effective as we could be, we would have to get away from the split.
- I. In that convention of '35, can you recall some of the arguments or the splits between the two groups? Were they mainly ideological, or practical, or what?
- R. There were two divisions. There was a division of the craft against the mass production. It was Hillman and Dubinsky and John Lewis leading the fight against John Fry and Hutchison and the craft unions on the

other side.

I. And the animosity continued then until when?

R. Until the merger. It's not over yet. These things don't clear up. People with their set convictions carry them on right to the grave. The only thing is, time will take care of it. And it's getting closer to that time as the people of that era die and new people come in. They're more receptive, and they've got a different outlook. You take the older guys. They never could forget the Depression conditions. And it's pretty hard to talk to kids making \$600.00 a week, or \$500.00 a week, about a depression where people were starving. You waste your breath trying to. I lived through it, but it's almost impossible to talk to these new leaders; they just don't understand what it was like.

I. Would you say that nowadays when it's so affluent and things come easier, it is more difficult to maintain a group identity than it was in the thirties?

R. Yes, they're individuals. Today each fellow has to take his own problems and settle them himself. It's much more difficult to get their support - their assistance today. In the past, the need was so much greater an individual's existence was dependent on collective action.

I. Did you find that the unions helped each other more in the thirties?

R. Yes, oh yes. There was better understanding then. Your trouble was everybody's trouble. That isn't the case today. It is in some. You know, naturally you develop a friendship with people and you become very close. And on that kind of basis, your troubles become the other fellow's troubles.

Keenan (24)

I. Where do you think future directions for the labor movement will lead? Will it organize groups that are not organized now? Or will it stay pretty much within the existing framework?

R. It's hard to tell. Personally, I think that the closer you stay to the basic objectives of the trade union, the better off you are. I believe in a lot of the other things. But I think that there's not enough time today spent learning your industry, learning the pitfalls. You're out on something else. You're out on a number of these things, that are related, but I think when you move out on them and let your own backyard and your own house get into disorder, it's pretty hard to be effective.

I. What about social issues and problems? Do you think unions should be involved in that, or stick pretty much to their traditional issues?

R. I think they should stay on the basic issues, yes. I believe that the unions should be involved with unemployment compensation, minimum wage, health care, and all the things that directly affect their members. But, I think a lot of our social problems are better handled by some other kind of organization.

I. Like political groups; then?

R. Well, COPE is a political group. Its purpose is to advance the interests of organized labor. It is most effective by working within the labor movement and not identifying with either political party.

I. Was there anything that happened to you personally in the labor movement that would help illuminate some of the problems of the twenties, thirties

or forties?

R. No, I think we took everything in stride. I think my experience in the Chicago Federation of Labor, with Local 134, was a great experience. I don't know how they selected me, but IBEW President Dan Tracy called me to Washington to work for Sid Hillman. I would say that was another great experience. It only could happen in America. Here was a fellow with just a grammar school education and a little night school, down in Washington, sitting in on high level meetings with generals and the greatest industrialists in this country, discussing the problems of war, and being just as important in there as they were. Each administration is different, The Johnson Administration, the Kennedy Administration, the Eisenhower Administration, and the Nixon Administration. Roosevelt brought the labor people right in and made them a partner, and they went out and kept the no-strike clause to get the production. But the big interests that control the government don't want us around. And today we don't have an outstanding champion. In the Roosevelt days we had some outstanding friends in important places. We don't have them today. We have a lot of people who pay us lip service, like Goldberg and others, but few real friends.

For effective collective bargaining, I think you've got to know the hard knocks that you, get in your trade, in your job, and know what happens and what you've got to overcome. Unfortunately, today too many third parties are involved in negotiations. Their lack of knowledge and understanding provokes disputes. Their self-interest forces irresponsible positions on responsible people.

Keenan (26)

- I. You find then that union people today are more interested in the economic aspect of unionization rather than conditions and things that you were concerned with?
- R. That's right. In those days we used to try to find work, try to make work, try to ban overtime -- those were our objectives. Well, today it's just the opposite. Our members want overtime. Everybody's looking for overtime.

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