

Interview with ~~Ha~~ Harry Bovshow
by **Morris** Vogel
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C O N T E N T S

Early life	1-2
Educational Director for I.L.G.W.U.	3-6
Second generation garment workers	7-9
Influence of Worker's European background	10
New Deal Period	11-13
I.L.G.W.U. Split from C.I.O.	13-15
Communist effect on I.L.G.W.W.	16-19
Effects of World War II	20-22
McCarthy Era	22-24
McCarthy Recall Movement	25-27
Gaylord Nelson campaign	28
Federal government service	29-30

Interviewer: Morris Vogel

Respondant: Harry Bovshow

Date: October 23, 1970

Side I

I: Can we start with something of your personal life. How did you get involved with the labor movement?

R: This I know very clearly. My father was a socialist, very interested in the trade union movement, who himself left the city of Montreal, Canada when I was a child because he led a strike and lost and would not return to work.

I: What strike was that?

R: He was a teacher. He was a teacher in, shall we call it a parochial school? He was a Hebrew teacher and this was back in 1919, something like that, and he led a strike of thirteen teachers, The strike was lost, twelve went back to work, he would not. He then came to Chicago and continued in his field as a Hebrew teacher. That was my background.

I: I'd like to ask about your father's socialism. Was this a kind of religiously motivated?

R: No, politically motivated.

I: There was none of this religious background that we ...

R: : No, not at all, It was contrary to his religious background. It was a deviation from his religious background. It was based on political-economic thinking rather than religious thinking. That was my background., When I voted for the first time in 1932, my very large family went out and voted a straight socialist ticket. I went to law school, got out of law school in 1932 and for a few years practiced law. I did not do any labor work but was constantly in contact with the people in the labor movement.

I: How did you maintain this contact?

R: I don't know. It was a matter of gravitating to your own kind of people whose interests were' the same. And the people whom I knew were people in the I.L.G.W.U. and so after a few years of that I dropped my law practice and went to work for the I.L.G. in Chicago as an education director, We had a very active educational program. The membership at that time in the Chicago Joint Board, where I worked, was roughly about 7,500-8,000 members. And we had a weekly participation of about 500 members, which is fantastic, It doesn't happen today, The reason for it, I think, is largely the make-up of the people who were in the union and the economy of the late thirties, the early forties, The people didn't have money. They didn't have

television. They couldn't go anywhere, And the union became not only their economic center but was also their social center. They worked near the union office. When the day's work was ended, they came to the union headquarters by the hundreds and spent some time there.

I: You mentioned that the make up of the union was in fact one of the reasons why people took this readily to the education program. What do you mean by the make up?

R: The membership at that time, remember I'm speaking of the late thirties, was largely Jewish -- intellectual, or quasi-intellectual Jewish workers, And, without going into detail, it was common among them. This striving for information, for education was present among those people to a larger degree than among other people at the same economic level. So, since they did come to the union hall, and since they did become acquainted with the educational program, they participated in it. If there were a forum or a speaker or a class, they would enroll and attend, There was very little to distract them. They had nowhere else to go where they would enjoy themselves as much, And so the program was a very successful one. And as I said, there was a weekly participation in classroom activity of about 500. And that would be about 6-7% of the total membership, which is very high.

Q: You mention this tremendous awareness that the union membership had of the world, society around them, political life around them. You mention that the greatest crowds would come for current speakers in current events. What happened politically with this education program? The thirties was the first time the union ever really took stands in politics.

A: It was towards the end; just before World War II, when we started doing some work on the question of race, and it became important because, as there were greater opportunities for work, the Jewish worker pulled away from the trade. It was not a good trade, it was not a high paying trade. We started getting in black members, There was very little friction. The white members went out of their way to make the blacks welcome in the shop and in the union. But there was still the need for discussion, to analyze the problem, to make them understand and this became a set project. This was shortly before our entry into World War II. Other than that, there was never a set goal, it was just a matter of providing educational facilities and no more, This is unusual for 1970, and possibly was unusual at that time for most unions, but in the I.L.G. at that time it was a very common and accepted approach, not only in Chicago but in cities across the country,

ordinarily in another trade, Did I make myself clear?

I: Yes, can you give me any specific examples?

R: What happened in the needle trades has happened in so many other trades. Of those that started off in the shops, some became employers and others became trade union activists and there was a love-hate situation that existed between them. They understood each other, They were able to get along with one another and were able to work out some very fine contracts, and at the same time animosities were as great as could exist between brother and brother. In a family, if there were animosities, they would be greater than between two strangers because of the greater understanding.

I: I asked that because you made a great deal of the fact that this is one of the reasons why the needle workers were able to organize as strongly as they did when they did.

R: No, I don't think that that point is well taken, The fight against organization in the needle trades was just as great as it was anywhere else, and, at times even greater because of the points I have made.

I: What would make people fight? Things like the protocols that were arrived at in New York, an understanding that might not have been reached, were there not this . . . ,

R: The big difference, I would say, between the needle trades and most others is that the trend towards organizing started, on the whole, earlier. It's an industrial type union and the organizing started earlier than the organizing in industrial unions as a whole. It started, I think, largely because of the political background of the Jewish immigrants who came here and became the union leaders. Many of them were revolutionaries and quasi-revolutionaries in Russia and Poland and came to United States. They ran away from Europe but retained their political approach. One avenue for it was the organizing of the workers in the shops in which they worked, so it started earlier, but the opposition by the employers, I think, was as great or more so, without going into the historical background. That's all written up.

I: All right, back to the depression when your interest in the union itself started and your observances of what was going on in the midwestern area. How about when Roosevelt was first elected? You mentioned that your family and the people you knew voted for Norman Thomas. When did Roosevelt's picture go up in the union hall?

R: Yes, Roosevelt's picture started going up around 1934, '35, because by that time he had introduced and passed his first batch of social legislation,

I: You mean the N.R.A. legislation?

R: Even the N.R.A. was a big thing for many unions. It certainly was a big thing in the needle trades and the I.L.G. Because of the N.R.A. they were able to establish what was then considered a high floor for minimum wages. They succeeded in reducing their hours to work to 35 hours, not throughout the industry, but largely, That was very early, Not all needle trade unions did. The Amalgamated Clothing Workers did not, but this was one of the things the I.L.G. fought for and won.

I: Under the blue eagle code?

R: Under the blue eagle code, and maintained it for their more skilled workers, For their less skilled workers, they didn't get the 35 hour week until the late fifties,

I: But you suggested there was a great deal of accomplishment before the social security legislation.

R: Yes, Yes.

I: Can you give me that on a local scene?

R: Well, immediately after the N.R.A. when the codes were negotiated, the cloak-makers, the skilled workers, those that worked on women's suits and coats, and those that worked on what was then called the silk dress, (where one worker put together the entire garment) went on a 35 hour week with overtime after 35 hours. This was quite unusual. Now having been able to accomplish that because of Roosevelt, obviously Roosevelt pushed their socialist background into the background and they became ardent followers and supporters of Roosevelt and the New Deal.

I: This **even** though unemployment is still tremendously high?

R: Despite the fact that unemployment was tremendously high, **yes.**

I: And very few people did actually share in the 35 hour week.

R: Yes, it was almost an unheard of thing but it became true for the skilled workers in the I.L.G. and they liked it,

I: Now more on the time as the depression itself went along and after the beginnings of the C.I.O.

R: Well, you know historically that the I.L.G. joined in with a group of international unions to form the C.I.O., and after a few years, withdrew from the C.I.O. and then rejoined the A.F.L.

I: How about the reasons behind this?

R: The official reason given was that the I.L.G. pulled out of the C.I.O. because, having joined it initially to organize the *industrial* unions, it had no desire or intention to break the trade union movement into two. And since the C.I.O. became an independent federation, the I.L.G. said, "We will have no part of that. We don't want to split the trade union movement." This is the official explanation.

I: How about the actual explanation.

Ii: The actual reason is that, as Socialists and former socialists, their worst enemy was communism and the communist. And the C.I.O. became infiltrated by communists, The I.L.G. leadership wanted absolutely no part of anyone who in any way was a member of the Communist Party. The I.L.G. had its communist fight much earlier. It had its communist fight in the late 20's and the very early, 30's.

I: Was that all before your time or can you remember it?

R: This was before my time. I know of it but it was before my time. But I might say that it hung on. I can remember a forum. There were two Polish intellectuals, Socialists, who around 1937 were imprisoned and then killed, They were taken into Russia. My recollection is a bit vague. They were, at any rate, taken into Russia and they were killed. There were protests all across the world to this killing that took place and the I.L.G. joined in the protests. I remember arranging a forum, and got a man by the name of Foder, who was a foreign correspondent for the Chicago Daily News, and asked him to come to speak about his experiences in Europe and asked him to touch on what happened to these two men. I remember his telling me, "I'll be glad to come, but you know where I stand." I said, "Yes, that's why I'm inviting you." We had about 150 people at this meeting and I remember his talk. He started with one part of the world, went around the world and wound up where he started from, which was Russia. He brought up the killing of these two men. They were killed because they were socialist and because they were trade unionists and because they were anti-communist. Within ten minutes from the time he first mentioned the names I was faced with a near riot in the room. We had, I would say, no more than 25-50 active

Communists in the Joint Board, if that many, but they were very active and very vocal, and when they knew that Foder was going to speak, they showed up en masse. First the questions started, then the accusations came and among them, of course, was that Foder was called a fascist. The leadership of the union couldn't tolerate that. They were there in anticipation of this vocal protest, The screaming match between them arrived at the point where, in a matter of moments, there would have been chairs thrown. Fists were being waved at one another. By sheer good luck I was able to yell loud enough to get the meeting in order. But, the feeling was very, very high. The animosity between the Socialists and former Socialists and the Communists and fellow travelers was tremendous. It wasn't a matter of trying to take over the union because they couldn't, There just weren't enough of them. And they couldn't sway the membership enough, but they did what they could within the union. so, inherently, the objection to anyone who was in any way either a fellow traveller or a member of the Communist Party was so great that the I.L.G. felt the need to withdraw from the C.I.O. simply because there were a number of people in it who were fellow travellers or members of the Party:

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Side II

I: But related to the trouble with the communists going on into the late 30's being one of the reasons for pulling out of the C.I.O., isn't this when the Popular Front starts going and it becomes reasonable for socialism to be pulled together with communism?

R: To some extent. You're obviously very well aware of the history of that period. It depended on how "die-hard" they were and this went on all the way through the '40's and into the '50's. There were some who became so anti-communist in their emotions, not in their reasoning, not intellectually, in the late '30's - early '40's that they continued to object to everyone who had at any time been connected with the communist movement, simply because they had been. Even if it was a "repentant sinner" they wouldn't accept him too readily. They did accept them though. As an example, let us look at the hierarchy of vice presidents in the I.L.G. Anyone who had been associated with a left wing group, no matter how deserving he may have been, could never have made the vice presidency. But a number of them went around repenting, disavowing their relationship with the communist movement, and becoming as "pure" as anyone possibly could

be, and when they were properly purified they were accepted and did become vice presidents. There were a few such incidents, but there were always people among the leadership, first, second, even third level leadership who could never forget the fact that these people had been-on the "other side" at one time or another.

I: In the twenties and thirties?

R: Right, the late twenties, early thirties. But now in the late thirties there was a time when the American left, Social Democrats and all, are following the example of European Social Democrats and are pulling together with the communists. The great battle against fascism was coming up.

I: Did. this do anything with the union? Is this a period in which the unions become more tolerant of those with communist backgrounds?

R: Some did, some not. Again, the die-hards never did. Those who weren't die-hards did attempt to work with the left wing in the fight against fascism. There was something that drew them together of course, in the I.L.G. More so possibly than in most of the other unions, in that the leadership, first, second, third level leadership, were

Jews and this was the period of Hitler. Anything that could be done to stop Hitler was, of course, very important and there was a drawing together. There was activity, joint activity, but as my memory serves me, during the activity they would work together and the moment some specific activity was ended the two groups would pull apart and each group would cuss the other.

I: And their discriminations were built up even further after the pact with Russia?

R: Oh, of course. Then the people who were the die-hard element among the socialists were vindicated. "You could never trust them", you see. This was proof of it. On the other hand, many of those who were pro-Russian, no matter what the Russians did, because this was Mother Russia and the communists had their first start there, were very heart broken and couldn't understand it. This was especially true among the Jewish people.

I: And they did try to make excuses for Russia?

R: Many did not and as you know, the membership of the communist party dropped very decidedly at that point because of the pact. Some remained die-hards and continued to excuse Russia's act because she did it for self preservation.

I: I wonder now when the war begins, prosperity comes back, then whats going on in the I.L.G. here.

R: When the people started working steadily, when wages increased, income increased, there was a falling away from union activity by the rank and file membership, The reason, I think, is purely economic. They began to have a few extra dollars, began to move into better homes. They began to have some money to go to the theatre, the concert, the movie and so these activities began to replace the union activities, which was about the only thing they were able to afford when they didn't have money. Now this did not take them away from the union. They remained good union members, but they became less and less active. In 1941 or so, when huge numbers came to the union halls every day after work as a common occurrence, it was accepted and expected. By 1943, I would say about half as many showed up. And. when I got out of the army after World War II and came over to the union hall, I couldn't recognize it.

I: We haven't been getting the factual things -- where, what union hall, what city is this?

R. Chicago, I'm speaking strictly of Chicago all this time and when I went into the army in '43, I got back in '46,

I couldn't recognize the union hall. There was nobody coming to the hall. When work would end, there would be 25-50 people showing up. Where were all the people? For a while I had thought the union had lost it's membership or the people were out of work because nobody was there, But a story comes to mind. I can remember the first day I showed up at the union hall after I was discharged from the army and saw some of my old friends among the cloak makers and the very warm greetings, the friendly exchange, the usual sort of thing. And I would say, "How are things going?" And they'd say, "Harry, you don't know how difficult it's been. I haven't been to Miami for two years." The great difference between that sort of statement and what had happened 6-7 years ago when they'd never dreamed of being able to go to Miami in the winter! Now they felt so bad because they couldn't leave the work while it was there and they had the money to go to Miami but didn't have the time, This, I think, accounts for a great deal of the change, at least in the I.L.G., the fact that people began to make money, Later on the old timers began to die off, retire, leave the city. The new people that came in were never that close to the union. They remained good rank and file members, but there wasn't that-closeness. "Solidarity" just wasn't there -- so the usual thing of a rising economy hurting

the thing that may have helped it rise. The trade union movement is not what it was in those days because people had more money. The union succeeded and in their success changed the entire structure of the union. Because the people had other things to do the union was no longer as important. Instead of having a thousand, fifteen hundred people at a monthly union meeting, as was true in the late '30s, by the late '40s you would get a hundred people at the meetings.

I: Did the union still retain its strength in negotiating and bargaining?

Oh, yes, if it weakened it wasn't because of the membership but because of economic conditions within the trade. The industry started leaving Chicago. It was a low pay industry even at its best and when it couldn't get enough people at the wages it was able to pay, it went to communities where it could get people at, lower wages. Plus the fact that the industry as a whole changed. Whereas, prior to the war, there was room for the experienced operator who was able to put together a whole garment, as he got older and retired and died there weren't people to replace him. The factories were forced into breaking up the operation, so that two, three, four, ten people would make a single garment. This meant that they needed less

experience, less skill and they were able to get people from the street without any prior experience. It actually lowered the income level of the workers as a whole because the highly skilled workers had been able to make good money but the lower skilled workers were not.

Aside from the economic changes that happened after the war, we then get into the McCarthy period, the period in which any group that's politically active as the I.L.G.W.U. is. . .

I was no longer in Chicago at the time. I might mention this because it's an indication of the social change within the union. In Chicago we had two branches. Both had education programs and both had education directors. During the war both programs were terminated and to this day have never been reintroduced, The zeal for education died out. The number of people ready to participate decreased to such an extent that the leadership decided that it was not economically worthwhile to spend dues money for the few people who were willing to participate, And so when I returned from the army, instead of going back to work as an education director, I found myself going to Wisconsin to work for a while as an organizer and then taking over as state director. I was in Wisconsin during the period of McCarthy. So from now on in, I can only tell you of my experiences from Wisconsin.

F i n e .

R: The McCarthy era was an extremely difficult one, obviously. The trade union movement in Wisconsin was, on the whole, a very liberal trade union movement. But the fear in Wisconsin was greater than it was, I think, elsewhere in the country, excepting possibly Washington, D.C. Some people in Wisconsin started a "Recall McCarthy" movement and I became involved in that.

I: What year was that, do you remember?

R: I can't tell you exactly, somewhere around '52. This was prior to the time when the Senate began to act, well before that time. As a matter of fact the recall movement helped the senators to pick up the courage to do what they did do ultimately. I became interested in the recall movement, I was at a second level of leadership in the state even though I was state director. We didn't have a large membership, A few of us at that level of leadership went around trying to get the top leadership to get involved,

I: Of other trade unions?

R: Of the trade union movement as a whole -- to get them involved in the recall McCarthy drive. And I regret to say that not one of them would participate, not one, We

formed our committee, hut the committee was composed of people at 8 second level, like myself. And I think that this is as indicative of the fear that existed as anything else. The liberal trade unionists would not participate openly, wouldn't lend their names. We got to the point where all we wanted was their names, We would do all the work but they would not lend their names and I think it was just complete fear and nothing else,

I: Was there also fear among people, not of the action they might think of doing, but of their past? Unions had had radical pasts,

R: NO, the Wisconsin trade union movement did not have, although, it had some elements of radical trade unionism,

I: I was thinking of Berger.

R: Victor Berger was a Socialist and the leadership during the thirties and the forties was, if anything, socialist oriented not communist oriented, although there were some communist leaders in the trade union movement at the local level in Milwaukee and in Wisconsin, But there was very little of it because the more liberal went to the socialist end, and you know the story of Milwaukee's socialist background. So it wasn't that. There were some, I don't want to say there' wasn't any. I know of a number who were

involved during the war, especially in attempts to stop production in munition plants, etc., but they were very few. The true leadership was either socialist oriented or Roosevelt oriented -- say left-wing Democrat, so it wasn't that at all. It was partly the fear that permeated the country and hit very hard in Wisconsin. The recall movement was not led by a socialist or a liberal, I don't know whether you know the story. It was led by a Republican.

I: The recall movement?

R: The recall movement was started by a man called Leroy Gore, Leroy Gore published a newspaper in a town near Madison. He was an ardent Republican all of his life, a close friend of McCarthy, close enough so that in the early days when McCarthy didn't have eating money he could come to Gore's house, and stay there and eat there and get a dollar or two from him, When McCarthy ran for office, Leroy was his staunchest supporter and was able to do him a lot of good because he had a successful paper. When McCarthy was going strong Gore came to the conclusion that he opposed McCarthy, McCarthy's actions. He was a little man in every sense of the word, Ye was small in stature; a rather unimposing man, didn't consider himself to be an intellectual, but a very very sincere wonderful, wonderful person, who decided that since he was partially instrumental in getting

McCarthy elected to the senate he owed the people of Wisconsin the responsibility for trying to get him out of office. And he started by writing editorials in his weekly paper against McCarthy. He knew what he was doing and what would happen and if he didn't know he was quickly told by the advertisers that they would withdraw the advertising. The neighbors became very abusive towards him and his family. He had one daughter, as I remember, who was a teenager, thirteen or fourteen, who was abused by the other kids in school. And he persisted out of sheer conviction that he owed a responsibility to the people of this state. I don't know a better way to explain it. Then he started hearing from others who agreed with him and the suggestion was made to him that a recall movement be started, Under Wisconsin law, if a certain number of signatures could be obtained, an election would have to be held. He became involved. He lost his paper. He lost all sources of income.

I: What was his paper?

R: It was a weekly publication.

I: What town was it in?

R: It was Sauk City, Wisconsin. It was not too far from Madison,

Wisconsin, and it was one of the very many weekly publications that you find in semi-rural areas. They live on advertising and with the advertising withdrawn he was out of business. He had a very difficult time making both ends meet, to the extent that he sent his wife and child to live with some relatives; partially to get them out of harm's way and partially because he couldn't afford to maintain them. He persisted in his fight and, as you know, it grew. It never grew to the point where he accomplished the recall, but enough signatures were obtained and enough publicity was generated so that people throughout the country became aware of it and congressmen and senators became aware of the fact that even in Wisconsin there was a good percentage of people who were opposed to McCarthy and the McCarthy tactics. And I give Gore more credit for it than I do any one individual because he was the one who started it. The sad part of it, as I said before, was the sad fact that the trade union movement would not become involved and largely because of fear. We were able to raise money among people, generally rank and file members, to some extent, but not from the unions themselves and not the leadership in the trade union movement.

I: When did you stop as state director in Wisconsin? What happened. after this and where did you go?

R: I worked as state director of Wisconsin until the summer of 1958. I left the I.L.G. because of a rather personal thing: my inability to get along with my superior, who was vice-president of the region. It didn't amount to anything more than that. Questions of policy, of how to do my job, became involved and since he was my superior and I couldn't fire him I quit. I spent about four months, five months, after that working in a gubernatorial campaign for Gaylord Nelson. He had already declared his candidacy and there was little or no money, They were looking for people who could devote time to the campaign and as long as I had no other job that I was doing at that time, I devoted my time and efforts to the campaign. This was in 1958 when, to everyone's surprise, there was a big Democratic sweep and the first Democratic governor of Wisconsin was elected since 1932, I think, or '34. Then I went to work for a community organization called the Hyde Park - Kenwood Community Organization in Chicago. I stayed there for a year and a half. I was executive director of this group. We had about ten people on the staff altogether. The purpose of the organization was to help build a stable interracial community. I left again for very personal reasons. I

found I was devoting too much of my time raising money to keep the organization going rather than doing the work for which the organization was initially started and went-to work for the government at that time in my present capacity.

I: Which is?

R: Well, originally I was the assistant director and since then we have been changed into an administration, now I'm an assistant administrator.

I: And you do what?

My primary responsibility is what we call "technical assistance". It's my job to interpret the laws we administer to the public, to the trade union movement, to the people whom we deal with, We work in the welfare pension field and my job is to interpret the laws to the people who work in the field; the consultants, the banks, the accountants, the ones who have to answer to the government for what they're doing. In recent months our agency has been given additional responsibility. Now we work in the field of the Executive Order 11491, which is the executive order regulating the labor-management relationship between the unions composed of federal employees and the government itself, and we also work in the field of the veterans re-

employment rights, so we have four laws -- the welfare pension, the two I just mentioned, and the law that was responsible for the formation of this agency, which is the Landrum-Griffin Act, which regulates the internal affairs of the union.

I: How does it feel for an old trade Unionist? Landrum-Griffin I know, was a sort of anti-union measure and then the fellows who pushed it were.

R: The government is a very complex thing, I was hired for the job, and it was a high ranking job, without any government experience, simply because I was in the trade union movement.

I. . . When forming the agency, it was decided that they would have one person in each of the regions who came from the trade union movement, who would be able to speak to the trade unionists, who was known by them, and who could work with them and so I was in the fortunate position of being the trade union spokesman within my agency. I didn't have to nor was I expected to change my thinking in any manner, shape or form, I was the trade union protagonist in the agency. So I had no adjustment to make. To this day I have no adjustment to make. I was the labor expert in the region and remained that way.

Thank you very much.

Interview with Harry Bovshow

I N D E X

A.F. of L., 13.
Amalgamated Clothing Workers, 11.
Berger, Victor, 24.
C.I.O., 12, 13, 15, 16.
Chicago Joint Board, 2.
Communist Party, 13, 15.
Communists, 15, 18.
Dubinsky, David, 7.
Executive Order 11491, 29.
fascism, 17.
Gore, Leroy, 25, 27.
Eat, Cap, and Millinary Workers, 7.
Hitler, 18.
Hyde Park Kenwood Community Organization, 28.
I.L.G.W.U., 2, 5-8, 11-14, 16, 19-22, 28.
Landrum-Griffin Act, 30.
McCarthy, Joe, 22-27.
Nelson, Gaylord, 28.
N.R.A., 11, 12.
Roosevelt, Franklin D., 11, 25.
Rose, Alex, 7.
Russia, 18.
socialism, 1, 2.
Thomas, Norman, 10.
World War II, 5, 19.