

B O O K 2 7

Katherine Conroy

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Interview with Katherine Conroy  
By Elizabeth Balanoff  
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Oral History Interview

with

CATHERINE CONROY

August/December 1976  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

by Elizabeth Balanoff

INTERVIEWER: I'm going to ask you some questions in the beginning that take you really far back.. First of all, I'd like to know what you can remember about your grandparents. Tell me anything you can about your background-when your family came here or anything that you know.

CONROY: We can do this kind of short and easy. I'm an adopted child of a couple. My father was born and raised in Milwaukee. My mother was born in Fargo, North Dakota. Her father was a homesteader and then they moved back to Wisconsin after completing the required time and selling the farm. They met here and married and they were childless for ten years and so adopted a child and I'm the child.

INTERVIEWER: The one and only?

CONROY : Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Were their parents still living after they adopted you?

CONROY: No, I've never known the grandparents. My mother's parents.... My father was about second or third youngest of eleven and his parents died before they were married, as I understand it. Anyway, it was long before my time. My mother's grandmother lived with her parents in North Dakota but died, and she knew her grandparents in this country. Her family comes from Luxembourg. They're part German and part Luxemburger.

INTERVIEWER: Were the grandparents the ones who emigrated or the great grandparents?

CONROY: No, I think it was her grandparents. It may be her parents. We didn't talk about that too much. But my father's father emigrated from Ireland and met his mother, who was English and also an immigrant, a forbidden subject in the family, I understand. My father never mentioned it but my aunt told me many many years later, after my father's death, that her parents never discussed the fact that the mother was English. That was a forbidden subject. They were very embarrassed.

INTERVIEWER: He married the enemy.

CONROY: Yes, that's right, so it was apparently kind of an interesting relationship. Anyway, he was the younger of eleven and my mother was the second youngest of five. After her mother's death, her father lived with my mother and dad. He died the year I came into the family. He was killed by a car and he was in his seventies. So I have no memory of any grandparents at all, just my parents.

INTERVIEWER: Alright, can you describe your parents and tell me what was most important about them.

CONROY: Yes. I look upon them very fondly because I was not aware that I was adopted until my mother was probably close to eighty. And that seemed to somehow bother her. She never told me that, and I had a suspicion, but my mother was the gentlest of creatures and very devoted, a very loving gentle mother whom I remember most tenderly because she was so kind. I believe, and my relatives have verified this now that we talk about it, that that was a great fear of hers, that somehow that would hurt the relationship. When she did finally tell me--I think that was five years ago--she would have been more than eighty. She told me and it was very painful to tell me and somehow that bothered her. She said how do you feel about that, and I said it doesn't matter. The only parents I know were wonderful to me and so what's the difference.

INTERVIEWER: Did she tell you anything about the circumstances?

CONROY: No. That's my mother's nature, however. She was never one to say a whole lot about anything. Nobody could get her to gossip, that was not her nature. If things were not working well in somebody's family and somebody would tell her, she might listen but she'd never repeat it. She just didn't do that. She was a rather remarkable lady.

My father was a typical Irishman, although he wasn't all Irish, and a man who, I think, was terribly affected, badly affected by the Depression. He, as I understand it, in his

youth aspired to be a doctor, but then after going to school for just a short time, he got involved with an art dealer in a store where he was awfully interested in antiques and oriental rugs. He was somewhat of an artist; he really enjoyed art. He used to paint a little bit, not too well. But he enjoyed the whole art field, so he quit school and worked for a while for this man and then later opened his own shop and sold paintings and vases and various things. But when the crash came and the Depression followed, that was the first thing everybody stopped buying--oil paintings and whatever. And he was a very proud man; it was a terrible blow for him.

So my recollection of my very early childhood is one of a very pleasant early childhood. I remember little things like my mother singing while she was around the house. She was home mostly. I guess she had worked very very briefly before she was married, in a millinery shop making hats. She was a beautiful woman. People always remember her as having been a beautiful woman, and that's her portrait and that's his portrait over there. These portraits are the result of selling paintings for artists who couldn't pay so they painted portraits instead. These have been in the family for many years because they were in their late twenties or somewhere like that when these were done. So the Depression came along when I was probably seven. My memory prior to seven is not much. They never burdened me with any of these problems, I just knew they were problems, that we were very short of money.

INTERVIEWER: He didn't lose his business, though?

CONROY: Yes, he lost everything.

INTERVIEWER: What did he do, then?

CONROY: Not very much. He tried to find something, but he wasn't equipped for anything. So we stumbled around somehow and then finally my mother was able to work for friends, really, who were also hit by the Depression. He had lost his job. He was a very successful salesman and quite well off, but he had lost his job. She had been a nurse before they were married, so she went back to nursing. My mother took care of their child. Of course, by this time we were trying a lot of things. We tried to have roomers to help pay the rent; you know it was really a very rough time. And my father didn't recover from that, really, until the war. And he would not accept welfare.

INTERVIEWER: He wouldn't?

CONROY: Oh, no. That was forbidden. He borrowed money until he owed, by the time the war came, an awful lot of money to a lot of people. Then he did get a job; of course, it wasn't hard to get anymore. Well, I was working by this time. I was working for the telephone company.

INTERVIEWER: How old were you when you started working?

CONROY: I finished high school in 1938 and I started working that fall. My mother thought I ought to have some vacation first even though we needed the money, but she thought that was the thing to do, so I didn't work during the summer. And then I started working. I worked for the county. Now the war hadn't started yet and jobs were terribly hard to get and my father wasn't yet working, but she was working for the county by that time.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of work?

CONROY: It was an attendant for children at the home for dependent children. She took care of boys from five to seven. They grouped them by age at that time.

INTERVIEWER: And what kind of work did you do?

CONROY: I worked for the county on a temporary job, relieving vacations in the kitchen at Meridale Sanitarium, and then I was sent over to what they called the Preventorium at that time. I'll never forget that because I was only about eighteen. They told me to go out there, and I couldn't get there by bus. I had to walk the last mile, because it was out in the country, and be there at seven, and it was in the middle of the winter. And there was no sidewalk and no lights. My poor mother was frantic but, anyway, I went. And I'll never forget, I walked in this door and a woman in there said, "I hope you're the new cook."

INTERVIEWER: Cook?

CONROY: I said "No, I'm not the new cook. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do, but I'm not the cook. I don't know anything about cooking." "Oh, " she said, "I promised I'd cook until they got a new cook. I don't like to cook either and I was sure you were going to be the new cook." Anyway, that job was only to last six weeks and then they were going to close that institution.

Then I got transferred to County Hospital and worked in the diet kitchen, and that was my county employment career.

INTERVIEWER: When did the telephone company experience come? Was that after?

CONROY: That came after the county experience.

INTERVIEWER: O.K., before we go on into your early adulthood, I want to ask a few more questions about your childhood. As an only child, who did you play with? Did you have lots of friends?

CONROY : You know, I've wondered at times about this. Now, I had a lot of friends. I always seemed to move in groups because I had no brothers or sisters. I always envied, by the way, those who did. But I have a memory of wherever I went to school, if I stayed there long enough--I went to a lot of schools, I must have gone to nine schools in my history--but if I stayed there long enough there always seemed to be eight or nine friends.

INTERVIEWER: Another thing I wanted to ask was the kind of neighborhood you lived in. Was your entire childhood in Milwaukee? And did you move from one neighborhood to another?

CONROY: My first memory of a home, and I suppose that's when I was about four. It was an upper flat not far from here. It was a neighborhood that my father's relatives and everybody lived in, almost a little Irish colony, maybe, of sorts.

INTERVIEWER: Would you call it mainly a middle-class neighborhood?

CONROY : Yes, I would, at that time. They had all come from the Third Ward, but that had shifted and it became somewhat Italian, but my father always had memories of his boyhood in the Third Ward. The former mayor and the former monseigneur and the former everybody seemed to come from that same ethnic neighborhood.

INTERVIEWER: Did you go to a parochial school or public?

CONROY: Both. I went to a public school for the first few years. I think I went to Catholic school in third grade. They were both Catholic. My mother was a very serious Catholic; my father was more relaxed about it. She was very serious, and we moved in a neighborhood where that was more convenient, not real convenient, but anyway a little better.

And that move was to rent a lower flat that had five bedrooms, to take in some roomers. The Depression is with us by this time. And my father would get a little something to do sometime in the area. He could appraise, and did often appraise rugs and things when people had household sales, for an auctioneer. Then he'd pick up a little bit. Then he might find a painting he thought was particularly good, and he'd buy it and then try to sell it. And he'd restore them; he did a lot of that, not refinishing, but

cleaning up oil paintings and varnishing them and repairing frames and so on. He did all that, that he was able to, but nobody was doing much of that, either. Then we just couldn't afford the Catholic school tuition and, of course, in those days nobody else could help you much, either.

Finally, I went to public school for a couple of years. Then when my mother's friend needed this help to take care of this child, that was out in Shorewood. We had just a little housekeeping room by this time. Our possessions had dwindled down to not much. So the point was that I would go with her and then she would come home one or two nights a week and Sunday, to be with my dad.

INTERVIEWER: She actually stayed out there.

CONROY: She had to stay there, because this woman was a nurse and she worked strange hours, and that was a two-year old. So I went to Shorewood High School for eighth and ninth grade. Then my mother had a chance at something that paid a little better. But that didn't require me to live there, so we rented a little larger tiny apartment. I went to school. And she didn't have to spend that much time in this second spot that she was in, also caring for somebody's child.

INTERVIEWER: At that point, Shorewood was sort of a fancy neighborhood?

CONROY: Oh yes, it was very nice.

INTERVIEWER: How did you feel, going to Shorewood High School?

CONROY: Well, that was no problem, although I wasn't really able to keep up too well.

INTERVIEWER: But you still had lots of friends?

CONROY: Yes, there were about ten of us that spent lots of time. Now I have to say that to help me handle that; we had cousins out there who were awfully good to me. They had three children; they were related to my father, kind of a fourth-removed cousin, great people. I have very fond memories of them. And when we finally had to move out of Shorewood, I kept pajamas and toothbrush and everything there. It was very painful to part with my friends out there, so it was arranged that when you want to come out on Saturday or Friday or whatever, then you just have your pajamas and your toothbrush and you stay with us. So that worked out well. I would say that I could not keep up. I didn't have what many of my friends did. Well, they weren't all that--you know.

INTERVIEWER: The Depression hit everybody.

CONROY : It hit everybody and they had to be a little careful, too. That was where--you know, eighth grade was not an expensive time in that generation. Nowadays, I guess things are a little different but none of us really had a lot.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of social activities did you enjoy?

CONROY: Well, we played tennis; we rode bicycles; we had picnics; we got together and giggled a lot. There was a lot of sleeping parties. You know, somebody'd have three or four of us over. People talk about their kids doing this today and I think well, I did it, too. We giggled all night. Parents were up every hour, "For heaven's sake, shut up!" So it was that kind of childhood.

Then when I left there, as I say, I had to change schools, then I came over to West Division High School. See, I'd missed my freshman year. I started as a sophomore and I really couldn't make that break from Shorewood. That must be a tougher age to make that kind of change, so I was still running back to Shorewood that first year. Then I got acquainted a little better at West [Division High School]. I joined, somewhat reluctantly, but I joined the Girl, Reserves of the YWCA and got to know a lot of people in that program. Well, I got really wrapped up in that because I think I've been organized all my life. It just seemed like no matter where I'd go, that was what went on.

My cousins gave me their bicycle. They didn't ride much. In my generation we rode bicycle a lot up to about maybe sophomore or freshman in high school. Then I had a good friend whose parents let her use their car and so a bunch of us would go around in the car. Not a lot; her parents were quite strict about where she could go and what she could do. They also had a summer home and I remember a couple . . . we did that a number of times. There was a gang in Shorewood and we got a cottage together, each one chipping in a few dollars. Oh, I think one summer there was a week or two when there must have been eighteen of us, with mothers with us, who just had a great time.

So I don't feel that my childhood was really deprived. I had a lot of fun. I enjoyed myself. And my parents were not strict with me. They were pretty permissive, my mother particularly. Sometimes my father would scowl and frown. I suppose, really, I was quite spoiled.

INTERVIEWER: At what age did you date?

- CONROY: That wasn't too much of a problem. Somehow in my generation, dating in high school was just--you know, you just didn't do much of that. You'd giggle about the boys and I know that there were times, especially at Shorewood, I didn't know too many of the boys at West, except a couple of boys that were in a class I was in. But there was no dating.
- INTERVIEWER: Just groups?
- CONROY: That's right. Just groups sitting on somebody's front steps and punching each other a lot.
- INTERVIEWER: Were your parents organization-type people at all?
- CONROY: No, not a bit. My mother was a very retiring person. My mother always said that she and her sister were never allowed to do anything. They were always dressed up and starched up and ribboned and beribboned, but George, their brother, was the only one who was allowed to do anything. And maybe that's why--I think there was some feminism in my mother's heart. I look back on that now.
- INTERVIEWER: She wanted to let you have as much fun as George.
- CONROY: And be as free. And she'd always treat me as if, somehow, I was quite special. She gave me, I'm sure, great confidence that I couldn't get from anything else. My father always felt that I was very bright, but I never applied myself. School was really a terrible bore.
- INTERVIEWER: You didn't like it?
- CONROY: I put up with it, and I never missed. I couldn't miss all this activity that was going on. But the classes, really-- I just put up with them and couldn't wait till class was over for the next big event of the day, whatever it was. So I could hardly be called a scholar, and I don't think any teacher would ever accuse me of being one, either.
- INTERVIEWER: Were you, personally, ever very much involved in church activities?
- CONROY: Not as a young person, and perhaps really never. I got involved with a group-- I don't know if you've heard of the Young Christian Worker or the Catholic Worker's Movement. We had a center here and I got very involved in that. I'm not sure why I did that; I was prevailed upon. It kind of grew out of our union headquarters. You stumble into things.

INTERVIEWER: How about politics? Were your parents interested or active in politics?

CONROY: My father was a Democrat, although he didn't do much about it.

INTERVIEWER: They did vote?

CONROY: Oh yes, oh yes, they were very serious about voting.

INTERVIEWER: Your mother, too?

CONROY: It was important, yes. Mother had a strong sense of duty and that's probably because she had this deep sense of responsibility of things you should do--voting and going to church and whatever. Father was very good about voting, but he had to be driven, practically, to church.

INTERVIEWER: He never went out and organized other people?

CONROY: No, no, that wasn't his speed. He was a social person. He had friends that he played poker with. He was not a reticent or retiring sort of person at all. He had his cronies, and he could drink pretty well, and they'd have a great time. I think he was fiercely loyal to my mother and she'd, of course, get quite upset because we couldn't afford these habits, you know, but that was about all he had to do. So that was a bit of a struggle.

INTERVIEWER: So you had a close family and a secure and happy childhood behind you.

CONROY: Yes, I would say so. I think that I kind of baffled my parents because my interests were so varied. You know, I just seemed to be involved always in something. And I suppose my mother's idea of what my life ought to be like was a stereotype. You meet somebody; you marry; you have a family; and that's all anybody should ever do. And I obviously didn't fit that. I never met anyone--well, when I was in ninth grade, I think, there was a boy in the neighborhood that worried my parents a lot because he was too much older than I was. But I never understood why they seemed to frown and scowl a lot about his being around. And that didn't last too long.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have a crush on him or did he just have one on you?

CONROY: Oh, I enjoyed his company, but I was really immature.

INTERVIEWER: Were you what you'd call a tomboy when you were young?

CONROY: Oh yes, yes. I think from the day I can remember, there was always a couple of boys in the neighborhood I played with. If they had a scooter, I had to have a scooter. I remember this boy who lived in the house right behind us had a lot. He had everything. His parents, I don't know if they had a lot, but he had a lot. He had scooters and bicycles and oh, I thought he was very fortunate. I finally persuaded my parents that I had to have a scooter, and I don't think I had it a week when I broke a golden rule in our household. I crossed the street with that scooter in the middle of the block. The scooter got mangled by a truck. I wasn't on it; I let go of it, but my father was so angry about it. Absolutely nothing--he just couldn't deal with it.

INTERVIEWER: Were you ever spanked as a child?

CONROY: No, I never had any corporal punishment. I'd get scolded. My father'd never touch me. My mother might just tap my fingers, but I don't even recall that. I had no fear of physical punishment. See, my mother was really such a gentle person, if she just frowned at me it just tore me apart, you know, because she was never difficult. But I could hurt her feelings. She claims that I would never disobey her but I would talk her into things. And I would talk until she gave in and then she'd say alright, do it, or you can have it. And then I'd say, but you don't want me to have it. And then she'd say there'd be another long argument about why didn't she want me to have it. I guess that was the style. I don't think I ever disobeyed them, and there were only a couple of rules. One was never cross the street in the middle of the block. Always cross at the corner and look both ways. And the other was always lock the door. He was really definite. Oh, and don't touch things. When I was very little we had a lot of valuable things that were around the house and I was never allowed to touch them, and so I never touched things. That was no problem--I just didn't. And even today when I'm in somebody's house or in a store I hesitate to pick something up and look at it.

INTERVIEWER: Alright, I guess we're ready to go back to your work life now. Can you remember what you were paid for those county jobs?

CONROY: Well no, my first salary that I clearly remember was the [Wisconsin] Telephone Company, and that was eighteen dollars a week, and that would be in 1942.

INTERVIEWER: How many hours did you work? Was it a forty-hour week or longer?

CONROY: No, I think the telephone company was on forty hours. I'm not going to swear to that, but the county was not. You worked forty-eight hours. The hourly rate might have been higher with the county, and I think it was, and we worked more hours, but the job was a dead-end job. My father had some family that worked for the telephone company, cousins and all. So that's the place to work, that's a secure job.

INTERVIEWER: Did you do split shifts or did you work straight hours?

CONROY: The whole miserable business. Whatever miserable hours they had--as a new employee I worked them all. And they were horrible. But as a single person it really--I mean we hated them, all of us who worked them, but you worked with others who were suffering the same problem, and so you pretty soon built up a little group of friends who worked till ten o'clock at night, and so you amused yourself as best you can at ten o'clock at night by eating hot fudge sundaes and gossiping a lot.

INTERVIEWER: These were mostly all women that you were working with?

CONROY: Oh yes, yes. There was no contact with the men. That, in those days, was almost forbidden.

INTERVIEWER: Did they have a union when you started there?

CONROY: Well yes, there was. I had trouble finding out about that union.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about that.

CONROY : Yes, it was a little independent union and--well I'm going to back up. This is kind of interesting. When I worked in the diet kitchen at County Hospital, I worked there a couple of years. And we had a lot of fun; it was a fun job because it wasn't too tightly supervised. We threw a lot of wet towels around at each other. You know, it wasn't a very challenging job but it had its little extra benefits. The cooks in the kitchen were kind of fun, and there was a lot of teasing and kidding and whatever going on.

And I remember one of the chefs, who was an older man, and I would talk quite often and he'd tell me that he belonged to the union. And I'd say, "Well, why don't we have a union?" And he said, "Well, it's just the chefs who are in this union, the cooks in the kitchen." And I didn't like that too well. Now I didn't know a lot about unions except I gathered that that gave you certain rights. It wasn't too clear what they were.

We had one dietitian in that kitchen who was kind of mean and she loved to humiliate people in front of other people. She didn't get to me too much because I was a little gutsy. I was fairly confident, at least I was articulate not to let her get to me, but she could get to some people. The people who suffered the most with this kind of autocratic boss were the young student nurses who had to serve for about six weeks in that kitchen. In the course of their training, they learned about diets. And these poor kids were so vulnerable, because between this dietitian who was such a mean, ugly person, who seemed mad at the world, frowning all the time and just giving people grief, and then the head of the nursing school was another demon. She was worse! The kids would tell me, and I never saw it happen because we weren't in the hospital too much except to go around and deliver trays, but they told me that she would come into an elevator and she looked mean--she was tall, skinny, and forbidding--and the elevator could be full of visitors, doctors, everyone, and she'd humiliate some nurse about--did you take a bath today, or--you know, just terrible things.

Well, that's the way people treated them; workers suffered with that kind of abuse. And that infuriated me. I thought that was terrible, so this was my interest in this union thing, because I didn't know any other way to deal with that. Otherwise they'd just fire you. Well, I never got anything out of that.

Then when I came to the telephone company, it was an ideal time to start with the telephone company. The telephone company was desperate for help. This was the war now, and help was hard to get. The operators, prior to the war, many of them had just hung in during the Depression, had some seniority, didn't quit, and had been so carefully disciplined by the company, because prior to the war it was hard to get a job with the telephone company and they owned you body and soul. Well, the war comes along and they have to have double the force, and triple. It was just crazy. Where it would take you ten years to get anywhere, the war comes along, and it only takes you six months. So I was only an operator at the board for about six months. They needed people to train so badly that I went into the training department. I became what they call a control operator that helps with training, and then I became an instructor myself. And you know that all just went bang, bang.

INTERVIEWER: You moved up very fast.



CONROY: Yes, very fast. Everybody did; it was not anything special. It was, as I said, the perfect time to start there. And, of course, the management had to tone down their discipline a little bit because people would quit. They could get better jobs, you know. They were very vulnerable and they let us get away with quite a lot, too. And there again, I had heard there was a union and I couldn't find out anything about it. It was a little independent traffic operators' union. And the men had a different union. Now that's the history of the Bell [Telephone Co.] system, by the way. The Bell system, as I understand the history of unionism at Bell, and Jack Barbash wrote a book on this.

Anyway the Bell system decided to beat the labor movement to the punch with what they called their Employee Representation Plan. And when the Wagner Act was passed, that wiped out the management control of that. And that gradually became, in the early forties, really before my time, the men had really gotten this thing together, or they started to get it together. The union that represented the operators, however, was very weak. It really knew very little about labor. It was run pretty much by a lawyer from Chicago.

INTERVIEWER: What was his name?

CONROY: Ed Hackett, who also ran part of the Illinois Bell Employees unions, various unions. He was on retainers and he really ran them. He was a very committed dedicated man. I remember asking somebody how you could join this union and nobody could tell me.

INTERVIEWER: Were the other women disinterested in unions?

CONROY: I don't know. I gather the union didn't really understand how to solicit participation or do anything. There was just a handful of women who--well, the stories were that when Ed came from Chicago it was sort of like the arrival of a Third Coming or something like that. They'd all meet him at the station, and whatever he said was right, and they never questioned anything, and they did whatever he told them. So, unless you knew this handful of people, you just didn't know what was going on. They didn't work in my building. I never saw them.

INTERVIEWER: Did they ever make any efforts really to broaden out?

CONROY: No. Then in about 1945 the plant union, which was called the Guild, decided to organize the women and they raided this independent [union]. Meanwhile, we'd built up quite a training department gang and we used to rent cottages and

## CONROY INTERVIEW

go picnicking and just lived kind of a light--I mean we didn't do anything important--just had a good time.

But I was watching this whole raid, and I noticed we had a couple of people that were really working on people to join, and they were signing cards. They talked to me about it, and I said I don't know anything about that organization. I don't know anything about the one that's here either and I just don't know what to say. I hate to quit something when I don't understand it to join something else I don't understand either. So a couple of us decided--well, we'll go down and see the officers of this union and discuss this with them. So we find our way to the headquarters; we'd never been there before. And this woman who was the president, we recalled this later, and the way she described it: "Here, you young things with your babushkas come into my office and tell me that my union's being raided and I thought you were crazy."

INTERVIEWER: She didn't even know?

CONROY: She didn't realize how strong that move was. Well, see, it was not in the office she worked in: It was a different building. She worked downtown. We were over here in the Toll Building. And if she heard it she didn't believe it, and nobody apparently discussed it with her. They were signing people up right and left, and she didn't believe it when I told her, and I said, "Well, that's what's happening."

Anyway, they held an election and the Guild won. So there we were; we now had a different union. And that wiped out the leadership of this old independent union. Then the men had to quickly find people to provide some union work, you know, signing people up and organizing and whatever. I had known a lot of people at the Toll office, and several of them who worked in that project were after me to get involved. And I said, "Well, you know I don't mind, but I don't know what to do." "Well, come to a meeting." And I said, "Oh, alright." So, I went to a meeting and I was elected steward, and I hadn't joined yet. The reason for that was that the only group in that whole big toll office was a group that was in this training department. It was a more relaxed work. We could talk as we worked, and as a result we were always organizing something. We didn't exclude anyone; everybody was always welcome, but the only people that really participated in all these things that were always going on were the people from that department. So we had a bit of a reputation for organizing all the time, nothing of any great seriousness, but this was where the action was.

INTERVIEWER: What kinds of things had you organized?

CONROY : Oh, we'd have a big all-day affair out at some park, just social, nothing important. But we were the only ones in the building, I guess, who were doing anything and so that, then, becomes rather obvious. So I guess a few people thought that those of us who were into this could do a lot with the union. And out of this curiosity that still was with me from the county, I was interested but I felt so dumb. What do I know? Except I realized nobody knew anything. So I suppose the beginning of my union career was kind of being in the right place at the right moment.

INTERVIEWER: Did you feel, personally, any serious grievances against the telephone company?

CONROY : No. Oh, I didn't like some of their policies. I'd get very annoyed. But I didn't personally have any trouble. I think probably I was more troublesome, because I asked an awful lot of questions. I remember I had one instructor who said, "God, you have to know it all." You know, I'd say, "Why do you do this?" And she'd say, "Well, I've been here five years and I never worried about why we do it. Why do you care why we do it?" And I'd say, "Well, I just wondered why we do that."

Anyway, I accepted the steward thing, but I think the union grew so fast it couldn't do anything with anything. Because even the Guild was relatively new to the labor movement. So we were all sort of fumbling around trying to put this organization together. And I knew less than most of the people involved, so I just learned a lot.

INTERVIEWER: How did you learn? Did you have any special training to become a steward?

CONROY : No, in fact that's very amusing though, because we had no way of educating anyone. We didn't know anything and we had no money and we sort of learned by trial and error. Then the real turning point, when I really just sort of plunged right in, was the famous 1947 telephone strike. I only lived two blocks from the office and that was a golden opportunity. I mean, what better way to cut your teeth in a union than a strike? A six week strike--it was a nasty one! We had a big building and we needed to cover about five doors with pickets because the company had lots of people going in. And they were working hard on people to go in. So I became a picket captain very fast. It was convenient for me. I could run home and get back and I was on that picket line about nine hours a day. And it rained every day; I got soaked.

INTERVIEWER: I remember that strike because I lived in Chicago a block away from a telephone building and students were going out to help the picket lines. How did you keep people out? Did you have much hostility on the lines?

CONROY: Oh, we had all kinds of problems. First of all, there was a tavern on the corner, and pickets were supposed to picket two hours a day, and they were all scheduled for their particular two hours and then they'd go down to the tavern on the way to a street car to go get a job, except they never got on the street car. They stayed in the tavern. And they'd talk to each other and then come back and tell us, "Now we've figured out how we're going to put this strike to an end. We're going to really fix the company." Well, there was no violence, there was no one who was violent, not physically to people--but mischief.

Oh! We were on strike over Easter. And I don't know where the idea came from, but somebody got the notion that we'll form a double line and make the people scabbing walk between us, and we will have lipstick in our hand, rolled out of course, just walking peacefully along, and we'll be so close they'll have to rub against this lipstick. And I can't tell you how many people in their Easter coats, pink and pastel, went into the building with streaks of red on each side. And the pickets were cheerful; they were singing and so on. And that's the kind of stuff that we had troubles with. One day we really were concerned, because some nut came out of the building by the front door where we had a lot of pickets and threw a bunch of pennies at the pickets and went back in. Oh, I tell you! But the management was mad about that, too. Whoever it was really heard about it. That was just--oh! And I guess there were some people who waited for that person to come out again and followed him home, didn't touch him but just scared him.

INTERVIEWER: Were there people who broke up friendships over the strike?

CONROY: Not that I was aware of.

INTERVIEWER: Friends usually went one way? All stayed in or went out?

CONROY: Yeah, I think that's true. And I think the people who scabbed on us were kind of weird anyway. I mean they didn't have a lot of friends.

INTERVIEWER: What percentage of people would you say went in?

CONROY: Very small. We really did very well in that building.

INTERVIEWER: I shouldn't put this in since I'm interviewing you, but one of the things I remember at that Chicago place was that when the women would come out and they yelled "scab" at them, it didn't bother them, because they weren't from union background, apparently, sufficiently to be hurt. About the second week of the strike, when they came out, instead of yelling scab, they would start making fun of their clothes or the way they looked and then they would break into tears. They were crushed!

CONROY: Well, I could picture that. Our gang didn't do that. We called them scabs. There were a lot of rumors about what was happening to them. I'm not sure if they really happened or not. I kind of suspect they did.

INTERVIEWER: What kinds of things?

CONROY: Well, I had heard that these people who had worked would get telephone calls about every half hour during the night and nobody would be on the line. They were just harassed. And the management tried awfully hard to find out if somebody really was doing this. I didn't know anyone who was doing it, but there may well have been some people who were doing it. So they found a thousand other ways to hassle them, following them, muttering about them. But I don't think that was too serious a problem here. That may have been serious in some places, but in my own situation, it was pretty well confined to the one building and the one picket situation. Those of us who were picket captains tried to preserve the order. We knew the cops pretty well; there was always one there. They were nice. And the management didn't give us too much trouble. Some management provoke a lot of trouble, but they were pretty sensible. They didn't try to irritate anyone. I think there was more problems in other areas of the state.

We had fun. Somebody was getting married and we had a big shower on the picket line. We had card tables and had gifts and cake. And we always had somebody with a baby going around that picket line with a stroller or a buggy or whatever. And it was' really relatively peaceful.

INTERVIEWER: Do you find that kind of social aspect is important in giving a union a kind of solidarity?

CONROY: Mm-hum. Now I enjoy listening to union songs once in a while together, but I'm not a very ritualistic person. I don't feel compelled to sing "Solidarity Forever" every time we do anything. I suppose I'm not really that sentimental a person.

You know, I think when you are trying to build an organization, get people to participate, you do examine your own past to see what it is that happened that got you involved, when others seemed to escape that whole thing and are totally unconcerned. And as I examined my past, I suppose I had reached a point in my life where just playing was not enough. And it didn't appear that I was going to marry anyone. I wasn't eager to marry just to marry, and I hadn't met anyone that I could see myself tied down to and spending a lifetime with. I was easily caught up in anything that was interesting to me and the union interested me because, you know, you spend a lot of your hours at a job, and there were a lot of things that I just didn't think were right and they ought to be dealt with. Now, I used to personally argue with management people a lot about things that were happening. A rule made no sense. Nothing could get my dander up quicker than to see an operator who was defenseless being brow-beaten by somebody who had a little power, and in tears. That bullying kind of thing infuriated me!

INTERVIEWER: Was there a lot of that?

CONROY : Well, the Bell system still has too much of that. It's great for regimentation and discipline. You know, production supposedly is going to be better if you discipline people. And there are certain jobs that are inhuman. The operator's job does dehumanize people. Their whole program is to almost make them machines. They have dumb little rules like--you must keep your feet flat on the floor--and I never did. I'd sit on my foot and that would absolutely infuriate my boss. And then when they'd say, "You know you're not supposed to sit on your foot," I'd say, "Am I doing my job?" They'd say, "Well, yes," and I'd say, "Then don't bother me."

INTERVIEWER: What other kinds of rules did they have?

CONROY: Keep your hands--I'll never forget this--keep your hands below Little Chute. The old switchboard was a narrow display board in front of you with some keys and cords. And the display board had commonly called cities. We were long-distance operators. And one of the cities about half way down the display board was Little Chute, Wisconsin, in the middle of the board. And you were never supposed to put your hands above Little Chute. You would perhaps block a signal that would come in. And that, to me, was the dumbest thing. If you obeyed the rule, the problem that could come if you didn't obey the rule would not occur. See, if you just stayed below Little Chute, then you couldn't block out a signal. Now, they wouldn't teach you not to block out a signal. They'd just lay out how you do that.

And you weren't supposed to talk to your neighbor, and you hold the pencil this way, and you hold the ticket that way. That just drove me nuts! And even if they had all their silly rules, the way they would implement them concerned me a lot. If they bullied somebody--there's something about people bullying other people or people using power in a heavy-handed way on other people that does do something to me. I just get very disgusted!

INTERVIEWER: Do you think you were more affected by it because your parents had been so lenient?

CONROY: Probably. See, I had not learned to accept any of that kind of heavy-handed supervision myself. Perhaps that did have a lot to do with it. I could not tolerate it and I didn't know why other people had to.

INTERVIEWER: How did people in general react? You mentioned some people bursting into tears.

CONROY : They, I suppose, didn't know how to answer. And women anyway--I'm convinced we've got to stop crying in the corner about our troubles, and fight. Since I'm in the union, I've had good experience in seeing how males handle problems compared to females. Males handle them and females don't handle them. They just suffer and suffer and endure. They cry in the washroom; tell each other at lunch. It's all great therapy but it doesn't solve the problem.

INTERVIEWER: The people who were bullying the operators, were they women supervisors mostly?

CONROY: Oh yes. The whole operation in these operating rooms was-- I guess you could call them "straw bosses" really. They called them chief operators. They really made very few decisions--just make them do this, get them to do that. So they were issuing the orders. The manager was always male and he'd walk through maybe once a day.

INTERVIEWER: Who made up the rules?

CONROY: The Bell system, some of them were made at Bell Laboratories, I'd swear, because no matter what operator you talked to from whatever part of the telephone system anywhere in the nation, they all had the same rules. It was like every telephone man drove a green truck. They didn't have any other color trucks; they were all green trucks with bells on them. And the pencils you used were green. Everybody had the same kind of pencils. I mean it was like an army. Those things used to annoy me a whole lot and a lot of it we haven't even gotten rid of yet.

I lecture the company. I have about two hours of lecture I just go through. You know that whole mentality of how you handle telephone operators has not changed. You still have the same philosophy; you grind it in to them. You may change the method, but it's the same story. You don't have Little Chute any more, but you still worry about somebody who sits on their foot. What do you care?

Anyway, that whole problem somehow fascinated me and I'm not sure why because I'm not a hostile person, not really. I tease management. I tease other people. I'm accused of having unbelievable patience, unbelievable patience, and I think I do. And I'm sure I got that from my dear mother. My father could be short tempered, but that wasn't too serious either; that didn't bother her. He'd rave and rant for a few minutes and she'd let that go by, so I never really learned that. I suppose when I do get angry that I might sound a little bit like he does, but I don't get angry too often. I get disgusted, maybe annoyed, and I have to stubbornly pursue some change, but the only management people who have had sharp words from me are usually the kind of management people who abused their power and took advantage of somebody who couldn't defend themselves.

INTERVIEWER: You must have run into this right off the bat as a steward.

CONROY: Yes, yes, because there's so much supervision. I mean, they had layers of it. Everywhere you turned, somebody was supervising. There were all manner and types of supervisors and some of them were pretty decent. They might be firm but they were decent and they were fair, and some were just bullies. You know, the bullies bring out the worst in me.

Getting to the strike again--the strike really tuned me into the whole labor thing. Then I really became fascinated by it. And then these were exciting years for CWA [Communications Workers of America] because we were really building a union, writing a constitution, changing its name and with long debates. We would sit in convention and debate all night long two or three articles for the constitution. At five in the morning we were still arguing should it be this way or this way. I wouldn't have missed it for anything; it was such an exciting time. I feel sorry for young people today who come into the labor movement and are dealing with particularly a union that's inflexible now. It's operated the same way for the past ninety years and they just cannot seem to alter anything. I'm not sure it's as serious as some think it is, but it's a lot more fun to be in the founding stage of an organization and find out that at last year's convention, we wrote the constitution this way, but that's not working so we can change it this year, and we go into another debate that goes on all night.

INTERVIEWER: Have you attended all the conventions?

CONROY: Just about. I've missed very few, and particularly those very exciting years when I was an officer of the local and a delegate who voted and could speak. I just got so totally wrapped up and absorbed in all this, you know. And I realize that not everybody can take that kind of interest in the structure. But I'm part of quite a few other organizations and you know....

INTERVIEWER: You realized how much the structure can determine the future?

CONROY: That's right, I think that's awfully important, but I had people saying, "Oh my G-d, we don't want to talk about the constitution and structure." Well, to me that was just a very important subject. So I was very thrilled with all that. I was totally absorbed with it. The years just flew by. As a matter of fact, 1977 is the anniversary, really, of thirty years of just about 100 percent of my time.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do after you were a steward? Tell me about what positions you occupied.

CONROY: Well, immediately, because we had so few active traffic people, and there was a great need, I became, I think it was at the next state convention, I became a business agent. We had just created this new structure, and I was a business agent for the Milwaukee operators [about 1948]. At that time I think the potential was about 3,000. We didn't have them all signed up, but it was a great challenge.

The Milwaukee operators were divided up into I think about eighteen locals, some of them so small that I thought, "My G-d, why are they locals?" They had one in every building. And they had one in every office in every building. You might have one where the operators were in one local and the other people were in a different local. It was crazy. But it grew from the old independent set-up, and that probably grew out of the representative plan. The company never encouraged people to get together, so you had all these separate groups. The first thing I thought was, "Well, we got to get this reduced to something that makes some sense! Some of these locals just didn't do anything. They had no officers; they didn't meet; nothing was happening. So that was a beautiful opportunity for me to learn by trial and error. I didn't know what to do, but there wasn't anybody that could tell me, either. So we just had to try to figure it out, and we figured it out. We made a few mistakes but we did figure it out. We reduced that sixteen, or whatever

it was, to four for the whole city. And then we decided, after we operated with four for a while and that worked much better, that we really needed only one. This is, by the way, back when the system was going to dial telephones, and dial telephones were wiping out whole offices of people.

INTERVIEWER: What could you do for those people? Was there anything you could do to help them?

CONROY: Yes, we did, I thought, some good things. We worked out a plan together for somehow absorbing a lot of these people in the toll office or the remaining dial offices or whatever. I spent long hours in meetings with them. And of course, they were offering to put operators in any clerical jobs they could do, but the operators were afraid. They would take them into the employment office and test them and one thing I discovered: the way they operated the discipline in those operator rooms, the operator usually didn't take long to decide she wasn't good for much. The expectations they had for themselves for doing anything else weren't too good.

So I met with a vocational school and set up a program of testing, and the local [union] agreed that we would pay half the cost, and the employee would pay the other half, and go through some testing where the telephone company won't be involved, where you can really let your hair down and be yourself, and if you don't like the results of your test the company will never know that you had one. And if it is good, then you can take the test to the company and say, here, I have an aptitude for arithmetic or mathematics, or I'd like to try a clerical job or whatever. And that was very useful. A lot of women learned some good things about themselves in the process, and they were afraid of company tests.

INTERVIEWER: Did other places do that, or just Milwaukee?

CONROY: No, that was just us.

INTERVIEWER: That was a very unusual idea. I know people in other unions who would be interested in that idea.

CONROY: As far as I'm concerned, I think people have to learn to know themselves and understand their possibilities and not find that out from their boss. They have to do that in their own comfortable way, because it may be uncomfortable and you don't want your boss--I mean, why advertise your weaknesses. Just stay away from what you can't do. So many of them did get out of operating and into other kinds of jobs and did very well, turned out fine. Now, counseling was not 100 percent perfect; there were some problems.

INTERVIEWER: Who provided the counseling, the vocational school?

CONROY: The Milwaukee Vocational School. We had a lot of people go in, too. And the director over there was intrigued by this whole thing. As a matter of fact, at first he wasn't sure they could do it because these were adults, and he said, "Our tests are all written for students." I said, "Well, there must be something you can salvage out of all that." I explained the problem to him and he got kind of intrigued with it and he set up some forms.

INTERVIEWER: Would you say that many of these people turned out to have more potential than they thought they did?

CONROY: Oh, yes, I'm sure of that. I don't think anybody was the least bit hurt by this process. A lot of them took advantage of it. They didn't have to, but a lot of them did. Some of them didn't learn a whole lot either, but they didn't lose anything. Some of them did find out that they really ought to try some other jobs and that they really were capable of doing more than the operating job they had. So we felt real good about the program. We thought it was a smart thing and it turned out well. And you see in those days, before affirmative action, it was terribly hard to break out of the bind you were in. I guess at that time when they hired people they tried very hard not to put over-qualified people in jobs, too.

INTERVIEWER: What did they do, just not hire them?

CONROY: Well, either that or they'd steer them into a different job like their commercial rep [representative] job where they dealt with the public on bills and whatever. They usually looked for some college students for that. But the college kids, I felt, were over-qualified for that job, too. On the operating job they wanted--well, you know,, the first operators were supposed to live at home because they couldn't afford to live on the company salary anywhere else.

INTERVIEWER: Did the company inquire into that?

CONROY: That's right.

INTERVIEWER: That was company policy, then.

CONROY: Oh, they really ran your life. They told you how to vote. They told you when you were sick and when you weren't sick. They really owned their employees.

INTERVIEWER: Explain this a little more. Would they hire married women?

CONROY: They didn't keep married women for a long time.

INTERVIEWER: They wanted daughters, dependent daughters?

CONROY : Yeah, right out of school, mold them to their own, whatever it was they wanted from them. Now this was before my time, because I started during the war when they just took anybody that walked in the door.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, pre-union, pre-World War.

CONROY: But I would hear stories about how the chief operator would walk into the lounge and everybody'd stand. And at election time, the company would gently tell people what would be a wise way to vote, what would be good.

INTERVIEWER: Did they have a traditional party they supported? Or was this in local elections?

CONROY: My understanding was that the people they were pushing were usually Republicans. Not in any real obvious way, but they had a way of getting their message across.

INTERVIEWER: Now, what about this telling you when you were sick?

CONROY : Well if you didn't feel good--many of them had the habit of saying "I don't feel good." Then the boss would quiz them, "Did you stay out late last night? That's probably your problem. You didn't get enough rest; you must get to bed early. What time do you go to bed? See, that's too late, you should go to bed earlier. You owe it to the telephone company to get a good night's rest, so that you're able to be alert for your job and be well." Then, I guess when they had headaches, they used to talk about how they had salve. They didn't dare give anybody pills, that was too dangerous, so they had some kind of salve. You'd take the salve and rub your forehead a little. They had lounges and they had what they called quiet rooms, rooms that had a couple of beds in them and you could lie down for an hour. If you said, "I feel so sick I really should go home I think"-- "No, I don't think you need to go home. Lie down and put the salve on your head and rest for twenty minutes or a half hour." That's what they did. And probably even, maybe not right today, I don't know, I'm not that close to operators today, but up until not very long ago, operators would say, "May I go home." And we were trying to teach them to say, if you feel sick and you believe you should go home, you tell them, "I'm going home, I'm sick." And if she says, "Why don't you lie down?" just say "No, I'm going home." Because you can't get fired for being sick. But you'd better be sick; don't get caught shopping. Anyway, that was the way they handled this.

INTERVIEWER: Now, have all of these things stopped since the union came in?

CONROY : Well, of course, this new generation is much more independent. And then the management is a little more enlightened. I mean, they wouldn't dare ask some of those questions. In fact, they better keep still because the operators have some sharp ways of answering, too. And I noticed this right away, when you have the protection of a union, and the union has a contract that allows you to take up a grievance, you've got this level and on up, you get a sense of security out of that, that I will be heard. They can't arbitrarily not like the way I part my hair and fire me. There may be some things we haven't been too successful in changing, but there's a lot of things we have. They have learned to respect the steward and the local officers and the international rep [representative]. You know, they pay attention now. They realize that you don't accomplish anything by fighting with the union. Now the danger is, perhaps, just the opposite. They treat the union with so much respect, now the union representatives have a misplaced notion of their importance.

INTERVIEWER: Has that happened in your union, too?

CONROY: It happens in all of them. So I don't know; the pendulum seems to have to do some swinging.

INTERVIEWER: How long did you remain business agent?

CONROY: Well, that didn't last long because we wiped out that job. No, I take that back. In about 1950, we had a state election then. We had restructured and we had a state executive board and officers. You know, we had president and vice-president, and I ran for secretary-treasurer. I'm trying to think why I ran for that. Oh, the president was a real nice guy. I liked him a lot and he was great to work with. And there was a woman vice-president who unfortunately-- that was kind of a mess. Anyway, there was a woman who had sort of led the fight to get the operators into the Guild, and she became a somewhat figure-head leader. She was elected the vice-president and I was, of course, the business agent, so I didn't cross her path much. Anyway, it developed that she wasn't getting along too well with an awful lot of people and she really wasn't mentally too sharp. The whole thing--it outgrew her. She could not grow as fast as the organization was, and she was really lost. I had heard they weren't going to elect her vice-president because she couldn't handle it. So the fellow who was secretary-treasurer was going to run for vice-president. It wasn't too clear who was going to run for secretary-treasurer, and so I thought I might as well run for secretary-treasurer. So I did.

INTERVIEWER: That's at the state level?

CONROY: The state of Wisconsin. We had quite an election, and it was kind of interesting because even back then I realized that I probably can't win this because I'm a woman. I mean this whole operation was male-dominated and run, you know. You weren't going to do anything without the approval of the guys. I ran against a young man from Madison, and I'm not too clear why he lost, but he lost and I won it, so I became the secretary-treasurer. Meanwhile, we restructured again and wiped out all this division, what we called the third level. See, we had really the local level, the state level, only we called it division, and then the national level. We decided we should eliminate the middle level.

INTERVIEWER: What was the middle level? Was it between the state and the local?

CONROY: Yes. Well, the state really handled a lot of things like the grievances for the fourth level, the bargaining. See, one of the things we had to do, to deal with AT&T [American Telephone and Telegraph Co.], we had to centralize our bargaining. We could not have every group doing their own, because AT&T was really together, so to deal with that we had to get it together. So we put all the responsibility for bargaining in the International Executive Board.

INTERVIEWER: I see, so you're limiting what the state does, then.

CONROY: That's right. It appeared what do we need the state level for, because we want locals to be more active. And the tendency is, if the state is the active body, that isn't going to have as much participation as you would have through your locals. So, eliminate this state level and then the union would be run by the locals or the International (Executive) Board, or the convention, of course, which is made up of local people. Well, it was a shocking change, because locals had really been kind of weak and helpless. And now, suddenly, they're getting back dues and they have to take responsibility, and we've increased the responsibility they have over the years.

INTERVIEWER: And have they met the challenge?

CONROY: I think generally they have, and we're better for it, too. So with that division level wiped out, there was an agreement made among the leadership of all these divisions that we would set up a national staff, then. They wouldn't have any voting power or anything, but they would carry on the administrative operation of the union. The administrative

staff would be those people who had been officers of these divisions. They would just move into the staff positions.

Well, I didn't want to do that because I still hadn't been a local officer and I thought I ought to have that experience. And my local accepted me very well; I was very close to the people in this local. So I talked to them about it and said, "You know, I could go on the staff and I'd have job security and about everything else, but we need to build this local and I need to know all about that." I said, "I'll run for president; if you elect me president I won't take the staff spot. Someday I may have to, but not now." That was fine, everybody was for that, so I was president here full time for about eight years, from 1951 to 1960.

INTERVIEWER: You're an unusual person to take that attitude.

CONROY : Well, see I had no responsibility. I lived with my parents and they were good to me. They charged me a little room and board but it wasn't too bad, and I wasn't involved in any emotional way with anyone, that I would want to make a different kind of life. I have sort of a one-track mind, so I sort of fall right into this, you see. And it was such an exciting time in the union. Everyday--some new crisis! It was just very exciting, I just rushed at it. Now I was still working for the company--sort of, till I had this business agent assignment. Then I was supposed to be on the company payroll but I had a lot of work so I was off a lot. In fact my boss got so that when I showed up she'd say, "Oh, you going to be with us today?" "For a little while, but then I'm going to get out of here if I can."

INTERVIEWER: What about as local president?

CONROY: Now, as local president, we decided it would be a full-time job. I had tried to hang on to the company job and keep my salary going, but it was tough doing it. I think there was a year there when I was business agent, 'cause that was not a full-time job.' I had a title of what they called service assistant. I trained operators and helped operators or whatever. But the hours weren't good. I didn't have long seniority and I was getting evening work and I had a lot of meetings to go to. This was interfering with my union career. I just couldn't let this interfere. I gave that title up. Now that cost me about eight dollars a week, but then I had the kind of seniority as an operator to pick the hours that fit my union activity. So I was at the office at seven in the morning and I'd work for Mother Bell until four PM. Then I went to the union office and we ran mimeo machines. I learned to run all the machinery, because if we

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wanted to put a newsletter out we had to write it and run it and mail it and do whatever. So we learned how to do all that--broke every machine in the office.

INTERVIEWER: You were really doing double work all that time.

CONROY: That's right; we had to do it. In order to get the job done, we just had to do that. And I had quite a bunch of active people who were just great. We painted the office and we just did everything. Whatever was needed, we did it; we took care of that. And the guys are intrigued by all of this. We were so busy! So then, when I became full-time president, we had a small office with a headquarters with a staff. We had a state director, an administrative post. We shared a little cubicle in that office. After a while, I felt as if we really ought to get out of there because, first of all, they didn't want any locals there. And there was some muttering about our local had more privileges than any other, and that was beginning to bother the staff. It was true, in a way, because I could run everything from the office. I figured it belongs to the union; I'm doing this for the union; it happens to be one local but so what, you know. Anyway, we finally decided maybe we better change that. I lived on Lloyd Street here in town with both my parents in a two-bedroom flat. My father died around that time, of cancer. And so, I decided I'd move the office to the house and we'd save a little rent. I had not a very large bedroom, but fair size, and I'd wake up in the morning and there's that mimeo machine looking at me. The dining room table was always a mess, and my mother'd say, "I wish you would clean this table off." And I'd say, "Yes, I'm going to do that," but it never really got too clean. The phone rang all day. It was just wild, you know.

Meanwhile, I also got involved in labor's community services program here in Milwaukee and became part of the committee and then finally ended up on the board of the labor council here [in 1950]. As a member of the board, the merger of the AFL and the CIO came up and so I was part of the merger committee. We were on the CIO board and I wasn't the first woman on the CIO board, but after the merger, I was the first one the AFL had ever had. They didn't know quite what to do with that. But I had some good support here from other unions because I was very active in the community services program, and the new constitution for the council called for the board members to chair all the committees. We had no one else who would be on the board who had been involved or knew anything about the community services

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program, and this was Leo Perlis's thing. Well, besides being president of the local I was awfully involved in that. I became a member of the United Fund's board of directors as a labor person. And I was on the Catholic Social Services board and Child Care Inc.'s board, and Cerebral Palsy's board. It got ridiculous and I said I just can't serve on all these boards. There weren't that many labor people available, for one thing, and a lot of them did want a woman. And I was it.

INTERVIEWER: Let me ask you this. Do you feel that having a labor representative on those boards made a real difference in terms of making sure that labor people got the help they needed? Did you change policies, or what exactly was the outcome of your participation?

CONROY: I don't know. It was kind of a curious assignment and I think that some labor people are very uncomfortable with it. We had some interesting seminars here on that whole subject of how do you get labor people more involved in the community and how do you get labor people on boards and committees. Then when you get them on there--'cause many agencies would come around to that and they'd agree that they should have them--then it was how do you find a labor person who isn't overwhelmed by it, because a lot of them are. The Schlitz Brewery community relations man was a very liberal fellow and he was very interested in labor. All he had to do was promote Schlitz at various community affairs and he was a good community man. He did a lot of work for the community and he was on everybody's board. Seems like when you get into that world of social services and welfare agencies, it's the same people. You go to any annual meeting and here's the same gang you saw at the last annual meeting for another agency. It's just that kind of world. We had some labor people that were very effective and they really monitored what they were doing. We were anxious not to have fees or to hold them down to something reasonable.

I had an interesting experience with child care because we were trying to hire a director and we'd discussed this at board meetings several times. We were advertising in professional journals.

INTERVIEWER: Is this for a community-run nursery school?

Director, Community Services Department of the national APL-CIO.

CONROY: Yes, at that time. It's changed a lot since then. Anyway, we were looking for several months and we hadn't found any-one that met the description we were calling for. Now we were looking for G-d, really. We wanted everything--experience, degrees, and work for nothing. A perfect arrangement. I still remember this. We finally upped the salary to \$8,500, which then was not much. It isn't much yet, it wasn't then, but that's what we were offering. It was up from what we had paid the last one. We had a committee; I wasn't on the committee, but we had a committee looking for a director. They had interviewed people from various parts of the country, and suddenly a guy from here, who worked for United Fund, applied. Now he didn't have all the qualifications, but he had good qualifications. He had a Masters in Social Work. They also wanted a degree or some experience or graduate work in pre-school training or education. Well, that's looking for quite a bit, you know. Anyway, he didn't have everything but he came through real well and they were pretty pleased. They thought he'd be a pretty good one. Then somebody on the board says well-- they knew what he was making because he was from here. He was only making \$7,200 or something. So they said I don't think we ought to pay him \$8,500. Now that's the kind of stuff that makes me so mad. And although I wasn't in the habit of saying a whole lot on that board, I reacted to that. I said, "I think that's a shame. You decided the job was worth \$8,500. You happened to know what he was making. If you'd gotten him from California you probably wouldn't know exactly, and because you know, you want to take advantage of him, and I think it's wrong and I think we ought to pay him the price we set."

And what was interesting about that board was, I don't think I was as handicapped by being labor as I was by being a woman. The women on that board never said boo. And it was a pretty blue-blooded board. Most of them were the wives of professional people in the community and they rarely said anything. And they didn't say anything then either, except out in the hall.

INTERVIEWER: They wouldn't back you up?

CONROY: No.

INTERVIEWER: Did you win?

CONROY : I won. They were ashamed to do it.

INTERVIEWER: What you're really saying is they lose by default a lot of times. It's not a matter of being discriminated against when they speak, as much as being afraid to speak.

CON-ROY : We are just in the habit of taking a back seat. We just don't deal with that. We don't even recognize that that's what we're doing.

I think these boards that serve agencies often deal with questions they [union people] aren't equipped to deal with. I remember on child care, we had a big discussion on how many learning or emotional problems we should include in the center, 'cause the center was designed to provide day care for children who needed it. But every psychiatrist in town wanted to put some children with real problems in it. We said, "Well, then it won't be for normal children." Anyway, we had a big argument about this and I finally said, "I just don't think we're equipped to make this decision. I'm not. This is a very professional kind of thing; you have to have some knowledge. I don't know how many disturbed children you can put with normal children and not have them all disturbed before you're through. I mean, I'm just not equipped to deal with it. And most of the people on the board weren't. A few of them thought they were, but they weren't any more qualified than I was.

So in some ways we are very handicapped when we deal with highly specialized kinds of services. On the other hand, I think the fact that we don't know, does keep the agencies' professionals explaining things. Now maybe, they can fool us once in a while. But pretty generally, they want their community boards to understand their problems and they have to get down to some pretty basic explanations.

INTERVIEWER: I suppose the professionals then make the decisions.

CONROY: Well, usually we ask for their recommendations and ask some questions, but I don't know many agencies who would not support whatever recommendation they made.

[I worked closely with a member of the] Milwaukee for Labor Committee at the United Fund. He happened to be a creative, talented, enthusiastic, very bright guy, and he and I worked real closely when I chaired the committee and served on the board and he directed the program. We would have an hour or an hour and a half conversation before either one of us started the day, you know, to launch the day. And, of course, there's always the usual politics in community activities as there is in everything. You know you can't get away from it. And we would have our struggles, trying to get the program okayed or trying to get this done or that done, or whatever. We did a lot of this together. He'd had various training programs to prepare people for that kind of serving the community through various agencies. I thought it worked,

very well. Now, we could never seem to find enough people to do it. There are so many committees and agencies that it is just terribly hard. Normally, they meet in the middle of the day and it costs you money to take people off of jobs. They don't get paid if they don't work. It involves lunch and parking and it gets to be an expensive problem. So it ends up with the same few doing all of it because they work full time and they don't lose salary. And we had our battles here, too. We'd take on the labor council or we'd take on the YMCA.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of things did you battle about?

CONROY: Well, we had trouble. Do you remember the famous [UAW] Kohler strike?

INTERVIEWER: Oh yes.

CONROY: Well, we had some trouble here in town because they built a YMCA hotel and put in Kohler fixtures. The Brewery Workers [Union], and that's a big union. At that time there were about 9,000 [members]. They decided they weren't going to contribute to the United Fund because of the Kohler fixtures in the YM Hotel. And we had decided, as a committee, that we could not punish the whole community because one agency, who doesn't use that much community money anyway-- these hotels usually are self-supporting, because one agency has messed up. So we got into a battle and the press picked it up. We had all kinds of troubles, editorials, everybody taking sides and one union fighting, not in any great world-shaking way. But our committee prevailed. The unions all decided we are going to support it; it's AFL-CIO policy, and we have to deal with this problem in some other way. We can't deprive all the kids and people of this community of services. So we felt pretty good about that victory. And our program was very controversial. We would often speak out, you know, and raise a little hell about things.

INTERVIEWER: Can you remember any other particular controversy?

CONROY : No, not really. I can't remember the detail anymore. It's an awful long time ago, except Harold and I reminisce occasionally about the good old days when we really battled, wondering if we're getting old now. Things just don't seem as bad, or maybe they aren't as bad. But he's feistier than I am, has always been. But we got along with each other very well and so we worked very well together. But I can't remember. Many of these little incidents weren't all that serious. Even if it seemed like the crisis of the century, even at the time we'd say, "Well, next month it'll be something else." We won't even remember this one happened, but we had our battles.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do after you spent your decade as local president?

CONROY: Well, then it became apparent--see, I'd resolved when I became full-time president, because the telephone industry was converting quickly to mechanized equipment, unless we got some other members of some kind or another, we would shrink. And I didn't want my salary, which was modest, but I didn't want my salary to become a burden, if we couldn't do the other things we wanted to do. We believed a lot in education; we sent people to summer school sessions and wanted a lot of participation. We were entitled to four delegates to convention, but we always sent six people. That was a great education. So we really wanted to be terribly involved in everything.

I knew and they knew that the end was in sight, and finally about 1958, I told the director that the next staff opening he had, I wanted to put a bid in for it. I, by now, had lost any chance of going back to the telephone company. See, I had a three-year leave. At that time we were allowed three, and then you had to make a decision--go back or you're through. I weighed that one for about a minute or two and thought I can't go back there. I want to stay in the union. I can't tolerate that job. Then Ray, his name was Ray, he's since died, but anyway he developed an opening for staff. So I applied for that and went on on staff in 1960.

INTERVIEWER: What's your title, staff representative?

CONROY: Representative.

INTERVIEWER: And how big an area do you cover?

CONROY: At that time, and it's still true with some little adjustments, but I had the east side of Wisconsin. And I still have the east side of Wisconsin, which is where most of the people are. Now we have locals, at one time we had one in every town. However mechanization's hit those, too, so now I have sixteen. They go from the top of the state to the bottom. The area's not wide. I have one local that's about thirty-five miles this side of Madison, and you know where Madison, Wisconsin is. It's not too far away. So I never go more than 200 miles west. That's as far as my area goes. However, I do have contracts to negotiate, eighteen of them. And a couple of them are over on the other side of the state, because I have all the public employees and we have some small towns to negotiate with, like the city of Reedsburg

and the city of River Falls. Nobody ever heard of these places. Anyway, we have contracts for some employees. It varies a little from one to another. So I don't bargain all of them myself, but I'm responsible for them.

I usually have, in most cases, a local person who does the physical bargaining. And I had about that same assignment, but not as much bargaining as back when I first came on the staff. However, you know I knew my way around this state. I'd been active for so many years, it wasn't all that great a hardship. What was interesting, though, was back in the days when I was a business agent, we decided we had to have an education program to teach new people about the union. But we had no program. So, I wrote one.

INTERVIEWER: Oh really?

CONROY: Yes, I didn't know anything about writing an education program but when there is nothing else, anything you do is better than nothing. I put together a thing of some sort. I don't even remember what we did with it. But anyway, I went around training people.

INTERVIEWER: All around the state?

CONROY: Yes, and after we changed our structure again, we had an education department and we produced some programs for the whole union with material and outlines. Then I taught those, because I really liked it.

INTERVIEWER: Now when was this, that you were doing this?

CONROY: I did my own because we had none in about 1950, the early fifties, the late forties.

INTERVIEWER: This was when you were business agent?

CONROY: Yes. Then, when I became president, the Washington headquarters produced the programs. I still went around teaching, but I didn't write them. Because I liked to do it and no one else wanted to do it.

INTERVIEWER: So you must have kept up with all the young, up-coming people by doing this?

CONROY: Oh yes. I was very interested in the development of a person like I, who knew nothing when they started, and I tried to share with them everything, you know. So that was kind of fun.

Then we always had, in the summer time, we'd hold a week at the University of Wisconsin. It was what we called leadership training. Locals could send people. And I would teach there. There would always be, in addition to university faculty, one or two from the union, who would teach about the union, and so I would participate in that.

INTERVIEWER: Do you still do that?

CONROY : No, I haven't the last few years. I did up until a few years ago. We've more and more turned to the professionals for training. A lot of the union material that we used at that time in the week-long school, we now incorporate in local training. So when they get to the school, they've already had that.

INTERVIEWER: How do you feel about the quality of the professional training? Are you pleased with it or not?

CONROY: Well, we have an endless argument about how we ought to train, and I have a lot of theories of my own. I, personally, would like us to think we need and must develop a program that provides any local person who wants to try, the tools to train people with. We just can't reach enough people with the professional group. And I've suggested, and we've written up some stuff where we'd use, perhaps, slides. I'm not too good on movies because I think movies are too expensive and their life is too short. Slides can be cheaply changed and adjusted. And a script of some sort that helps a person who may have no training experience to get a good discussion going, by having enough provocative questions.

People, when they're working full time for an employer and have families and other things, they just don't have time to spend long hours preparing things. They ought to give them all the tools they need, and they could do it in any town at any time. They don't have to wait for me or somebody from Washington or get to the summer school or whatever. They can set it up like Tuesday evenings for three weeks or something. Now we haven't come to doing that yet. I think our union's education program has developed to the point where we have some sharp people in Washington who have a wealth of knowledge on educational techniques. I was going through our outlines the other day, and I thought, gee, the style is great, but they're missing the gutsy questions. They're dwelling on the wrong problems.

INTERVIEWER: Such as? What were the questions that you thought they missed?

CONROY: Well, for example, there was a great big thing with departmental meetings. They want to try to get stewards to talk about having departmental meetings and then they offer some subjects for discussion. Among them is consumerism, legislation. These are important and valuable subjects, but if you have any sense of what's happening on the job, you 'know that a steward getting their department together is going to want to talk about the grievances of that job. That's where you got to start and you may never get off of it. And you know if you can build the spirit of the group and create a kind of cohesive team, they may get on to other subjects. But they're not going to until they resolve some of these job problems. And I guess in Washington, one doesn't know that and so there're some rather impractical subjects used with these really really good role-playing techniques. And I thought, well, we aren't going to get it right yet, but we're getting closer every year. Another twenty five years and we'll make it. And I think, really, the director we had after Ray died and I were talking one day, saying something about our educational program. And he said, "Catherine, who taught us?"

INTERVIEWER: Life.

CONROY: And I said, "Yes, and you know I'm saying, we've got to have a better program. We cannot survive, it is very important." And he said, "Who taught us?" Well, I suppose, really, a lot of good stewards have not had much training and they do a good job. And they learn, they learn by what happened. And I suppose if we didn't have a program we would still get something done.

INTERVIEWER: Well, in a way you would like to pass on your experience so they didn't have to learn everything from scratch. It's a waste of time for everyone to have to start from scratch.

CONROY: Well, that's right and that's really the biggest problem. Except there's no better way to learn. The only problem today versus twenty years ago, too, is that the management in those early days, they were crude, they just did such obviously bad things it wasn't hard to build up some spirit to fight. But today, they're sophisticated and they're very subtle, and the battle is for the minds of people now and the loyalties. You know the kind of management that would have a temper tantrum's gone. They're smoother; they're more skillful today. So people get manipulated into doing what they want them to do without realizing it's happening to them and....

INTERVIEWER: So you need a more sophisticated kind of counter-effort?

CONROY: That's right, surely.

INTERVIEWER: How do you feel in general about your union as compared to other unions in the United States? Do you think you've done a better than average job?

CONROY: Yes, I imagine we all feel that way. One thing I've learned, though, is that except for some basic common areas, every union is uniquely what it is because of the kind of industry it's in.

Now we have members, and I'm sure that you've heard this from people, too, where they'll talk about the power of the Teamster's Union. We have members who'll compare our union with the Teamsters. And we're not a very close group; the Teamsters and CWA had some serious battles. Of course, my only answer to that is, well, look at the Teamsters Union. Everybody's heard of the Teamsters, but what employer that they negotiate with can you think of? Name one. And nobody's ever been able to give me a fast answer to that. Finally, somebody will remember their father works for a laundry and he drives their little truck and he belongs to the Teamsters. So they mention the Midtown Cleaners. Well, big deal! Then, you point out to people that CWA bargains with the biggest and richest private employer in the world. Now, I don't know what the Teamsters would do with that, because they can buy or put out of business any employer they deal with. They're bigger than any of them or any combination of them. So the union is the- giant and the employer is small and helpless, except for some major ones like United Parcels. There may be a couple of big ones, nothing that comes to your mind immediately.

So, you know, how do you compare that? The Teamsters ought to have good contracts. They have no excuse. So, when you say are we effective, I think in view of the size of the problem we have to deal with, 'cause Bell is a giant, there's no doubt about it. And it's unique in a lot of respects. It's guaranteed a profit. It is now so highly mechanized that when we strike, they don't need us. I mean the machinery goes on; the customers still put their calls through and they pay their bills faithfully. The money comes in. I think the last strike we had, somebody figured they saved eleven million dollars a day by having us out. But it upsets them. One thing about Bell is Bell gets upset. Everybody is upset and so you have to get them where they're vulnerable, and money is not where they're vulnerable in a

strike situation. But PR [public relations] and demoralizing employees 'cause their management people hate to have to handle the customers. They're not used to it; they get very upset about it.

INTERVIEWER: I wonder if they keep their feet flat on the floor while they're doing it.

CONROY: They don't do anything right. They smoke at the boards; they talk. One guy said back in the days--he was talking after the strike and he had worked as a toll operator, and that's in the days when they recorded tickets in long hand. They used abbreviations. Well, he couldn't read any of them so he took them all home and burned them. They never got a nickel out of that. And he says, "We give the public some kind of service. I finally will find Chicago and ring it for them, but, believe me, my productivity is zero. I mean it takes me an hour to put two calls through." But the big thing is that the customer pays those monthly bills so that even though the toll gets messed up they still make money. That creates a situation for a union, I think, to have to design some different kinds of ways to deal with the problems, because you have an employer who can buy whatever kind of information, know-how, and where-with-all that is possible to buy, which is unlike other companies. The only union now that's bigger than we are, that is as an employer, is government. Federal government, state governments, are really big. But I think the campaign against unions has been making a lot of strides.

INTERVIEWER: Do you?

CONROY: Yes. Somebody wrote an article that the labor movement has two problems, the right and the left, both of which attack labor all the time. Whatever side you are talking to has no good things to say for labor. We just don't do anything right. Now that's the history of the labor movement, to take the attacks. And the things we do that are good get little or no attention, but then some union has a convention. And unfortunately, I was a little shocked, the Teamsters raised their president to \$150,000 a year. Now that upsets me, 'cause if you want to be that rich you shouldn't be in the labor movement.

INTERVIEWER: Yours apparently doesn't go in for the high salaries?

CONROY : No. Well, we're well paid. The president just got a raise to \$56,000. It's in that area.

INTERVIEWER: As unions go, that would be fairly modest.

CONROY: Yes, we are modest as unions go. Not cheap, but modest, and I think it ought to be that way. When I see a union person worrying about making a buck on their travel treatment, I get very disturbed about that.

INTERVIEWER: You don't have any rank and file protests against your top officials?

CONROY: Well, not an organized protest. We have kind of a tradition, though, that somebody gets up at every convention and tells them all off. Joe, you son-of-a-- But we're very democratic, so Joe--now he's dead, but our president until a year ago, a feisty Irishman. And then Joe [Beirne] would call on him and he'd listen to all this as they'd tell him off and then he'd call on the next guy. And they took great pride in being able to make sure that we had this annual rap-the-leadership-on-the-head program.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think automation is going to do much more damage to your union?

CONROY: Yes, we're really concerned. It's worse now.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have any plans? Is there anything you can do to deal with it or do you just have to take it?

CONROY: Well, what is disturbing to us is that not only is the operator's job wiping out. In fact, we're probably over the crisis for the operator. But now, first of all, foreign equipment is absolutely driving us crazy. See, the Bell system is in trouble for the first time in its history. It's in trouble and admits it.

INTERVIEWER: How is that?

CONROY: Well, see, AT&T was a monopoly, and of course a regulated sort of monopoly, but a monopoly. And this permitted it to provide what is reputed to be the best telephone service. And I think it's true that it is. It is partly because all the telephone equipment works together. You know there are set parts of the Bell system. One part manufactures one part and installs it and the part operates, but it's uniform and it's probably the same all over the nation. You wait about the same length of time to get an operator, and you wait about the same length of time to have a telephone put

Former President of Communication Workers of America.

in your house. So the service is good; it's good service. And it's reasonable service. The price is not outrageous. In fact, I guess as prices have gone the past twenty-five years, it's probably one of the cheapest buys you get. Now, it's also a powerful monopoly and, you know, power is a dangerous thing. I don't know that AT&T has used that power in a bad way on either the public or the employee. I mean, we do a lot of complaining, but as workers go, telephone workers are doing as well as any. I mean from a pension, fringe, salary benefit. And job security, until recently, was excellent and that's a big item. But equipment has come in now. Other countries are creating telephone equipment now, answering services and PBX boards, and all kinds of things. And in the famous Carterfone decision by the FCC [Federal Communications Commission], they opened the door to this kind of competition.

INTERVIEWER: What was that decision?

CONROY: The Carterfone. And it had to do with somebody invented something called the Carterfone. I don't know if it was an answering service or what it was. Anyway they filed some kind of petition with the FCC to allow them to sell it and attach it to the telephone network. And AT&T had a fit. Well, there was a big battle about that, but AT&T lost. Now the result of that has been--see telephone companies are charged with the responsibility to provide service, and they must provide it. And the only time they can get out of doing it is if you just consistently refuse to pay your bill. And if it's out in Podunk, and they've got to put up ten miles of wire to get to Joe Blow and provide him with a telephone, they got to do that. There's no money in that, but they got to do it. Well, what's happening with their competition now, is that their competition is getting the stuff like big city private lines, hospital switchboards, hotel switchboards. That kind of equipment pays, you see. The profit is there because you're giving a lot of service with very little equipment.

INTERVIEWER: I didn't even know about this.

CONROY: Oh yes, and it's becoming a very serious problem. First of all, from our standpoint, we have a lot of jobs at stake. The hue and cry is that you should break up the Bell system so you have competition and somehow it's healthier. Well, maybe it is in a lot of situations, but it is not healthier in the telephone industry. It's going to be a very troublesome problem. Bell, who has never done this before, has come out with a piece of legislation to protect itself and is

saying that the result of this, if we stay in the direction we're moving, the result will be that all the profitable telephone business is going to go to the private contractors. And the cost of telephone service that we provide is going to go sky high because cost will have to be loaded on the customers we have. So the legislation is asking Congress to allow them to buy out and maintain the monopoly nature of the business, with some exceptions, pretty generally so that Bell can continue to function and make, supposedly, a regulated profit.

INTERVIEWER: I assume that these other people use nonunion workers?

CON-ROY : Oh yes and it's a tragedy.

INTERVIEWER: So it's really a case of a unionized company competing with a nonunion company.

CONROY : A lot of these new businesses will exploit the people they hire. I talked to a guy who was an ex-Bell employee at one time and he's working for one of them. He said he has no benefits. He gets an hourly salary. He installs this equipment and leaves town, and he doesn't know if it works or not. I mean he gets it going as nearly as he knows.

INTERVIEWER: That's really interesting. That means the industrial unions have now arrived at the same point where the craft unions did, where organizing an industry is not enough if it competes with a nonorganized industry.

CONROY: That's right. Of course, we call them inter-connect companies. We've been trying to organize them.

INTERVIEWER: Have you had any luck?

CONROY: Well, they don't stay in business very long.

INTERVIEWER: What do you mean?

CONROY: Well, whoever--now, like this guy, his boss was in Tennessee, and he hired him because he had telephone training. See, the system trains them, too.

INTERVIEWER: They're hiring ex-Bell employees?

CONROY: Well, this guy had left the system ten years ago, and then he went into something else, and then he decided he wanted to get back into the telephone company,. except they won't take him back. So, while he's waiting, he found out about

this outfit. Well, they hired him and they told him he'll work as long as they've got a job for him. But if they don't have an order; he doesn't work. And they don't want to pay him to repair what he puts in. He's supposed to put it in right the first time. If there's anything wrong with it, it's not too clear what you do if you're the customer. And this is really what's helping Bell a little because Bell sells service. You know they'll come back and keep the thing working but these other outfits don't. Well, it's a matter of time. Some of them will survive and the others will fall by the wayside.

Anyway, then you add to that. See, Wisconsin Bell is not a big Bell company; it's one of the smallest compared to Illinois Bell, which is a giant. Well, Wisconsin Bell is now installing what they call modules wherever they get into a home, if they're called for a repair or whatever. This is the kind of equipment that you put on the wall in two or three rooms and plug in your telephone. So when the subscriber moves, the new subscriber can come in and just plug in the telephone. And they'll hook it up in the central office so nobody'll have to come out here and touch it. That wipes out a guy called the installer.

INTERVIEWER: So he may go to one of these other companies if he has nowhere else to go.

CONROY: Well, what we're working out with the companies all over, as much as we're able to, is to keep the people we have. Let attrition reduce the force. Wisconsin Bell, by attrition, by not hiring at least in the plant--they've hired some operators because that turns over quite a bit--but in-plant in the best paid jobs, they've not hired in three years.

INTERVIEWER: It's really to their benefit.

CONROY: Oh sure. Except the equipment that they buy is so expensive. But I guess it's still cheaper than people. Now they have some new directory assistants, that's, the old information operator. Well, they have equipment now that it appears, although around here they're still using books, looking up telephone numbers, but they can take an area code like 414 or 312. The goal is ultimately that one office with some people in it will handle the whole area. They will find telephone numbers for any town in the area if you know what town you're calling. And then if they can feed all this information into a computer and use cathray tubes or whatever it is, you just dial up a name and zingo you get this information right off.

fixed or a roof fixed, or whatever. Those are the things that maybe we can't mechanize, you know.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think unions in general, or your union in particular, are going to be able to meet this kind of challenge?

CONROY: Mm-hum.

INTERVIEWER: How?

CONROY : Well, I think it's happening. Teachers are organizing; police are organizing.

INTERVIEWER: You mean service people. I mean what about just providing employment period, though. Do you foresee a time when we'll have 20 percent permanent unemployed?

CONROY: I don't think so. I would hope--well, of course, who knows? I mean any country that would elect Nixon twice is apt to do anything. But I don't know. See, there's a lot of talk about a shorter work week and spread the work, the labor, that there is. Our own union has passed some resolutions recently to reduce the work week to thirty two hours. Now some people feel that we shouldn't do that, that we ought to increase dramatically vacations and early retirement.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think your union will?

CONROY: I don't know. Now that our own members see the future of the jobs we have as being very grim, you know, they're talking more and more about,- if I could get a decent pension I'd get out, start building a different kind of career. Well, there's a limit to how much of that can happen, too, when you have a high unemployment rate. So I really don't know. I think people have mixed feelings about this. Some people would like to retire and then they wouldn't quit working, they would do something else.

INTERVIEWER: That doesn't solve the unemployment problem.

CONROY: If you shorten the work week--the Rubber Workers [Union members] I understand, once had a thirty hours work week--but they all get a second job. So that doesn't help any. If you increase vacations, maybe that is a way, although some of them may work during their vacations, leisure time activities are growing.

INTERVIEWER: The Steelworkers [Union members] have that and I think many of them don't work. Many of them use it just for personal work, like home repairs, the kinds of things they would have done anyway.

CONROY : Or take long trips. Of course, camping has become a whole huge industry.

INTERVIEWER: Or some of them are even using it for more education.

CONROY: Yes, that's good.

INTERVIEWER: Sure, because the colleges need the business, too. They're having problems.

CONROY: Sure, if they use their time to provide work for other people, like building a new industry in recreation, more people going to ball games, visiting parks. It all helps because it provides additional service jobs. But there're some things that will grow, and there are other things that will just shrink and nothing will take their place. Now as a union, because Bell is not shrinking, just the payroll is shrinking. Bell right now, unless this legislation fails, Bell still is big and powerful.

But I should hit on this with you. As a union, in 1965 we decided that we're going to--because we had, by the way, the union had contracted with Diebold [consultants] to study the industry for us and tell us what its potential was. And they produced a big report for us to point out exactly what's happening right now. There was enough information about automation, mechanization, to be able to predict it. So we knew we were going to shrink and felt we could not let the union shrink because the payroll is shrinking. We've got to still have a strong union to deal with Mother Bell, so we have to find members somewhere else. The telephone is kind of a limited industry. We decided we'll get whatever telephone companies aren't organized, which aren't of any great proportion, then reach out to other kinds of workers. Because what difference does it make? How many teamsters do you see in the Teamsters Union? So we have to expand.

INTERVIEWER: What areas are you looking at?

CONROY: Anything. You can't imagine--we're into everything. We have egg candlers and hat manufacturers and government workers and city workers and county workers.

INTERVIEWER: Is this like the Packinghouse Workers [Union] had sugar workers and the Clothing Workers [Union] had spaghetti makers?

CONROY: Sure, they're all doing it. UAW [United Automobile Workers] has some telephone people.

INTERVIEWER: Are you going mostly in areas where the people are not organized?

CONROY : Well, we just feel that if somebody doesn't have a union and wants one and they come to us, we'll take them.

INTERVIEWER: You're not raiding other unions. You're organizing the unorganized.

CONROY: No, no, we're taking the no-raid pact very seriously. We're all committed to that in the AFL-CIO, so we don't raid each other. No, our interest is in people who have no union. And we've organized; we've got a lot of workers in New York state and we also have a lot of city workers in the city of New York. We have some people in New Jersey. We have the state of Ohio, a good piece of those people who don't yet have collective bargaining rights under the state law. But we're still representing them and recently we filed some kind of suit and won two or three million dollars in back pay for some people who were affected by some political game somebody was playing. So we're trying to grow so that we can maintain a strong base with which to deal with any employer.

INTERVIEWER: So you really do have a plan.

CONROY: Oh yes, we're trying to. And I got very involved in that because at the time of the convention, the plan was drawn up and it was called the Triple Threat Program. And when it was brought up in the convention and adopted, the program said that growth is our number one priority. And we're going to grow by publicizing our union's getting involved in communities in organizing. So every district was to produce what they called their best rep to go to Washington for a couple of weeks and learn about this program and then come back and implement it in their own districts. I went for CWA in this district. Now that was an interesting thing because I really wasn't particularly eager to move out of Milwaukee. Now my father had died by this time.

INTERVIEWER: What year was this?

CONROY: This was about '66. However, see a piece of that program was community services and I really was the only one in the district really up to that, right up to my ears. I knew a lot about it. I didn't know much about the program but that was the point in sending us to Washington. Art Lefevre of CWA District 5 talked to me about it and I thought a lot about it. I really didn't want to move out of Milwaukee.

Anyway, I finally agreed. I had to go to Chicago to do it, because that's where the district is. I didn't want to move to Chicago, but I said, "Well, I'll live here and commute or get an apartment and do something and I'll try to do it."

So I went through the training. There were ten of us in it; we had ten districts. There we're two women and eight men. We learned all we possibly could. They had us in Virginia and they brought in every expert they could find on any piece of that, you know. All the experts on organizing, which turned out not to be too expert. I don't know as we have an expert on organizing. The way the labor movement is not growing, I guess no one really knows how. Then we brought in all the experts we could find on community problems and all the experts we could find on public relations, because we felt we had to tell our story in order to draw people to the union.

Then I came back to Chicago and got a little one-room apartment. My mother was still up here, not doing too well. And I worked on that program. It had to be set up and then you had to train staff and we had to train local officers. I did this in three states and traveled quite a lot.

INTERVIEWER: What other states beside Wisconsin?

CONROY: Indiana and Illinois and then went back and did some follow-up on that. I imagine I puttered around with that for around three years. Then, finally, it was decided administratively that it now should be up to the staff to follow through on it and those of us who had that assignment did not need to do this anymore.

Well, here I was in Chicago and my place had been filled here, but they needed a staff person in the Chicago office for the state of Illinois. So I stayed on there and worked there another three years. Well, I was in Chicago until it was six, and I finally moved my mother down. She was failing more and more and she wanted to be in the same city with me. She felt very lonesome, although I came home every week-end. It was a crazy way to live. so I worked in Illinois and dealt with Illinois Bell, and I was given United Airlines. We had two hundred people in United Airlines, which we negotiated for. We negotiated with United. It was my first experience bargaining with somebody else out of telephone. Airlines? Especially United Airlines! But it all worked. Really, if you know anything about bargaining procedure, you can do something with any

workers, if you have a contract. So we did alright there. That unit, by the way, is wiped out by computers, too. They've all had to be transferred to other jobs.

INTERVIEWER: In such a short period of time?

CONROY: Well, they were building that computer for a long time. United (Airlines] has a giant computer, you know. They used to teletype all their freight orders and everything. Now they just push buttons on a computer and it all comes out, all comes out somewhere.

Anyway, I should back up here and tell you--what was the year Kennedy was assassinated? '64?

INTERVIEWER: '63, I think.

CONROY: Anyway, the year before that--are you familiar with Kennedy's Commission on the Status of Women?

INTERVIEWER: Oh yes.

CONROY: Well, the report that was produced by that commission called, "The American Woman," called on the various state governors to appoint commissions on the status of women. Talking about how much timing affects my life, I happened to be at the University of Wisconsin for a week the summer before Kennedy was shot. Professor [Jack] Barbash was on campus and he had been teaching one class and I happened to see him. I've been seeing him at that campus, known him, for years. He came up and said, "Catherine, I have a request for you. They're putting some kind of a committee together and they want you to serve." Well, what kind of a committee was that? He didn't know much about it, but he had on a piece of paper the telephone number to call and he said, "I think you ought to go with that, whatever it is." He said, "It has something to do with the Governor's Conference." I went because Jack [Barbash] asked me and I've known him a long time. I found out later that what somebody said to him was we've got this committee to plan a governor's conference and we'd like a union woman on it. Do you know of any? And he probably couldn't think of a soul except he saw me.

INTERVIEWER: I doubt that.

CONROY: No, because he is an absent-minded guy. He really is. His wife will tell you that. And I know that I was there. If I weren't there, he wouldn't have thought of me, but

he saw me and it clicked, you know. Yes, Wisconsin has a woman and she happens to be here. So I find myself on this planning committee for this Governor's Conference. The date for it was set for November, whatever it is, that Kennedy was shot. So we put this Governor's Conference together and I'm serving on it. They had the president of the state AFL-CIO on it and a lot of people. And Katherine Clarenbach is on it. Do you know who she is?

INTERVIEWER: No.

CONROY: Well, she chaired this commission in Wisconsin for many years. And, unlike Illinois', this one has been very vigorous, very vigorous. So anyway, we put the conference together and we had a very successful conference. And then, following our conference, the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor set up a Conference of Governor's Commissions, and there were twenty-some. We went to Washington and each commission reported what they were doing. Well, that was all very interesting and then we returned to Wisconsin, and of course our commission was busy.

The following year they had another gathering of commissions. By this time, there was about thirty-eight. We listened to every state reporting what they were doing. Some of them were working on traffic safety and we kind of wondered what that had to do with women. You know, that's the way it goes. Anyway, it was either that year or the following year that we were there for the commission meeting and I was chairing a workshop. They'd set up workshops. Instead of everybody listening to every one of the states reporting, we did a workshop. That is the [Women's] Bureau set up workshops and they asked me to chair the one on employment. And Kay had one. There were a lot of us involved. And we had, by this time, been on this for a couple of years, and we had decided it's about time these commissions are producing some action. It's time for something to happen to women. We're sitting around talking to each other a lot, but we got to have some action.

Now in my workshop I had a woman sitting there whom I'd never heard of before, had not met her before. And that was really a shame because I should have heard of her. Her name was Betty Friedan. And Betty had written a book, but I didn't know that either. Somebody said, "Betty Friedan's in your workshop." I asked, "Who's Betty Friedan?"

\* Katherine Clarenbach.

"Oh, she wrote a book." "What book?" "The Feminine Mystique." Never heard of that either. Somehow that had escaped me, but anyway Betty was there. And we talked in that workshop about fighting for voluntary overtime, because we knew a lot of industries have workers who are forced to work overtime. This limits women's opportunities. It isn't right for any person. And Betty argued with me about that; that was impossible, we couldn't get that. It was a minor argument, but I remembered having an argument with Betty Friedan.

INTERVIEWER: Why did she think you couldn't get it?

CONROY: She thought it would be impossible to get employers to agree to it. I don't know if she seriously thought it. We didn't talk about it afterwards. Anyway, that evening, Kay and I talked to each other and we had decided we wanted some resolutions passed at that conference. And Kay checked, because Kay knows the [Women's] Bureau very well, including at the time the director, Mary Keyserling. And they were a pretty conservative gang.

INTERVIEWER: Were they?

CONROY: Very. And Kay discussed with them the possibility of passing resolutions. A number of workshops wanted to do that and Kay came back and reported, "There will no NO resolutions. It is not appropriate." And we got mad!

Anyway, that evening the whole conference had been invited to a reception at the State Department. And it was a beautiful layout. I don't know if you've seen that. They have an area of early American furniture and it's beautiful. A beautiful room--it's really bigger than a room. They had a bar at the end and they served liquor very freely and they were having a buffet. Now I have a good friend in Washington who now works in the Bureau of Prisons and she used to work for CWA. When I'm in town I call her and then I either go over and have dinner with her or she joins me down town and we have a bite to eat. I had only that little time because we were leaving the next day after the luncheon. So she decided I'd get her a ticket and she'd join us. We hadn't seen each other for about a year. It was quite a long time and we wanted to catch up on news, so instead of me being with the other commission people from my own state, which usually I was, I sat out on the veranda that overlooks Washington with Sylvia and we were just visiting and so on. We'd go and get a platter of food and then come back and sit together and talk some more. So I didn't see anybody

until the whole affair was over. We were all getting on our busses to go back to our hotel and I connected again with Kay. Kay said, "Come with me when we get back. We're supposed to go to Betty Friedan's room." And I said I wasn't invited. "Well, I was," she said, "and I'm taking my friend."

About three of us went to Betty Friedan's room. This is very late at night; it must be about midnight. The room is jammed, you know, and we're on the floor and hanging over the davenport. There's just lots of women in there. And some of these women are talking about we need an organization. Things are not going to change for women unless we get an organization. Well, of course, everybody was feeling rather good by this time. Remember this reception was very generous with the liquor. Well, I felt pretty good considering I didn't drink very much, but I could see the rest of the crowd was rather high. Betty was--do you know her?

INTERVIEWER: I've seen her and I've heard her speak, but I've never actually met her.

CONROY: Well, when you talk to Betty, Betty bubbles. Betty gets so excited and she's so enthused. I'm a real fan of Betty's. I just think that she has good vision; she has good sense. She's a terrible organization person.

INTERVIEWER: Is she?

CONROY: Terrible! But she has no experience. And that's not her thing. Writing, speaking, having visions of the future and analyzing problems is more her thing. She does it very well. Anyway, Betty was saying that women want so and so and so. And somebody says "Well, who are we to speak for women?" Betty says, "Who in the hell invited you?" And it happened to be one of the three of us--not me, but the other person who also was uncomfortable about going there because we hadn't been invited. And Kay is looking shocked, because Kay is a rather open, outgoing person, and if somebody invites her somewhere, she figures everybody's welcome. She didn't realize that this was a carefully selected group, and Betty didn't really know me or this other person. Anyway, things weren't getting anywhere so we decided to break up that night. Next morning at breakfast we decided to set up NOW, the National Organization for Women. They had a luncheon and they had a podium thing that had tiers of people at the head table.

INTERVIEWER: Now who was this that had the luncheon?

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CONROY: The Women's Bureau of the Labor Department. And of course the luncheon was the biggie and they had some senators there and I don't know who all they had there. They were up there. You know, they had the head table and the head head table and the head head head table. You never saw so many people at the head table. Anyway, there were twenty-five of us, I think, at two different tables passing notes around, creating NOW right there in this luncheon in front of these people. And I know that Mary Keyserling wondered what in the hell's going on down there at these tables, 'cause we're running around.

Then Betty says, "Now, this is a historical moment; we have to have a photographer take a picture of these founders. And we're going to call it the National Organization for Women." She immediately comes up with a statement of purpose of sorts. We decided Kay Clarenbach will be the first temporary chairperson and the headquarters will be in Madison, Wisconsin, and Kay will put together some kind of a conference so we can really launch this thing officially. We will all tell everybody we can think of and we will get something started. From that moment on, NOW was born, with twenty-six people.

Now the founders--we said that anybody that joined NOW from then until fall, when we held the first conference, would be a founder. So there are two lists of founders. There are the original twenty-six and there's this additional group.

INTERVIEWER: The early joiners.

CONROY: The early ones, yes. Then, of course, those of us who were that involved in it were on the first board. And Kay became, after the first conference, the chairperson of the board. Betty was the president of NOW, the first president, and they both served the first two years. And I served on the board, I think, only for one year, or possibly for two, I'm not sure. But I really didn't have time and I didn't have the money. My union was willing to help pay my expenses for awhile, but I just couldn't get away to travel all over the country to these board meetings, so I told them I just couldn't serve. And of course they wanted a union person on their board, and I'm a union person.

INTERVIEWER: That's to their credit.

CONROY: Yes, they did want that. And there was myself and Dorothy Haener from UAW and a woman, I forget her last name, Colleen something from the airline stewardesses. Well, anyway, NOW,

from that day to this, seems to live with one crisis after another. A lot of good things are happening, and a lot of crazy things are happening, and a few things that aren't so crazy.

INTERVIEWER: Well, give me your version of what's good, what's crazy, and what's in-between. Just go ahead and talk about NOW as it's evolving.

CONROY: I suppose just telling my own experience would give you my version of how it's going. My first impression of the board was that here is a group of people that know very little about organization, and I was big on structure. We wanted to be incorporated and we had an attorney, Marguerite Raywald, putting the by-laws together that would allow that. I didn't know much about incorporation, but I thought I knew a lot about by-laws. Finally, we came up with a set very quickly that we were pressed, as a board, to adopt. We had to get incorporated fast. We were also establishing at the same time the Legal Defense and Education Fund, which was to be our educational and legal arm. It would be a tax deductible separate operation. So there was this great pressure to get this thing going. I remember the board meeting when we got the by-laws, and I thought oh my, we are going to have all kinds of problems with these by-laws. And I'm pleading, we really should do a better job on these.

INTERVIEWER: What was wrong?

CONROY: Well, the thing that's been plaguing us ever since. The supreme body that legislates for NOW is the national conference. And the national conference will be anyone who comes. There is no delegate system. If you could afford to come, you were a participant. That smelled like trouble to me already.

INTERVIEWER: It would make it easy for any group to organize and take over.

CONROY: Right. Plus which, even if that part weren't a problem, if you hold it in the East you'd get mostly easterners there, and then you don't get the cross section of the organization, and the people in the West probably can't afford to attend. In the West, you're going to have the opposite problem. So it seemed to me that to be truly representative of the rank and file members of NOW, we had to have a delegate system. We are still struggling with the delegate system; we cannot get it off the ground. Anyway, I can remember Betty saying-- Betty now apologizes for this--but anyway at the time Betty said, "Oh it doesn't make any difference. Let's get on with

the program. We got to get the ERA [Equal Rights Amendment] passed and we have to get these things done." And I thought Ohhhhhhh. Nobody wanted to talk about by-laws. Nobody wanted to talk about them. And Kay is patting me on the head. "Well, Catherine, you tried." And I said, "Yes, I tried." Anyway, I served on some by-laws committees and we couldn't get them off the ground then, 'cause nobody wanted to talk about them. We're too busy with saving women. The problems of the organization just....

Now we moved the headquarters from, I think the first one was in Madison, but as soon as we got started we moved to Detroit to UAW headquarters. Then it moved to New York. And every time we did this, we lost records. Nobody knew who belonged and who didn't. It was just a mess, we were so disorganized. Then it moved to Washington and that wasn't any better. Finally, now this is when I'm in Chicago. When I left the board, I left mainly because I hadn't the time to spend on the national level. But I did promise, because Chicago's a major center, that I would start a chapter in the city of Chicago. I'd do that and I'd give my energy. I worked there, and so I could. And so we set up a chapter in Chicago. Now this is a long time ago. I was its first president, and that first year was a disaster because I had no time for it. I was traveling quite a lot. And I had a couple of officers who volunteered to be officers. I never laid eyes on them before; I didn't know who they were. I didn't know any of the NOW members in Chicago. We got a list of NOW people that the national office had and then we invited them to a meeting, and we invited Kay down to talk to them. We figured she had a little credibility as a speaker. We got about twenty-five or thirty people out. Then we elected these officers. Well, they didn't produce much. And I didn't produce much. So we stumbled around for a year and then decided well, let's start over again. So we brought Kay out again as a speaker. Anyway, what intrigued me was that NOW grew by itself.

INTERVIEWER: It was an idea whose time had come.

CONROY: I couldn't believe it, because here I am trying to organize a union and I'm having a terrible time. But the Daily News had done a story on NOW and me as its president. The only address we had was our office. I got more mail begging to join and I didn't answer it. You know I didn't have time. A week later, I'd get another letter saying, I wrote to you a week ago. And I thought, we just have to knock people on the heads to join unions, but NOW--you can't keep them away. They bother you to death, call you up, call you back. I couldn't believe it. So NOW just grew like Topsy. Then I

was no longer president, but I was active in the Chicago chapter for a few years. I was active but I had no role, I just helped. Anyway, we did have our glorious moments while I was still there.

INTERVIEWER: Did Mary Jean Collins follow you as president?

CONROY: Yes--no, she didn't follow me. Somebody followed me, I can't think of her name now. We had to almost boot her out. She was very difficult. And then Mary Jean followed her and was in for a couple of years.

INTERVIEWER: I thought she did a good job.

CONROY : Oh yes, she's very able. Do you know what she's doing now? Working for the Illinois Nurses Association. She's the organizer and negotiator and just cut out for that.

Anyway, in addition to being disturbed by the failure of this leadership of NOW to come to grips with these house-keeping problems, which I found very depressing, because I just had a feeling that unless we did something dramatic, we were going to be victims of all kinds of problems. And of course, shaping up was what now I guess they call themselves the militant feminists, and probably want to be very radical. Well, the argument was should we be in the lead organization or should we have broad-based appeal. And I think the majority of NOW people are more conservative than to want to be labeled as radical feminists. They want action; they want to get things done, but they doubt the majority of NOW members and the majority of women do not care about the off-the-wall crazy stuff. I don't either; I just don't see that. I think it may be fun for the kids, but it's no way for adults to act. So all these internal battles, of course, took place.

The whole lesbian thing became a terrible problem. And a lot of us feel very strongly that that has stunted the growth of NOW in a serious way, not because the clause isn't a good one, but it does distract people from the real questions. And women are not necessarily a more important question, but NOW was directed toward getting equality for women. Now when you throw in everything else, it reminds me of the initial movement when the suffragettes got sidetracked after they got the vote, working on prohibition. Who needs it?

INTERVIEWER: The side issue takes center stage.

CONROY: The energy is all consumed with something else. Well, I think we've survived the lesbian issue. I mean the whole

gay thing is here, pretty well recognized as being here; both males and females are struggling with it and I'm sure that they will prevail. It will work out. So I don't think lesbianism is the question anymore.

Well, then I was at the Houston conference. A number of us founders were there and it was a disaster, an absolute disaster. Awful! And this is where I realized that trashing your sisters is a serious bad habit of NOW people. The majority caucus grew out of that and the attacks on the Chicago machine, which I found very funny because the people in Chicago that I know are very committed dedicated feminists. And to put almost a stigma of "machine" on them as though they're up to some corruption of some kind was so unfair and so wrong. And the people who were saying it knew it.

INTERVIEWER: Who were the people who were attacking them?

CONROY: What is now the majority caucus. And all that we were saying to the people at the conference--we were politicking. We were pushing for good leadership. We were pushing for by-law changes for the good of NOW. None of us would profit by it. But the name calling and the mud slinging and just cussed meanness 'was just more than we could quite bear. Well, anyway, it was apparent to Kay and I and some others that we could do nothing with most of them. And we dreaded Philadelphia.

Then the board--they had, of course, elected some of this majority caucus to the board, and then Mary Jean and some others were on the board, and it became two camps. For the majority caucus, the radical feminists folks and followers, who I don't think knew what they were following, and then the other side, which was, I think, the more mid-west conservative types who felt that that's not the way to go. I can tolerate these differences, you know. I don't see anything wrong with a different opinion about how you proceed as long as your goals are the same, and you can argue out how we're going to get there and come to some concensus which you can live with, then everybody pick up and go on. Well, that's not the way they play the game. You either do it exactly our way or off with your head. So it was with some reluctance that I went to Philadelphia. Sister Austin, who's also a founder, went to Philadelphia. Kay would not go. She said no, she didn't have time and didn't feel that she ought to. She had a little more vision about that one being a worse disaster. Anyway we went and it was terrible. It was unbelievable!

Meanwhile, I'm on the advisory committee. I guess I'm still on it. They haven't changed it yet, but they may. Anyway, NOW has an advisory committee and it doesn't really do much. On it are the people who maybe some time in the past had done something for NOW or somebody who had some special thing to contribute but can't be generally active. The ex-presidents, Wilma Scott Heide and Betty Friedan, are on it, and Kay and I. There's about fifty people or forty or something. After Wilma was no longer president, Karen [DeCrow] inherited the job. Wilma was to chair the advisory committee, which is kind of the way this goes. You can only serve two terms, then you chair the advisory committee and you're on the board. Well, Wilma calls and sets up a meeting at Wellesley College for the advisory committee. Kay and I and Austin and Betty, I forget who else, we all went. The latest fiasco, of course, was hot. And this was where Karen [DeCrow]\* tried to fire NOW people in the office in Chicago, or one of them, the director of the Chicago office. The board reversed her and there was a big fight and Karen left [the] meeting, and it was just ridiculous.

INTERVIEWER: Why did she want to fire her?

CONROY: Well, the story was, and I don't know really what the reason was, but the rumor was that she wanted to fire her because she really wanted to move that office to New York, to be right where she could run it. And she wanted to use the office for her own political purposes. That's the story. Now, the office was doing fine in Chicago, but this group objected to its being in Chicago because this is right in this "machine." Although the office just did its job of producing material and keeping track of records, and that's all they were supposed to be doing. So they had this fight at the board about it, and, of course, I wasn't in on any of this. But we get to the advisory committee and it's still a hot subject, and there are a couple of board members who are on the advisory committee. It comes up and Karen's there. Oh, and resulting from that, the state of Pennsylvania puts their dues in escrow and another state did the same thing. Of course, that created a big uproar. Now how's the organization going to function if people use those kind of weapons. I still remember when we finally got to talking about it, Betty said to Karen DeCrow, "Now, what is this about the dues in escrow?" And Karen--see Betty picked Karen as one....

INTERVIEWER: She did?

\* NOW President, 1975-1977.

CONROY: Yes, way back, when Karen was still a law student or whatever, and thought she had potential and was a NOW person. Well, anyway, she's changed her mind since. So she knows her very well, and who better than the person who brought you in, the mother looking down saying, now what are you doing? And Karen is saying, "Well, that's what they decided to do." And she says, "Well, what did you do about it? You're the president; did you do anything about getting those dues back into NOW's treasury?" "Well, they have a right to withhold them if they want to." Well, see, this is the whole spirit. You're free to do as you please if it's what you want to do, but if it's what somebody else wants to do, you're either violating the democratic principle or the due process. They've got all kinds of names for whatever you do that isn't what they want to do. At that meeting we really had a long debate about what we should do about the troubles of NOW. Is it our role as an advisory committee to comment or what should we do. None of us, with one or two exceptions, participated in any of these problems, and we don't really know. However, as an organization and as an advisory committee, since the only role we know of is that we give advice, we really ought to suggest some direction for this. So we suggested that some impartial person be brought in to hear both sides if they can't resolve this dilemma, and issue some arbitrator's decision, you know. Well, that never really worked either, but we had a very-interesting meeting. And this is when I realized that we had, first of all, suffered again, in NOW for this lack of experience in an organization that had grown so big with so little organizational direction. I mean, we were five years old last year, or six or seven, whatever we are, and we jumped from twenty-six to fifty thousand.

INTERVIEWER: That's been fatal to many an organization.

CONROY: Yes, and it's just beyond anybody's ability to handle. Then the people who have the responsibility for handling it, not having grown up with it, are even less equipped to deal with it. Now, the only thing, I think the top level leadership of NOW is in very bad shape. I just feel that it's bad. I only know a few of them, but I saw who we elected. And I'm not judging them by that. There's one woman elected to that board I had some experience with face-to-face. She had charged [Wilma Scott] Heide and the executive board or the committee, I forget which, I think it was the committee, with some gross thing they supposedly had done. NOW at that time, and I didn't know anything about it, had set up a grievance procedure and they had a grievance committee, so she files her grievance with this

committee against the officers, threatening to take them to court. So they decided they needed somebody to represent them who knew something about grievance procedure. They called and asked if I would do that and I agreed for Wilma and whoever else was involved. They sent me a copy of the grievance procedure, which I couldn't believe--I just couldn't believe it--and a copy of all the papers that were involved in this big dispute.

Well, I tell you as a unionist, the [NOW] grievance procedure assumes you're guilty until you're proven innocent. That's pretty bad! And the poor board, or the officers, were defending themselves against charges that weren't very clear. So I just wouldn't do anything with it until I had a clear set of charges so I knew what we were talking about. And I kept saying to Wilma, you don't prove you're innocent. If you had any sense, you'd just keep still, because somebody's made a charge against you. Now let them tell us what the charge is. It was another name calling game. This person who did this, whom I didn't know until I read her material, and it was just poison pen stuff: "The officers are no good," and it just went on and on.

I think that a lot of the writings, which smoked out all this trouble had to do with NOW's attempt to change the by-laws again. In an attempt to campaign against those by-laws, she started accusing the officers of being undemocratic, of being dishonest. You know this and that and the other thing. Anybody could have filed the charge. It could have been the other way around, but they didn't. So she calls them all kinds of names and sends this out in the mail and says that the by-laws are violating everything and doesn't say precisely how. Anyway, it's a bad scene. Then instead of handling it, Wilma, who is so motherly, decides that she'll write her a nice letter and just kind of gently scold her a little bit. Then, because this woman sent this poison document to all the chapters, I guess, she sent a copy of her letter to all the chapters. That resulted in the grievance, in this woman saying you insulted me in front of all these people. Therefore, you should be impeached. Well, of course, you know that's ridiculous.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think anyone is deliberately trying to wreck the organization?

CONROY: Well, many of us wondered. I'm not too paranoid, but there were a few people who thought the CIA had their fine hand in there.

INTERVIEWER: I remember hearing that about that conference.

CONROY: Yes, and that was hard for me to believe. I thought that was beyond belief, but then now that I hear what the CIA and the FBI have all been doing to civil rights groups, I suppose that's possible. It could have happened.

INTERVIEWER: Well, it could have been any number of groups.

CONROY: Yes, and I have no evidence of that.

INTERVIEWER: Does it seem to you--is this the kind of behavior that you think women would normally engage in just because of inexperience and frustration, based on your past experience?

CONROY: I don't think this is a woman problem; it is human.

INTERVIEWER: In other words, an individual sufficiently disturbed might behave this way any time, any place?

CONROY: Individual people, I think, who become caught up in an emotional question that deeply affects them could well become not as rational or practical or reasonable as they would otherwise be. And NOW is probably a very heady experience for young women. Now that Philadelphia conference just blew my mind. First of all, I couldn't get there too early. I was not able to show up until the following day. They were at it for two days before I came on the scene.

Now I've been through, you know, building a union and some union-type structures and am accustomed to some order and some good sense. So I get my convention call and kept that right in my hand because I didn't know what time I would arrive in Philadelphia. I wanted to be sure that I'm following the agenda and that I get to the right place to do the right thing so that I qualify to present myself to the conference as a member. Well, we couldn't find out where the registration committee was because the call said they were going to be at the auditorium, but they weren't there. So we're looking around. Two people are with me who are also late. We were trying to figure this out. Finally, I found Mary Jean and some others and I said, "Well, where's the registration committee?" That question had not come to her attention yet, and so she's looking around. So either she or somebody from Chicago hit the mike and asked where is the registration. Well the president didn't know. She finally comes back and says, "I think they're over at the hotel." Somebody else says, "No, they're coming over here." It turned out that registration was a fiasco from the night before. They hadn't got it straightened out yet. They don't know what they're doing. They got Price Waterhouse or

somebody in there handling something. And why they didn't have them where they were supposed to be? I can see us having lots of problems, but that's ridiculous.

And they're fighting on that floor. And just at the time that we walked in, I forget what they were fighting about. They had already fought about whether people who were not members and just joined that morning should be allowed to attend the conference. And they decided yes, you could join that morning and attend the conference. And you see now, who had stacked the Philadelphia conference. Then they decided--see they do this.

INTERVIEWER: You mean your by-laws don't say anything about this?

CONROY: See, there's so many loopholes in those by-laws. You can decide almost anything and get away with it. It's really bad. They are so loose and so poorly done. Then they decided not only could they join, but they didn't have to pay the fee.

INTERVIEWER: Why not?

CONROY: Because they're poor. And our dear poor sisters should not have to pay for anything if they can't afford it. So they waived the dues and they waived the fees for them. And I would swear that the women I saw who made up the cheering "rah for our side" crowd, some of them didn't look to me like they were over sixteen. They must have recruited them from some high school. I think they knew what they were doing. This really burned me up. And of course, when you think of the probably thousands of NOW women who, if they could have been forgiven their dues and their conference fees and hitched a ride, they would have come, too. But we didn't allow others to do that. So the thing was stacked; it was stacked. How we were going to elect anybody but Karen was not coming through too clear to me. I said, "We're done! This rump group, they call themselves the majority caucus, but they don't represent a majority of anything. They've taken over. They're pushing the majority around and they're accusing the nonmajority caucus group of being organized and plotting against NOW, and it's never been together."

That day, finally, the nonmajority people, who didn't even know each other, met in the back of the room and decided we've got to do something together about this problem. The majority caucus forced them to get organized, but they couldn't. It was too late. So they swept it with one or two exceptions. Then, after they got in office as I hear it, you may hear more about it than I do.....

INTERVIEWER: I don't hear anything much about anything.

CONROY: Well, I hear that they closed the Chicago office and they moved everything to Washington and they have no help. I don't know if they offered these women a job and they wouldn't go. So they dumped them. Then they didn't know what to do with it, and apparently that Washington headquarters was in chaos.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think NOW is finished as an organization?

CONROY: No, no, I don't think so. Because really, let's be honest about it, I think in the last several years the only real activity that's been going on in NOW is all these chapters that are working so hard. And they're doing their thing. They're getting state legislation. They're working on ERA, without much help from the national NOW, which sits around and fights with each other.

INTERVIEWER: That's sort of like the old abolitionist movement. The local groups did their best work when the top leadership was fighting so much they couldn't do anything.

CONROY: That's just about what's happening. I know this chapter in Milwaukee is trying so hard, you know, to carry on. They're very disturbed by all this because they're not in that camp. Well, I can't tell you a whole lot more. I really think if NOW--now they've elected this commission to prepare by-laws. And I've worked very hard with Sue [Ludke] up here.

INTERVIEWER: Are they still trying to get some by-laws?

CONROY: Oh yes, they're going to have a conference in October and the commission, which I guess is one person from each state, selected by the state. There should be a good cross section of representation there. Now I'm not too sure how good their experience is. But if their spirit is in the right place and they're willing to listen and if they're willing to try hard, we may be able to put together some by-laws we can live with. There's probably going to be some things wrong with them, but anyway Sue Ludke from Milwaukee is on that commission representing Wisconsin. I've worked with her because we worked together on state by-laws. She asked if I would mind, since this is all a new experience for her, to spend some time and go through by-laws with her. They had put out a rough set and then they refined them and we talked about them and went through every sentence and every article on every page and just discussed what is workable and what appears not to be wise, and then she would have some

sense of what it's all about. Then just a week ago Saturday, she came over with what is getting to be about a finished copy, which is going to go out in the mail. They're meeting again and then they will be mailing this to all NOW people.

INTERVIEWER: Will these be voted on by them?

CONROY: Well, I'm not clear on that. See, they are going to have a national conference just for by-laws and I think that national conference could adopt them.

INTERVIEWER: Could that national conference be packed again?

CONROY : It could be, except it's going to be in the middle of the country. It will not be in majority caucus territory, and it won't be in Chicago "machine" territory. And I'm not too sure a lot of people are going to make great sacrifices to go to a by-law conference/ because they aren't going to care any more about it today than they did eight years ago. So those who are really troubled by the effect of the bad ones will perhaps go and work hard at it. Now, what's worrying me about it, because they did this before, I get worried about people who get excessively concerned about democracy. And they get so wrapped up in that cause, because they really don't deal with the real questions, that they end up making it impossible to do anything democratically or any other way.

INTERVIEWER: Any kind of order becomes undemocratic.

CONROY: I know it. And she was showing me this set they were going through and they've got the alternate proposal and the alternate to the alternate.; I said, "You mean to tell me you're going to ask people to choose between about four different sets?" You know when you give a committee an assignment, you tell them to come up with a set of by-laws--one set. Now if people want to amend a piece of it at the conference, let them try to do that. And if they've got a good idea, maybe we can deal with that. But when you send somebody three or four sets of by-laws and they're supposed to try and make some sense out of all this and pick out the best of whatever they like out of whatever is there, how do you relate it? In one article, you may pick alternate D and then you may like alternate F in another article and you've got a mish-mash. This is insane!

INTERVIEWER: Well, did you talk her out of the alternates?

CONROY: Oh, she wasn't interested: in the alternates, but this is what the concensus wants to do.

CONROY INTERVIEW

INTERVIEWER: Are you still going to do that?

CONROY: I don't know. She and I went over every alternate and in most cases I said, "Look, some of them are silly. They really didn't change anything. They just reworded something." I said, "Gee Sue, you've got the initial committee action here and unless there's really something wrong with it, I'd stick with it because you just can't be quarreling with a great big group of people over trivia. Live with it. You can clean it up another time. Get the fundamental basic ideas straight now." And she feels very strongly about that, so I'm wishing her luck, 'cause I'm not going to be there. Somebody says, "You mean after all you've been saying all these years about by-laws you're not going to show up?" I said, "That's right. I have done everything I know how to do about this and I'm not going to bleed for the cause. It's somebody else's turn now. We old folks are going to watch you kids straighten this mess out."

INTERVIEWER: One of the things I noticed in Chicago is that NOW was working with union women in some instances. Do you want to make any comments on that? Is that the influence of the union women who are in NOW?

CONROY: No, I'm not real close to it but I think really, you know they started this Midwest Academy down there that's working with--what do they call themselves--Workers on the Move. And they're union-minded and union-oriented. There's no, major union that I know of that's part of that, but I know that a number of us have tried to help. And some of the same people are in both--the Academy and the work on this leadership training type thing, which they've put a lot of NOW people through. But their goal in the Academy is WE, [Women Employed], I think they call themselves, don't they?

INTERVIEWER: Yes, Women Employed.

CONROY : Well, that's all connected. And those women, whatever they know about unions, they probably got from the Academy and people who really have some union experience, but I don't think there's any collective bargaining going on down there.

INTERVIEWER: I talked to one NOW leader who had been working with some Sears employees and they had terrible problems. And she said that they finally concluded that the only thing that would help them would be to organize a union. I said, "Are you going to try and organize a union?" And she said, "No, we don't have the resources." I wondered is there any place they can go in the union movement and get help.

CONROY: See, the Retail Clerks have worked on Sears and it's been terrible. They've had terrible problems with them. And I don't know what it's going to take. I don't think they ought to start with Sears.

INTERVIEWER: Well, they concluded that they couldn't organize Sears.

CONROY: I think a major union would have to spend a lot of money and put in a lot of people to take on Sears. It's just too big and powerful. They'd be better off to work on Marshall Fields or Wieboldts or a department store that is not such a monster. Sears has been fighting unions for many years and they're very good at it.

This is something so many people don't understand. I was invited to speak at a class at Roosevelt [University] when I was in Chicago. And these kids were, I'm sure, very revolutionary--got to save the world. And, of course, they were very hostile when I came in. Why don't the unions organize poor people who don't have a union--like we don't want to, like we're pushing them away. And I said, "We'd love to." Well, that was the wrong answer. They know we're not doing it, so therefore we don't want to do it. That obviously makes sense to them. So I went over the problems of trying to organize and how much the law is involved, and the protection the employers have, and the things they can do to you, and the workers' attitude about unions, and all the people who are propagandizing against unions. This is having its effect.

You know, nothing would make American business happier than to wipe out the whole labor movement. Most of them--they think they know better than we do what's good for us. Now Women Employed--I think it's good that they're teaching people the value of organization, but they're no substitute for a union. They still have to unionize, because employers love to say the door is always open. "If you're unhappy come and see me any time." God, that's old! But actually people, when they go through that and they find out the employer just humors them or fires them, one of the two, it still doesn't connect to them. Somehow, it doesn't all come together that there's some legal protection you've got to have before the employer really acts. Men understand that.

INTERVIEWER: Women don't?

CONROY: Women don't seem to.

INTERVIEWER: I think a lot of these young men don't understand it, people who're not in the unions, and especially some of the young radicals don't seem to understand it, either.

CONROY: Well, the left wing has done the same thing to unions that the right wing has done. They, too--they talk about workers taking over--well, of course they're so radical. Somehow, it doesn't get through the American people are not ready for that. Joe Beirne, our [CWA] president, used to say--because usually at every convention, every year for the years we've been existing as a union, they'd handbill us at every convention. And I think it was the year before he died he said, "You know, their story hasn't changed a bit. They still have the same rhetoric they had thirty years ago. It didn't do anything for them then. It still isn't doing anything for them, but they don't learn anything. If they'd only change their act a little bit. Now they've got some good points." And I noticed that. There was a group in California and I picked up all their handbills. And they're such fresh young kids, you know, and they're kind of cute.

INTERVIEWER: You'd like to harness the energy.

CONROY: Yes, these poor little kids, they don't know what the hell they're doing. Here they had a whole thing, and they always get their money's worth out of paper. They take legal size paper, the cheapest they can get, use both sides, and it goes from edge to edge, single-spaced, and it's just garbage. They go on and on about the evils of the capitalist system. There's a whole page of that, and then at the back end of the page, at the very bottom, they talk about the poor telephone operator and they describe her problems. Very accurate! I don't think any telephone operator in that convention ever got that far. They could have started there and never mentioned the capitalistic system. Just help her and maybe she'll start to listen. They do the same thing and they're still doing it. Except some of them are very bright and very able.

INTERVIEWER: Well, some of them may learn how to operate. I think some of them will.

CONROY: But, of course, as they grow up a little, then they begin to realize that that's not the way to go, either. This country, I'm sure is gradually, obviously socializing. But it's not going to be done the way you did it.

INTERVIEWER: It's going to be done with conservative rhetoric rather than radical?

CONROY: That's right! And you know, the more you regulate business the more you spread the burden of the poor and the unemployed and whatever. We're moving in that direction. Just be

patient and stay with the program; you have a better chance of getting these things done. But you're not going to wipe out General Motors in one fell swoop, and the workers are not going to take it over, no matter what you do. They don't even want it. We don't want to run these companies.. We just want our fair share of the profit.

INTERVIEWER: What would you like to talk about now? Do we have time to talk about CLUW [Coalition of Labor Union Women] or is there something else that you'd rather talk about first?

CONROY: No, I think CLUW is a good subject.

INTERVIEWER: Were you one of the founders?

CONROY : No, no. CLUW was really founded by the UAW with some help from the AFT [American Federation of Teachers], I think, and CWA has participated some--not a major contributor but a good one. I know that prior to CLUW, Olga Madar\* had tried to get something going in the state of Michigan with union women in a kind of coalition with other women and other women's groups, to get some legislation passed in Michigan. And ERA finally became one of their causes. And UAW has done more for women than perhaps almost any other union. So when they set up this first national CLUW conference, I participated a little bit in the planning of that. I went to a few meetings but not to many and I didn't have any particular important role in it. It was just supportive more than anything. As a matter of fact, we have another woman in CWA who I think played a much more important role. Her name is Loraine Paul from the West Coast, a fine good union feminist.

INTERVIEWER: How do you feel about ERA, incidentally, since union women seem to be somewhat divided over it?

CONROY: I think after all the energy that's been spent trying to pass it, it's got to pass. I don't see it making any changes in anybody's life. I think it's a symbol, though, of equality that must happen, that's got to be. And now that it has become that kind of battle cry, we must pass the ERA.

INTERVIEWER: Of course, Myra Wolfgang\*\* thought it might hurt some women. Do you think it would?

\* First CLUW president.

\*\* Former officer of the national Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union.

CONROY: I know it and she preached that for a very long time but she did change her mind.

INTERVIEWER: You don't think that's anything to worry about.

CONROY: No, I don't see that it's going to hurt-women a bit. I don't know of any protective laws that have really done anything for women that men shouldn't have had, too, if they have any value. And that was her cry--that weight lifting. Some states, including Wisconsin, never had a weight lifting law. And in the states that had weight lifting laws they don't apply to, for example, hospital attendants who might have to lift a 200-pound, dead weight body. So, we've been kind of taken in by all this.

INTERVIEWER: Apparently a rational kind of weight lifting law would relate the amount of weight you could lift to your body size rather than to your sex.

CONROY: That's right. Or your own strength. There are many men who can't lift either because of physical build or health or age or whatever. So you can't say that some people should or shouldn't.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think CLUW has served a useful purpose or is it too soon to tell?

CONROY: I think CLUW has a lot of possibilities. I don't think we've come to recognize them yet. Because we are trying to organize women and working women--there is a difference. I know that it's said, sometimes in an accusing way, "NOW women are middle class, not typical of the working women." I don't think that's a fair charge because I think that some chapters are mostly working women and some are mostly housewives so you can't make a general statement. But I think that NOW women attracts--you don't have to belong to NOW. You do have to belong to most of the unions that are representing a certain job. So it doesn't mean that if a person is in a union that they're necessarily cause-minded or oriented or wanting to change anything. They want the union to produce their salary and their benefits, but I don't know that the average male or female member looks to the union to do a great deal more than that unless something goes wrong. Then--why didn't we do something about that? But beyond that they don't want to be bothered. And union women are slightly better off than nonunion women but they, too, have only begun now to get the message.

And I think union women are about where NOW women--whatever they may be, but they're movement people--where NOW women

were about five years ago. They're only now beginning to get the message that there're some things that ought to be changed and you're the only one that's going to change them. And I think this whole cultural thing is to blame. I don't think that there is some physiological or psychological difference that makes women so passive. It's that same old story. You bring them up that way and then how do you expect them to be. Somebody said to me, "Women don't ever fight for their rights." I said, "Well, they've been taught not to."

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel that as far as union women are concerned, the battle may have to be with union men, in many instances? How do you feel about that?

CONROY: No, because I think that men are practical. I think it's going to depend on the union. The union that is principally male, like the building trades, the building trades are not going to attract women in droves. So the men probably won't be bothered too much by it. They will find it amusing and whatever; it won't be too upsetting. Unions like my own, where women are the majority but men have the majority of leadership, and I mean almost 100 percent with a little exception, the men, I think, are very nervous in this union. They don't know what it all means. Since we have the votes, they are holding their breath waiting for us to exercise it, and we haven't done that yet.

Now I don't believe most of our women are hostile about this fact that males are running the union. A few of us are very disturbed by it, though, because we believe that the organization should have leadership which truly represents all interests in the organization. Some of our older, longer-termed leaders are not going to accept that, but I'm sure they're going to fight it, not in any obvious way, 'cause it's too dangerous. They're practical. But any subtle way that they can avoid having to deal with the women question, they're going to. I know of some instances where it's happening. I see just little signs that are probably not too evident. Well, I think I am on the state AFL-CIO board, for example, because I think there's leadership in the labor movement, of all unions, that are a little uneasy about the fact that we had no women on the state board.

See, union women are not attacking anybody for that, but the women's movement is attacking. And I mentioned John Schmidt\* for example, here in Wisconsin. Now John, I'm sure,

\* President, Wisconsin AFL-CIO.

means well, but he is a male chauvinist. There's no way that you can slice that, but that's what he is. But, as John says, because Wisconsin was the first AFL-CIO state council to hold a women's conference before any other state had one, because there happened to be some women who were kind of tuned in to you know--what are we doing for women. Well, as John says to the women's conference, "I'm a practical politician and I know the handwriting is on the wall. I'm not about to insult the potential voters." And he tells you that quite frankly. Now I don't think that changes his feelings about it, but he's trying to make the adjustment. So, I think that John does see the advantage to having a woman on the [State AFL-CIO] board. I mean, I'm the token woman. Yes, of course, we have a woman! My union does not have the vote to make it. We just aren't big enough to swing that kind of power in the state of Wisconsin. We're not in any state, for that matter. Well, we might be in the South because we're a bigger union.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think a larger number of women officials in your union would have resulted in different kinds of gains at negotiations? Would different problems have been taken more seriously?

CONROY: Oh yes. And it isn't so much a matter of women. For example, I meet once a month with sixteen local presidents. Fourteen of them are male, and they're craftsmen. So when we come to good and welfare, which is about two hours before we recess, the good and welfare that we talk about is the problems of the telephone craftsmen. Now if we had an equal division of craftsmen or construction, or craftsmen and clerk, or craftsmen and operators, operators and construction, we'd probably talk about all of it. Maybe not necessarily that the women will insist on their fair share of the time. They aren't accustomed to that yet. They have a tendency, even when they're the majority by a slight edge, to defer to the male who wants to talk about his problems, because he knows, and there's no doubt in his mind, that you just have to aggressively pursue that problem. She hasn't figured that out yet. She just doesn't recognize. She's still waiting to see what the union's going to do about her problem. And now I say harsh things like, "Never mind what the union's going to do about your problem. What are you going to do about your problem? I'm just going to help you; I cannot do this for you. That's why you're in this mess for so long, 'cause you keep waiting for somebody to do it for you. And all the union does is make it possible for us to do something together." I think that's 'slowly going to get through.

Now, young women today are very different from my generation. I mean, it's only in recent years that you can get a telephone operator who might swear on the line. And the words they've learned would really blow your mind. My generation never heard those words till lately from anybody. They have a little more self-respect; they have more initiative; they have more confidence in themselves. They are more optimistic about their own future; they don't feel the limits that my generation just grew up with and accepted as inevitable. So the change is not going to be dramatic and it's not going to be overnight. But I think pressures on a John Schmidt or my international president, it's just going to get tighter and tighter. I mean it will be nice for awhile, like we tease John. It took us four conferences to talk to the women as women. You don't know John?

INTERVIEWER: No.

CONROY: O.K., well, John doesn't speak the king's English. I mean, it's really pretty wild. I think it's one of his attractions. He just murders the English language, but he's no dummy. He's not dumb; he's shrewd as the dickens. At the first women's conference, he was very patronizing, you know: "Now, youse girls, what you got to do...." and he gets a boo. I'm not sure he knew what was wrong with what he just said. The next speaker pointed out that we "girls" are really women and the "girls" are our daughters. Well, then the next time it was, "you broads." John uses terms like that frequently. Well, he really got an earful from that. Then the last time, "Now you women." And everybody cheered; John finally caught on. And he looked so proud of himself.

And I have to laugh now, because in my presence it's so funny. Like we have a state AFL-CIO convention and we're going to be in the same box again. We weren't ready with some good resolutions about women. We took the--it's called the Interstate Association of Governors Commissions on Women. They had passed a lot of resolutions, so we picked out a couple. One of them was on rape; one was on prostitution; one of them was on ERA; and I don't know what the others were. Anyway, we just tossed those into the convention 'cause we had to have something. Well, I don't think the whole labor movement ever had a prostitution resolution before. You should have heard the guffaws and the haw haws. They, of course, they refer that one to the board. The one on rape they referred to the board; they just didn't know what to do with them. The convention didn't know what to do besides giggle. Oh, I'm sorry--not one on rape, it was just the one on prostitution.

Then there's a committee that formed a resolution on rape. Wisconsin has revised its rape laws, their sexual assault laws. We reduced the penalties on some because it's impossible to get a conviction, and we've changed the permissible evidence, the history of the victim and so on. Anyway, when that material was put together, I brought it to a board meeting and passed it out to everybody on the board. Well, you know every time the board has a subject like rape or prostitution, they all look at me. Well Catherine? I'm the expert! And John, of course, right away, "Tell us Catherine, what about this?" And then I advise them.

INTERVIEWER: Do they vote?

CONROY: And they vote. It doesn't cost them anything. You see, they can do that so easily.

INTERVIEWER: You're working up to things that are going to....

CONROY: That's right. And I'm very attentive to those things that are of great concern to women. The deer party permit is very serious in the city council. How many people can go deer hunting at the same time. I don't know what it means. And should we have a fishing season or alternate seasons.

INTERVIEWER: You mean they vote with you on yours and you vote with them on these?

CONROY: I try to figure out what the concensus is here. You know I figure I got to make a friend here and there and show them I'm not all bad.

INTERVIEWER: I'd better turn this off, or you're going to miss your CLUW meeting.

December 29, 1976

INTERVIEWER: One of the things I wanted to go back and pick up on was the Catholic Worker Movement. You mentioned just in passing that at one point you worked briefly with them. You didn't tell me anything about it. Could you tell me what it involved?

CONROY: Well, we had two women working in our office. We had an office down town and these two women were active in the Young Christian Worker. It was a kind of a movement in the Catholic Church back before there was an ecumenical change and they would come to the office with all the problems they

were having with the center. The Young Christian Worker at the time was sort of radical in the sense that most parish pastors didn't accept it. Their philosophy was to get out with working people and try to get them to think of work in terms of a larger commitment, service to God, and to get them interested in associating and bringing the church into the work place.

So they had a headquarters right near our office, it was a kind of a skid row area. It was cheap, near the city hall. It was an old building. It was a store building but it had flats upstairs and they did a lot of work to fix it up because it was pretty run down. Then they opened a bookstore for the purpose of selling Catholic literature. They felt there was nobody handling the kind of literature that they wanted to handle. The traditional church stores had the traditional kind of literature. The book store was a cooperative bookstore and it was always struggling to survive. Everything about the movement was struggling to survive at that time. So these two women were very active in it and they would come to the office with all its problems.

INTERVIEWER: Were these women in your union?

CONROY: No, they worked for us. They were office workers for our headquarters and then they were volunteers at the center. So they'd come in. And I had been over there. The priest started that movement here, although it was started in France.

INTERVIEWER: Was this the Dorothy Day\* group?

CONROY: No, that was a different Worker. This was the Young Christian Worker. Dorothy Day was a little more extreme; this was a little more conservative. Anyway, they would have little groups come together and they would have discussions about work problems and how could we as young Christian workers deal with these problems. So they had the bookstore organization and then they had this Young Christian Worker training program.

Well, they kept coming over with all their problems; they'd bring them all to the office and discuss them. What should we do about this? How will we handle that? They were trying to structure the organization and they were having trouble with that. Why don't you come over and meet with us?

\* Leader of the national Catholic Worker Movement.

You know about organization. See if you can't help us. They kept at me and kept at me until finally I said well, alright. We would exchange ideas. So I got involved; the little time I had, I did get in there quite often. Finally, I agreed to serve on their board of directors. They incorporated themselves, this organization. We struggled to get that put together some way and then from there we worked on the bookstore. That was going under, so we had to see what we could do to pull that out. I probably spent my free time for over a period of two or three years. I got involved not in any on-going things, just projects.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of projects?

CONROY: Well, not so much the philosophical part of the program but rather trying to develop programs. We would hold little retreats, organizing them and getting people to participate and that kind of thing.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of people came from the outside?

CONROY: Well, they were recruiting. They got a rather interesting range--office workers, some professionals. I think they had an artist down there and they had some seminarians come in. You couldn't really point to any particular kinds. They recruited some telephone people, in fact they had some before I ever showed up. I suppose principally office type workers. One guy there was a CPA; they had a' guy there who was a bookkeeper. I don't know if that was because they were there first and brought others like them. They didn't have too many professionals; they had a couple of teachers.

INTERVIEWER: What about industrial workers?

CONROY : Not a lot, a couple but not a lot. And some of them were fresh out of college or fresh out of high school. The age range was not very old. I was probably one of the older people. They did set up a Young Christian Student for high school students. I didn't have anything to do with that, but some of the folks who were working on this got into that.

INTERVIEWER: Now what was its connection with the church?

CONROY: Well, the idea of the philosophy of the Young Christian Worker was started by a priest in France by the name of Father Cardin. The theory was that you would have these groups functioning in parishes at the parish level. Except at the time when they set this headquarters up, they set it up because they couldn't find a parish that would accept

for believing that the church should loosen up. I wouldn't be surprised but what Pope John, by all the reforms that followed him, if that wasn't what a lot of these people would have been looking for. Mass in English, for example, many of them felt strongly that we should do that. They were great for creating new prayers rather than just repeating over and over prayers that finally you forget what they mean. In fact, they did some spiritual thinking and published a book. Each person over there was to contribute an original prayer as their own particular prayer relating God to everyday things in their life. And they published the book. I doubt if it was ever a best seller but they got a lot of satisfaction out of it.

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel that there should be some kind of informal liaison between, not necessarily institutionalized churches but at least religion and trade unions? Some people at various times have expressed the idea that when it functions properly, the trade union sort of expresses a religious ideal and other people have focused on whether the church is helping or not helping. How do you feel about that relationship?

CONROY: Well, I don't know. I understand that Caesar Chavez has been accused by the Teamsters [Union] of introducing more than the economic and the bread and butter issues that trade unions are concentrating on a lot today. Looking at the history of some of the old unions, one can see that they had almost a ritual kind of existence. I've often wondered if that's what's missing in the labor movement, that lack of concern for all questions rather than just certain questions that affect workers. I don't know because I feel, not just in the labor movement--I hate to use the word moral responsibility--but the ripoff thing which goes on everywhere kind of bothers me. Some of the old fashioned virtues of honesty, decency, and integrity don't seem to sell too well these days and that disturbs me. I'm upset by corruption in government. I don't know that it's worse than it ever was or we're more aware of it. I'm concerned about the materialism that exists--more and bigger and better! I worry about people's value systems and priorities. The spirit of unionism, which probably prevailed at the beginning of the labor movement, a kind of concern for all human beings, I don't mean that it's gone but I don't think it's as strong as it ought to be. I'm not too sure--as a historian you know this better than I do--I'm not too sure things have really changed all that much, but the communications system is better than it used to be and maybe we know more about what's going on than people did in the past.

INTERVIEWER: To some extent we seem to go through cycles; we change and yet we remain the same. What do you think could bring back some of that genuine moral concern?

CONROY: I really don't know. Maybe you're right, maybe it is a cycle thing. The pendulum swings one way and then it comes back. Certainly the union person today is a fairly affluent person. It's a shame that suffering makes you more sensitive to a lot of things than if things are going well. Then you become more selfish, I suspect. I listen to some young folks who are caught up in the left quite a bit. We had an interesting CLUW meeting in Chicago the Saturday before Christmas and a few of us went down from here. We were arguing at length about what we ought to do. A couple of women I was talking with were very far into the left. Now, I'm not sure how far into the left they are; they're into it, some alliance or something. Initially, when we started the chapter there a couple of people we had got totally involved. Now they sort of fell by the wayside. They were pretty wild. They were lecturing us pretty regularly on the evils of the capitalist system. I've been listening to this off and on for twenty-five years and the rhetoric doesn't change a bit. And I think if you'd only change your style you might sell something but you don't. You just keep on with this hopeless sermon and nobody listens. When you lose your audience you ought to change your approach, maybe you could do better.

Anyway, I was thinking they're saying some things that are valuable. I don't think they help any. We get there without their help because obviously there are a lot of socialist things continuing to take place over and over again. I'm sure when we get national health insurance--and I'm sure we'll get it--it will be another step in that direction. People will wring their hands in despair and whatever. So it's bound to come. Too often some of these kids are young people who are almost patronizing. They speak about saving workers from the evils of capitalism and they don't identify themselves as no different than the workers they're trying to save. I mean they're really patronizing!

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever point that out to them?

CONROY: Over and over again. Yes, I've pointed it out and some of them get very upset with me. Now I think that some of the kids--I don't mean the October League, that's pretty wild--but the other groups that they're into, I think they're learning a great deal just being a part of CLUW. When our chapter had a group at the CLUW convention in Detroit, there

was a hard core group of extreme left in that convention and they behaved so badly that the folks from Milwaukee wanted nothing to do with them. They just felt they were pure destruction.

INTERVIEWER: When it first started?

CONROY: No, no, this was the last convention we held. And they didn't get anything; they just turned everybody off. A few of the young women from here were sorry they were even in the same organization with them because they felt they just missed the point. They were just so destructive. Apparently, a lot of young people have to go through a siege of this sort of thing and they get over it. Maybe that's good and maybe that's bad, but they learn that whatever it is they're taught doesn't work. They finally figure that out. I had asked one of the young women, "Tell me about this group you're in. How many of them are over thirty?" There's a long silence and then she said, "I think one is thirty-two." I said, "Don't you ever wonder what happened to all the left-wingers of the last generation and the one before, that they never seem to survive?" No, she never thought about it. I said, "Well, think about it because I don't think you've discovered anything new. Every generation's had a group get into this and I think there's a message in that. Some of the things you want done are getting done but not that way. If you'd change your style you might get someplace. That's what you've got to worry about, how you're doing it." Of course, I've felt this way because NOW had a lot of wild off-the-wall folks. And I've decided that's one of the things you find more of on the east and west coasts than in the midwest. I think the midwest, even though we've got liberal towns like Madison and some others, but the midwest seems to keep their feet on the ground. They can stay cool and handle it a little better so you're not as apt to get as much radical off-the-wall kind of behavior. They don't scare me; I'm not disturbed by them. I get a little impatient to think of all this energy wasted when they could be doing some things that are really worthwhile.

Back to the moral thing, I'll tell you my union has not generally been as inclined to be involved in the ritual type thing as some unions are. We're a younger union. Some of our members attended some union's meeting where they were saluting the flag and praying and actually before they got started they had so many things they had to take care of. They stood in a moment of silence for all the past deceased members and it was just one thing after another. And our gang was saying, "Golly, are we supposed to be doing all

these things?" I said, "No, that's not necessary." I don't know what it proves, but it's tradition. They're old unions and they've always done it and they'll keep on doing it forever and ever. It's part of their history. I'm not sure . it makes them a better union.

INTERVIEWER: I ask you, is there any difference in their moral fiber?

CONROY: No, I don't think so. I'm not sure that produces a whole lot. I think we have a tendency to ritualize a lot of that. I think we have to keep on doing these things because we've always done them. The whole world seems to do a lot of things because we always did them. We're not too sure why else we're doing them, we're doing them for those reasons. I had an old-timer tell me once that the old-fashioned union leader who appealed to the sentiments of the workers, the real wind-up type of leader, the charismatic type of leader, are fast disappearing and they're being replaced by more of an administrative type person who doesn't make very sensational speeches and inspire people to do much of anything.

Unions have become rather bureaucratic, too. They're all looking for administrators, somebody who can shuffle the papers and make the computer produce the information they need. The process of bargaining and the process of grievances, I think, has become more sophisticated. Employers don't make the glaring mistakes in dealing with their workers that they made in the early days, so unions don't make them either. So the processes are perhaps smoother. Everybody's more enlightened about how to deal with each other. I don't know if something is lost in that process or not.

INTERVIEWER: I heard Delores Huerta\* speak, saying that it took the Farm Workers [Union] some time to be willing to develop enough bureaucratic expertise to do the things they needed to do because they were so afraid they would lose their idealism. Yet they decided that they did have to have that, and she felt that they hadn't lost their punch by doing it.

CONROY: Yes. See, I don't know what the truth of that picture is. I'm solidly behind Chavez but I don't know what the problems are in organizing those workers. If you're organizing a worker who has a language barrier, who may have a limited education, you probably have one kind of organization. If you're organizing a different kind of worker who is pretty sophisticated, then you have to do something different.

\* Vice-president, United Farmworkers Union.

I don't know that you could walk over to the First National Bank and sing "Solidarity Forever" and have them all following you down the street. I don't know that that would do it. Maybe I'm missing something but I don't think that's what it takes. But if you talk about their wages and their pensions and their fringes and show them what they're missing, I think they would pay attention. So in the early days of the labor movement, that was probably the appeal--having leadership that inspired them to want to get up and go, and their suffering was so great anyway that what was the risk?

INTERVIEWER: Tell me what you think CLUW is doing and what you expect from it. Maybe start with the beginning of CLUW. How much were you involved in the beginning?

CONROY: Well, not as deeply as others. Let me back up though. In Chicago, several of us tried to get union women together. There was no CLUW but we were trying to get union women talking to each other. I had felt as a member of NOW that somehow union women had to start worrying about themselves. There must be some way that we could get something going. Libby [Elizabeth] Koontz, who directed the [U.S.] Labor Department Womens Bureau, had operated on the theory that the Womens Bureau ought to, in addition to working with governors' commissions and doing whatever, ought to try to bring some union people together. Mary--I can't think of her name--she was the regional director of the Women's Bureau in Chicago. She came from Michigan and she became very ill and retired. Anyway, at the urging of Libby she would call a few of us together. There were probably about eight or ten of us who'd have lunch with her every so often and we would talk about how we really ought to get something going. We kept talking about that and then finally we did set up a meeting. This was just before I left Chicago. We did get a few people together. Then Olga Madar from UAW tried to form a coalition and she came into Chicago before I left Chicago and invited a number of us to meet and talk. We explained what we were trying to do. That didn't really get off to a roaring start either.

INTERVIEWER: What did you want to do with this group?

CONROY: Well, we wanted to share our problems. We felt that the Women's Movement had something to say to union women and we ought to get on board here. We had a lot in common as union women, working women. There were a lot of things the Women's Movement was doing that would be valuable to union women. Not everything would concern them, but that whole economic thing--jobs--would be of concern to us. We didn't

really produce a whole lot that evening. Then, as I understand the real origin of CLUW began with UAW talking with Olga and probably a few other people together with some other union women.

They invited our participation. I couldn't participate. At the time they started, I wasn't available. So CWA endorsed the idea of some kind of coalition. We had a woman on staff in Chicago named Helga Nesbitt and Helga was urged to participate in that start. They had their first meeting near O'Hare [Airport] and decided in those first meetings that they should set up regional meetings and get union women together to talk about forming an organization. I participated in that; I helped with the regional meeting held in Chicago. Out of the regional meetings came a committee that got together to plan a national meeting. They wanted to hold regional meetings all over first to get everybody involved and the, of course, the famous big national meeting in Chicago. I was there for that and I participated in some of the planning for that.

INTERVIEWER: That was exciting. I remember that meeting.

CONROY: That was very exciting. See I had trouble because my district vice-president was not very interested in us. Now we had a woman, Loraine Paul, from California. Her vice-president was very interested and so he authorized her to participate and the union paid her expenses.

INTERVIEWER: Yours wouldn't?

CONROY: Mine wouldn't and I was so annoyed with him by that time that I decided, O.K., if you don't want to participate, I'm not going to give you any credit for participating. We will not participate. I will participate as an individual. This district has done nothing to help. When they met in the East or the West, I just couldn't get an O.K. to participate at the union's expense and I couldn't afford to spend my own money at the time. My help was kind of sporadic.

Then, however, after the big first national convention-- that was so spectacular! I think part of the reason we are stumbling around now is that we put this together so hastily, elected people to serve on the board, and we weren't really too sure who we could get to run to do anything. And people are running and accepting offices and had no idea what they were supposed to do and so they didn't do anything.

Then, of course, after Detroit (that was the second convention) we probably had an opportunity to put some more able people who had some time to get involved.

INTERVIEWER: What are the divisions? What are the cleavages within CLUW? You talked about this young group of radicals. Are there others?

CONROY: No, I think there are some young radicals and I think they're motivated mostly politically and they have bugged everybody. I mean they bug the labor movement and they bug CLUW and they just bug everybody because they're going to jump in any place they can to push their product, you know. And when people realize that all this energy is not for the purposes that you put the organization together for but to capture the organization for their own purposes, they turn people off. It takes a while, however, because they know how to make all the pleas--that we have to be democratic, and who's against that! But it takes a while to realize that that isn't really what they're trying to do. Once the organization recognizes that that's what's happening, they either sort of fall by the wayside or they're rendered useless, ineffective.

INTERVIEWER: So you wouldn't call that a major problem.

CONROY: No, I wouldn't call that a major problem. I think CLUW's major problem is that working union women are probably five or six years behind the rest of the Women's Movement. And I also believe that CLUW has (this is just my opinion) but I think we have muddied up our own purpose. When I say muddy, I don't mean dirtied it, but confused it. I don't agree with Olga Madar that national health security should be the major CLUW goal. The whole movement has already bought it and is pushing it, encouraging it and supporting it, so why set another organization up to do what everybody's already doing. She doesn't agree with that. She thinks that women have some unique health problems. Well, I'm sure that's true, but I just don't believe that that's CLUW's role. And I think our inability to really get CLUW off and running-- I mean it's limping--I think its failure to really run, is a lack of clear direction on issues that are of deep concern to women that are not being resolved or answered or dealt with by anyone else.

INTERVIEWER: What should the main issues be?

CONROY: As far as goals are concerned, I think the major goal has to be equalize pay for jobs of comparable skill and responsibility. Now equal pay has been solved in some areas where

people are getting the same thing, not entirely, but the means to do it is there. It's illegal not to pay people who are doing substantially the same jobs. But I'm disturbed, and I think women have to raise their own sights and their own expectations. A skilled office worker makes less than a janitor. There is something terribly wrong and that's what we have to deal with. There's a whole army of women who are earning way below what they ought to for what they're doing, for the value of their job.

I just recently negotiated a contract for some women who work in credit unions and I'm getting a vivid demonstration again of low expectations. They wanted to organize because they felt they had some problems. Well, after they got organized and we really sat down and talked about their jobs, they're learning now, much to their surprise, how much they need to do for themselves, how far behind they are. The best job they have in that credit union pays five dollars an hour. And they're paying \$4.12 an hour to a woman who is able to take care of their loans, taxes, has shorthand and typing skills and carries a heavy responsibility in that credit union. They have tellers and they have others handling all kinds of things. They've got ten women in there and it's a big credit union; it operates like a small bank. It's a credit union for a major manufacturing plant and in the plant, there's about eight unions. Their pay rates for the most unskilled jobs they have are better than anything these women are earning. I've had to focus them on that. Now they're getting the message and they're getting mad. And they say well, we've been doing this for years. Yes! You certainly have.

I think CLUW's job is to raise women's expectations so that we resolve this question of substantially equal pay for substantially the same kind of skill and responsibility. I don't think we can say jobs. That's only going to happen, I think, when women participate more fully in the unions. Now, women are difficult to persuade that they should be stewards and officers of locals. I know this because I've seen some of our locals try to get women to hold office. I think there's a certain amount of fear involved. Women are not accustomed to share in power with men and many of them don't think they want to. Except they don't realize that that's the only way they're going to get whatever it is they think they ought to have. They've got to share that power. Being powerless, we're so accustomed to it that we don't even understand what it means. So there's an enormous job of consciousness raising that I think only CLUW is going to do. The unions are not going to do it. The male leadership isn't aware enough.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think CLUW is doing it?

CONROY: I don't think we know how to. I think it's happening by accident as CLUW people sit around and talk about what is our problem here. Then they get into all these subjects. I think the chapter here has some people who are very aware of this, but I don't believe that when we first started CLUW that that was an identifiable problem in the minds of a lot of people. People wanted to go for equal pay and ERA and things which had big benefits and they weren't too sure what they all meant. I don't think you can recruit a large number of anybody around a philosophical question which only indirectly touches them. I mean you can get a few people together but you can't get lots and lots. So until we really focus on what it's costing women to not be active in their unions.... Now, I know that the youngsters who are very enthused about CLUW, when they started out they were sure that if we notified women that we had this organization they'd break the door down. Of course, they're in a state of shock now because that's not happening. And I didn't think it was going to happen. And then they varied their program. They decided they'd have some good films. "Union Maid" is one that they really take to, so they brought that out. Well, we had five people come to see it. Then they advertised it and showed it again and they got a few more people out, but there was no great demand, you know, to get involved in something.

I personally think that we're giving a lot of lip service to CLUW. Labor leadership in many many unions has endorsed and is encouraging CLUW, which is great because we need all the encouragement we can get. Now, as soon as CLUW starts to function the way it ought to it's going to scare some union men but why tell them that now. Let them be scared.

INTERVIEWER: Has your vice-president become more comfortable with it?

CONROY: No, he's not comfortable with it but, see, the president of the union got the board to endorse CLUW. Then he wrote a letter to every local in CWA urging them to get people involved, men and women both. He sent an application for membership to every local saying this is what CLUW's about and it would be valuable to have CWA people in it. Then they set up a contest between Patsy Fryman, who's an assistant to the International Union President and is the secretary of CLUW nationally. She made a bet with the representative of the [Amalgamated] Clothing Workers [Union] that we will produce [more members] in CLUW by February than they will. Now we have a contest. I thought well, that's fine. But our big

major local here, which is male dominated, always believes in supporting the union's programs and so they, at their last meeting, invited somebody from CLUW to speak to them. Then they passed a motion that the local would pay the dues for the first fifty who joined CLUW, for one year. I don't know how many members we're going to get out of that. And you know the dues are cheap. I'm not too sure that whenever you get it free--well, whatever works.

INTERVIEWER: You're saying the men in the union are not really the enemy. It's the women's lethargy?

CONROY: I was thinking about that. I think in a union that is over half women, a smart male leader is not going to do anything to discourage female activity. I think they're smart to be the hero. "Come on, girls, we ought to get this thing going." That's very smart to do. And I think in unions where women are so much a minority that they couldn't be a threat even if they all got together, if they're paying attention at all, it wouldn't be hard to get some support from men. But those that are in the middle, where women are of significant numbers, they could affect an election and present a real threat. There probably is some fear because the whole thing could backfire. So some unions are really going all out. Now AFT and AFSCME [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees] have done a lot with CLUW and they have large memberships relatively speaking, compared with other unions. Well, AFSCME and AFT are probably principally or heavily female. And CWA and Clothing Workers are heavily female. UAW had made a commitment under Walter Reuther to it years ago. He had set up a Women's Department and provided a seat on the [UAW executive] board for a woman. But that's Walter Reuther. I'm not too sure [Leonard] Woodcock\* would have initiated anything like that. He carries on with it, but I don't know where he sits on this whole business.

INTERVIEWER: Which are the unions that either are dragging their feet or probably will drag their feet?

CONROY: Well, I don't know. I didn't know until I was in Chicago at this last meeting, but there were a couple of Teamster women there who were telling me that the Teamsters [Union] is over 50 percent women. I said, "What!" They insist that they are, that the majority of Teamsters [Union members] are women. You might want to check on that. They have an

\* UAW president, following Walter Reuther.

enormous local down there--33,000 members or something.

INTERVIEWER: Is this because they've organized so many women who aren't actually Teamsters?

CONROY: Well, this local just added Blue Cross-Blue Shield. And now they've added 2,000 [members] more:

INTERVIEWER: Yes, it's possible if you're talking about people who belong to that union who aren't actually Teamsters.

CONROY: See, we all think of Teamsters as over-the-road drivers. That is really a minority of their membership. That's where the power is. That gang, they really call the shots. That's their best paid member and it's the best and tightest organized member. Now, they do have a lot of factories and plants and warehouses. They could very well be principally women;

INTERVIEWER: How did these women feel that their union was doing in regard to CLUW?

CONROY: They don't believe their union is encouraging anything. However, when we really got to talking about it, it appears that their problem is not perhaps a national problem but a local problem. See, those locals are big and powerful. That big local in Chicago with its 32,000 or 34,000 members, it could endorse or not endorse and it wouldn't make any difference what the Teamsters [Union] did. Now, the Teamsters are participating. Clara Day,\* though, is the one who is really the outstanding Teamster. I don't get a sense that there are others coming into CLUW with the same kind of encouragement. And I'm not sure about Clara. I never talked to her about it. I don't know whether she's active because she's been encouraged to be by her union or whether this is her own doing. That isn't too clear. She has a good enough job to have some freedom, I suspect. Although, of course you recall at the Chicago thing at the first convention there was a lot of difficulty about the Teamsters [Union] and the Farm Workers [Union]. What was the woman's name from Chavez's outfit?

INTERVIEWER: Delores Huerta?

CONROY: Yes, there was trade unity and sisterhood and whatever. That was very interesting.

\* Officer of the Teamsters Union local in Chicago.

INTERVIEWER: Well, that particular convention made me think that I had been reborn and could see the beginnings of the CIO because everybody was so full of idealism and enthusiasm, but I think probably everybody realized the rough road was still ahead. But it did surprise the people who organized it, the number of people who came. They were amazed at the number of people who would pay their own way.

CONROY: Yes, but a lot of unions paid their way, too. What I felt about Chicago as I watched this thing operating, I thought we got a bunch of women here who are caught up either in the political thing or they're caught up in the Women's Movement, but a lot of these very enthused women don't know a damn thing about their own unions or the labor movement.

INTERVIEWER: So that's the real problem?

CONROY: That's the real problem.

INTERVIEWER: The real problem is to coordinate these things, translate it into union action.

CONROY: Even here now, we've got some delightful women in Milwaukee involved. They are also active in their own unions but they are coming from unions that are very young, like the present chapter president, Patty. Patty is an AFSCME steward and she's a social worker and currently pregnant. She claims that this baby is not going to stop her, but I thought oh, you dummy. How little do you know. Anyway, she is wildly enthusiastic to have CLUW going really strong in her own union. Now, everything frustrates her. CLUW frustrates her; her union frustrates her; the county frustrates her. She is always frustrated. I said, "Well, you know Patty, I know how you feel and I wholly agree with you, but that's the way it is. You have to deal with that. You can't let your frustrations make you explode every day because that isn't going to get anything done. You have to get acquainted with the real world. Then you can be more effective." She runs around cussing, cussing everybody. She goes to hearings and raises hell with the county board.

Women have not learned and I think our chapter is becoming aware of this. We're spending more time talking about it. Women, even though they agree they want to help each other and work together and they've got a sense of sisterhood, they still have no organization sense. I keep saying to them, watch the brothers. Just watch the brothers; find out how they operate. Notice, for example, that they get together before a meeting and have a few beers and discuss the

problems of the organization. When they go into a meeting they know what they want to do. Women show up at the meeting at the last minute, not prepared to do anything about anything. When something comes up, they're on their feet trying to deal with it, not too effectively. They have planned for nothing. And if you don't get yourself organized and plan carefully what you're going to do, you're going to have a hard time accomplishing anything. And if you don't believe me, you have to pay attention to what the guys do. They've learned this over the years and we have yet to learn it.

INTERVIEWER: Some women in Chicago were complaining that CLUW meetings took six hours. That's probably the explanation, that no one planned ahead.

CONROY: That may be, but I was very impressed with that Barbara Merrill, who's their [Chicago CLUW] president. She's a bright able person.

INTERVIEWER: And she's got a long experience in trade unionism.

CONROY: I had a wonderful conversation with her after our meeting that Saturday. It was a regional meeting that Clara Day was supposed to call. I mean we're messing up on the national level now. And then, of course, these young women get so mad. I really got impatient with them the other day and I said, "You know, you are so critical. I agree with you that the national level of leadership in CLUW is making some mistakes, but I wish you'd keep in mind that they're all busy people. CLUW has no staff; it has little or no help. Everybody is trying to do something for CLUW around the edges of all the other things they're into. And they don't know any more about what we ought to be doing than any of the rest of us do. You assume that because you put somebody on the national board that they've got the magic answers. We know as much about what ought to be happening to CLUW as they do. There's no history to look at, this is a whole different kind of movement. So don't be so critical of your sisters who are stumbling around and fumbling and getting notices out late or not getting them out at all. Membership records are fouled up and that's the way things go. Be patient! Help, don't criticize."

INTERVIEWER: How do they respond?

CONROY: I think it makes them think. I know they think oh, Catherine is always scolding us about something. But they're good; they're good. They're very responsive. Anyway, we

talked about here, first of all, trying to do some recruiting, personal recruiting of individual local unions, asking the locals to let somebody talk to their members or something. I think some of the mail we sent out to some of the unions ended up in the waste basket, so we feel that we need to do some personal direct soliciting. There is some thought,, and we haven't figured this one out too well, that one of the things we ought to be doing is to help women to form committees in their own locals. If the local won't formalize a women's committee they can have a caucus. They can spend time together talking to each other about how they can do whatever it is that needs doing.

INTERVIEWER: So you're going to start going out to these other locals.

CONROY: Yes, they've already started. I'm not doing a lot of it.

INTERVIEWER: Is that strictly local or is CLUW doing this in a lot of places?

CONROY: It's not a national program, although I suspect since there's a lot of discussion on the national level about how to stimulate activity. The doldrums that are going on are going on all over, so we're aware that we have to do something.

INTERVIEWER: Does the recession have anything to do with women being nervous about asking for more?

CONROY: I don't think so. I think that women--I really honestly believe that it's the whole cultural thing--and even though there are a lot of women interested in the Women's Movement, it is nowhere near a majority of women. There's sympathy among a majority of women that something be done for women, but I don't think that anywhere near a half or a majority of women are doing 'anything or can see themselves in the role of doing anything. That's going to take a while. The small group that's interested and concerned enough to want to be active about it is quite small. To try to change the course of the labor movement by a small handful of women, who don't even understand their own problems and ability and potential is a kind of tough assignment, so it's going to show up in small ways. Decisions that are made that hurt women help to arouse their anger. That Supreme Court decision\* really provoked a lot of discussion and women who had been silent and assuming things were going to be taken care of got very angry. That's a good sign! I think when a few women try

\*Gilbert v. General Electric.

to get their unions to do something and get a cool reception or no response and realize that the first time they ask for anything nobody pays any attention to them, that will change some attitudes. But we've got to get them to try. See, they don't even try to get the union to do anything. I just feel that it's going to grow. CLUW's going to be effective. It's going to grow, but it's going to be tough to do. It'll take time. I think it will be something that's doing more than others. And some of these unions are probably going to have quite a fight on their hands.

INTERVIEWER: With the men, you mean?

CONROY: Yes. I think sometimes, even in the same union, it may be more successful in one local than in others. It has a lot to do with the kind of leaders.

INTERVIEWER: What's the highest position in your union that's held by a woman?

CONROY: We have one woman on the [national] executive board who comes from California.

INTERVIEWER: And how big is the executive board?

CONROY : It has twelve regional vice-presidents, we call them district vice-presidents, and five officers. That's seventeen on the board.

INTERVIEWER: Is she one of the twelve?

CONROY: She's one of the regional or district vice-presidents.

INTERVIEWER: The first one, or have there been others?

CONROY: The first. Well, I take that back. She is the second woman to be on the board over the years, but she got on the same way the other one did. The first one got on years ago. We restructured the union and she was already a leader in the area she represented and it was assumed that in restructuring, those leaders in those various areas would become board members. And she was one of them. She came from a district that had almost no men. She lasted, I think, two or three terms. As soon as that district acquired a large male membership, things changed. Now this woman in California was a more recent addition but she comes in the same way. We organized a large group who were majority female. She was already their leader and part of the agreement was that if the group came in en toto, there would be a seat on the board

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for her. So it was really a deal we made. She has, however, I believe, won one election. I'm not positive about that. She stands up for election again in June. This will be the critical test.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that in your own union women generally can win what they deserve or not?

CONROY: Yes, we've got the vote. But we have to organize that vote. We've not had an easy time getting women to run. There's a union election this June for vice-president of the district. I don't believe any woman will run. I won't run. I don't think the other two women on the staff will run. I ran once and lost, so I figure I tried.

INTERVIEWER: What reasons do they have for not running?

CONROY: I'd only be guessing, but I think the one wouldn't run because she's too new and the other one I don't think has any following. She came in from another district and that was some years ago and so I don't think she has a chance if she runs of getting any votes. And she knows it. Well, that's my opinion.

INTERVIEWER: So in a lot of ways you seem to be saying that the real problem is to get more women prepared for responsibility than to immediately demand it.

CONROY: They've got to be available, go after staff jobs, because it's awfully hard to be vice-president unless you're known all over the state. They've got to be willing to go for leadership roles in their locals, which many of them don't. They don't try. Or they've got to at least hold a steward's assignment or something. Now, we do have female officers. But now in Wisconsin we have thirty some locals and I think we have three of them that have female presidents, three out of thirty. Now there are some of them that have a majority of members who are women; in others that isn't true. But even where they are a majority, they won't do anything.

Now there are two women who are coming over here. One of them is president of my local and she's just a joy. She's real great. I'm after her to put her application in for staff, but I talked to her for a year before she finally did.

INTERVIEWER: You mean you really had to push her.

CONROY: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: What was her reason for being reluctant?

CONROY: Well, she never explained why she delayed and I tried to figure out why she was dragging her feet. I decided that it was because she's a little hesitant about the assignment. She's divorced and has an eleven-year-old daughter. She hasn't said it, but I think she had some concern about how would this affect her child. And she's a very serious and conscientious mother. She knows the staff job is terrible to win. I have a feeling that that's part of this whole thing.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that's what holds a lot of the other women back, extra family responsibilities? Or just fear in general?

CONROY: Well, it could, but I think it's this whole expectation. Even some of them who say we've really got to do something about women. When you say O.K. now, what are you going to do, they don't have that in mind. They had in mind somebody else would do it.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think women can get their demands met without taking leadership just by having organized caucuses, because some people have suggested that this will do it. I just wondered, do they have to have representatives in top leadership as well?

CONROY: Well, yes, you can get certain things done by caucusing. But it seems to me that unless you're willing to carry the full load, people will stop listening to you, because if the only time you see people is when you want something and then the rest of the time they're out doing their own thing, as an active staff person I would get tired and quit. I would think, help do the job, because there are so many things that unless you're a woman, you don't understand the problem. It's fine to instruct somebody to do something, but it's hard for them to do it if they don't understand what they're doing.

You know, I'm never convinced. I hear the excuse that women are busy running homes and families and whatever, and I'm sure they are, but I don't believe that that would be a problem if they really wanted to do this. I think it's an excuse, because I've seen too many women who have homes and families and are giving long hours to the union, so I know it can be done. But you have to do something about it, you have to make some arrangements. Edie does a lot of things and it isn't convenient for her. Tonight, for example, we

will be at a CLUW meeting so she has to arrange for somebody because she doesn't leave her daughter; she's too young. She's a very bright little girl but she's always got to see that somebody takes her. She's got some baby-sitting arrangements with a number of people so she can shuttle her from one place to another, but you're always aware that Edie is concerned about that. You know, she has to see to that. And that's staying in town but going to a lot of activities. Now if she had to travel, that would make it much more complicated and I think that is part of her problem.

INTERVIEWER: Of course, in another four or five years that problem will take care of itself.

CONROY: That's right. And she's learning a lot. See, she's a relatively new president so she's learning a great deal. She's very able. Now, the other one is vice-president in the CLUW chapter and vice-president for same local. She's very young, she's only twenty-three. She's really a feminist; she is very caught up in this and she's very effective. She's very articulate and very effective. I have high hopes for her, too. She has two dogs to take care of. It wears her out but she isn't married and she has no family. Young people who are that young aren't usually that serious and so that just fascinates me to see how she takes to this. She attends meetings. I have sixteen locals assigned to me and I meet with the presidents of these locals and others once a month. And where women have normally sat back and the guys did all the talking these 'two women, particularly the twenty-three-year-old, she really takes them on.

INTERVIEWER: What's her background? Is she fresh out of college?

CONROY: She had two years of college and didn't know what she wanted to do, so she quit and got a job. She's had a number of jobs. She's a very interesting young woman, good material for a lot of things. Her background is interesting. Her father is a high school teacher and he raised the kids. The parents were divorced when the children were young. She has three brothers and herself, there are four children. And she's really very bright.

INTERVIEWER: She may never have picked up that woman's attitude that you talked about.

CONROY: That's right. I think she has missed it. I think she's independent and she's very attractive. Of course, guys notice her right away and when you hear her react to some of that--I mean they try to flatter her and it doesn't get

anywhere. She's not interested. And, unfortunately, a lot of labor people right away--I remember she made a crack once about one of the guys who propositioned her (laughter). I had to laugh. I thought if he could hear you, it would really crush his ego. But many of these young women are that way. Patty, who is now married and has this baby, but Patty is like that. You can't flatter her with that "Well honey, we'll take care of the girls." No, no. So when they're turned on they're really great and they scare a lot of these guys. But they're real and they're honest and I think the day is coming when men will appreciate that honesty because I don't think that has been their experience. When they're getting an honest feedback, it's a little hard on the ego trip but....

INTERVIEWER: Good for the soul?

CONROY: Right. And I've met a few young men now who really appreciate a woman who's got her wits about her and knows what she wants.

INTERVIEWER: Maybe the younger generation of men will have different expectations, just as the younger generation of women.

CONROY : Well I know one of the women who's involved with a guy who says he just can't stand women who cater to him. He feels insulted by it. And I think that's going to come, where men are going to feel that they don't want a phony relationship. They'll want an honest stimulating--some women would bore me to death and I know they bore their husbands.

INTERVIEWER: Getting back to this question of neglecting family or really having to work day and night, men who are active really have that problem, too. People claim that men don't feel those responsibilities but actually a lot of them do. They feel pressured and still do it anyway, if they think it's important.

CONROY : Now this young man I'm looking for a call from Greenbay, I never fail to be amazed at him. He's a full-time employee of the telephone company. He has a small farm; he's raising some dairy cattle. He has three daughters and twin sons. He has a remarkable wife and he's a very active union guy. He works long hours at his union activity. Now, that takes a lot of doing because he's very interested in his children. He comes into Milwaukee quite often. His mother's here and he has a brother here. His girls, and he has two of them who are quite able. They're around sixteen. They milk cows and help on the farm. Now that's a family operation, that farm, everybody helps. He thinks it's real good for his kids.

And his daughters know a lot about unions. Whenever they have some kind of essay to write, he encourages them to write about unions and they do. He's very proud of that. And when he comes to town he will bring one or the other with him for a little holiday. Now how he handles this, he isn't a kid but he's young. But I think here's an example. So maybe he doesn't keep house--he has a housewife around--but he has enough other responsibilities so that he could claim to be as busy as any woman and say well, I don't have time. But he does take time. We had a steward up in Marinette, she had kids, six of them and the oldest was maybe eighteen when she was involved and she had one baby. She didn't miss a thing and if her local couldn't send her, she went on her own; she got very involved. Here's another example. Now she had a mother-in-law who could take care of the kids, but you know six kids you can't dump on anyone too often. You've got to have other possibilities. She had all kinds of arrangements, if one didn't work the other did. So there are ways.

INTERVIEWER: Delores Huerta has eleven children, so I've heard.

CONROY: You know if you're well organized, you can do anything. If you aren't organized, you can't get anything done.

INTERVIEWER: Some of the younger women I know are complaining about the idea that a woman in order to achieve anything is supposed to be super-woman, and yet maybe that's what we should encourage everybody to be--super people, men or women.

CONROY: Yes, and you know there are some headaches with it and I think they see that and they don't want to take it on. And I can be sympathetic to that. It's kind 'of like--I was talking to somebody and we were talking about bussing. And, of course, I'm a little worried about bussing. I don't think bussing is the answer. I'd rather break the housing patterns and if you could accomplish that, then we'd solve the problems. I was chairing a committee at the AFL,-CIO convention and I made the remark that there were a couple of lily-white suburbs and all we had to do was move a dozen black families in and break those housing patterns and we wouldn't have to worry about bussing anybody anyplace. Every school would automatically be integrated by the neighborhood. Well, there was a fire fighter sitting there and he looked at me like I had just committed the sin of the century. But I really think that's part of the answer. But you can say to black people, why don't you move to [suburb], but a lot of black people don't want to be the first to break those barriers down. It can be very painful. I can see how a lot of women

who perhaps have relationships with men that are precarious at best don't want to risk a lot of their personal life by fighting the cause and taking the risks.

INTERVIEWER: But what it comes down to is somebody has to have the guts or nothing's ever going to change.

CONROY: Or they don't have to take the risks, something like that. So, it's a slow process.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned at least two things that you think CLUW desperately needs to do. One is to put their emphasis on equal pay and the other is really going after raising the consciousness of women. Is there any other major thing that you think they ought to do that they haven't done? I suppose get a little better organized.

CONROY: And ERA, of course. That's got to be a priority item in those states and I think the rest of us have to help them wherever we can.

INTERVIEWER: I assume you've always been in favor of ERA.

CONROY: Oh yes.

INTERVIEWER: You weren't one of those union women who were afraid of it in the beginning?

CONROY: Well, I'll tell you frankly, in the beginning, I'm not too sure. Now, it's a matter of principle. I don't think passing the ERA is going to help anything. And when we first talked about it and when I first found out about Alice Paul\* and her forty-nine-year effort, I thought, G-d that persistence is marvelous. What is the goal going to accomplish for us? And I didn't think it was a high-priority item. But once we got into it and finally got Congress to make that move I thought, well now, we ought to follow through and finish it. But I would not have personally chosen it as my high-priority activity because I still don't know. Well now, that we've got that Supreme Court decision on maternity I'm hearing that ERA is supposed to cure that. I'm not sure why that is supposed to solve the problem, but there are those who seem to think it would.

INTERVIEWER: I hadn't thought of that. I think of it more as a symbol than anything else, to let the nation know that they can't go on saying it's alright to be unequal.

\* Leader of the National Women's party.

CONROY: Yes, and I'm not buying Schafly's [Phyllis] [anti-ERA] line at all, and I think it should be passed. When NOW first started to talk about it, I was one of those--I didn't say it loud, I didn't think it was all that important--but I was one who felt that if we had energy and resources we ought to put it on other things and get around to that somewhere along the way, or let those who want to work on it. I anticipated that we'd have a bigger battle with Congress. I think Congress passed it because of the little effort of some women. It was a more liberal Congress and so it thought well, why not. I would suspect after all the opposition to ERA came out that there were probably some congressmen who basically today wouldn't be as quick to vote for it, so thank G-d it's done. It's a symbol more than anything. But I'm not really, that bright about what a constitutional change really does.

INTERVIEWER: Well, it still depends on how it's implemented. All constitutional changes are only changes on paper. It's how they're implemented.

CONROY: That's right. And there were a lot of Supreme Court decisions that apparently went against women for the absence of it. Except this recent one, they haven't been going against women on the basis of our failure to have the ERA. It gets pretty technical and I'm not all that sure. I'm willing to take other people's word for it. Now that we're this far we must go through with it.

INTERVIEWER: Is there any other thing that you think CLUW should urgently do or do you think that pretty well covers it?

CONROY: Well, I think that all the questions that the Women's Movement is dealing with ultimately should be dealt with by CLUW, too. But I believe they will be, once CLUW really gets organized and has some very committed people and has union women pretty much on board. Then I think we can get to the other less obvious things, more vague and not so evident. I think CLUW ought to get after whoever it is that works on the DOT, the Directory of Occupational Titles. They had a grant in Madison.\* They worked on that directory and they straightened out the categories and classifications of a lot of jobs but they didn't deal with white-collar jobs at all, office workers, clerical workers. They ran out of money before they got to that. That's one that I thought was desperately needed. I guess the Directory is used extensively

\* Wisconsin Women in Apprenticeship project.

[by] a lot of employers and employment agencies and whatever. But in the old one, they ranked occupations according to their value and whatever, and at the bottom of the list were child-care homemakers. I mean it took more skill to collect garbage than to take care of children or sick people. So they rearranged that whole list and have updated it and straightened it out for error. But they did not deal with the whole clerical field. It's evidently a large one and requires a lot of research, and I think that union women ought to get after them to do that.

INTERVIEWER: Was that the government that subsidized this?

CONROY: Yes. And I'm not clear if that book was put out by the government or what. I never really asked.

INTERVIEWER: At any rate, there are a lot of people's salaries involved.

CONROY: Yes, because it would be great in negotiating for clerical jobs. The tendency is--set them aside and then throw a buck at them or something. You know job evaluation is a very complex science. It bothers me that I have very little reference that I can go to that is based on real good job evaluations. You know, I make threats and vague statements--well, this person ought to make more than a janitor especially if he can't read or write. That ought to be worth something. But I'm dealing from a very unscientific pressure.

INTERVIEWER: Any other things that come to your mind? Somebody's going to read this list and get ideas about what ought to be done.

CONROY: Well, of course, obviously I think union contracts have to include maternity treatment, whatever the boss says.

INTERVIEWER: So CLUW should insist on that.

CONROY: We have to; I think we have to do that. There's a lot of cleaning up in contracts that has to be done. I was shocked to find out the other day there's a whole group of workers who cannot get maternity health benefits. I'm not talking about pay, but insurance coverage--unless they're married. So if a young single woman happens to be pregnant, she's got a big problem paying for the necessary hospital and doctor bills. Now that's got to be all kinds of discrimination. Certainly marital status should not be a consideration for men or women. I think if they're entitled to something, they're entitled to it. You are not less pregnant because you're single.

INTERVIEWER: That's right, and it's not free.

CONROY: The price is the same with the doctor or anyone else, so you ought to get a fair shake. So I think once union women, have got a sense of unionism and the power of unions and the role of unions and the potential of unions for themselves, then they've got to examine all aspects of their contracts. I think that we've got to work hard for some kind of affirmative action without violating seniority where employers don't have any affirmative action.

INTERVIEWER: Is this a problem still? There was a statement in a Chicago paper this week quoting Barbara Merrill as saying she's all for affirmative action but not at the sacrifice of seniority. How do the women in CLUW deal with this?

CONROY: Well, I think we have them in all directions. I think wherever union women have sat down and really examined this, you just cannot stomp on seniority. See, I don't believe that you can use seniority to solve the economic ills of this country. I think we have to have jobs for people and it is not the fault of the union that the employers discriminate in hiring. The members of the union shouldn't have to pay the penalty; it should be the employer. And there's a lot of different ways to handle it, such as a money benefit of some sort where the employer pays the price, not a fellow worker. I personally dealt with a case here that upset me terribly, because I had a white male, fifty-one years old, with an application in for a job, a transfer, an uproot really, and he missed out because of the Bell system's affirmative action and targets. He missed out and was beaten by a young woman with a year of service. This man has twenty-seven years. Now, if you're talking about a year's service against six months, well, what does that mean. But when you do this to a man who's now worried about building his pension, and he was denied an opportunity for an upgrade before all this civil rights uproar because he didn't have a high school diploma. He's been losing every way, so we filed a charge and I helped him with it, because that is such a gross violation of seniority. Of course, I was talking to the state [office] about this and they said, "Well, we're helpless. We had to meet the target; we're ordered to by courts and we've lost all the appeals."

INTERVIEWER: Is that true?

CONROY: Higgensbottom and Pennsylvania. It has awarded in favor of a program on every kind of suit that everybody's brought. Now, the Supreme Court has not dealt with all of this, although

there's been recognition of seniority in the program, but when a target comes along and the employer's not hiring and you're talking transfer, seniority gets zapped real bad.

INTERVIEWER: Does this turn men against women more than normal or not? White against black?

CONROY: Yes. Well, I don't think black people are suckered as much as females. As a matter of fact, I get the feeling that the employer would far rather take a black male than a woman if he had a choice. Of course, they don't have to meet as big a target either. Blacks are a minority; women are not. The Bell system, for example, has over half women and has kept them within the traditional female jobs. There are clear distinctions between male and female work. So they have a lot to do and they're desperately trying to find female garage mechanics and female linesmen, or female whatever--also male operators. Male operators; they meet that quota just fine. But they're having a hard time finding women who are willing to work in construction, climbing telephone poles and splicing cables.

INTERVIEWER: So if one comes along she's almost automatically got a job?

CONROY: You can be sure she's going to get it, but it's interesting so few are interested. So we've got to work on trying to get affirmative action to make sense and make sure that it's implemented. We have the doors open to improve the opportunities for women in better jobs. But between upgrading traditional female jobs and opening doors to traditional well paid male jobs--or maybe they're not paid but they're more interesting. Females always seem to have the dull ones. So those are important things.

INTERVIEWER: If you had a daughter, say seventeen or eighteen, and she was asking your advice about what she should do with her life based on what you've learned, what kind of advice would you give her?

CONROY: Well, I would urge her not, not be a nurse, teacher, social worker, or an office worker. I don't know that I would try to push her into anything but I would steer her away from some things. I'd probably send her to Alverno College here in town because they've got so much to offer. It's a women's college and if you want to investigate schools for women look at them.

INTERVIEWER: What do they do?

CONROY: Well, they've got a program now. As a matter of fact, the president, who is a nun, is a fantastic woman, has had a couple of male teachers file charges because they claim the school discriminates against men. We enjoyed that a lot; we thought that was kind of interesting.

INTERVIEWER: What had she done to those poor fellows?

CONROY: Well, they claimed all sorts of things, but really what they did, they did fire a couple of males.

INTERVIEWER: Is that not permitted or what?

CONROY: They were trying to make a case that they were fired because the school is so pro-female and, they claimed, anti-male. Now Jorelle says that's not true because we want a balanced faculty, but she said, "Let's face it, we don't pay much. When you get a male to teach in this school, he ain't going to be the best." Now she doesn't say that for publication. But she says, "Unless they really have a feel for what we're trying to do, we don't necessarily get the best candidates."

INTERVIEWER: What are they trying to do with their students?

CONROY: Well, they're doing two things. First of all, they're encouraging women to go into nontraditional occupations. There is a nursing school, but they talk about medicine. They have a liberal arts course, but they encourage women to administer schools as well as teach in them. They also have a new teaching program. They assess students and they set up advisors from various walks of life to evaluate the students in terms of their own experience. They have business people. They invited me to be an advisor and I couldn't find time for it because you've got to get over there and meet with these kids. And you give them very honest feedback as you see it. They also do a kind of internship. They try to get employers to put them on their payroll, or at least allow them to work. That work experience should be related to whatever they're headed to. They're trying to train women for management positions in various businesses and raising the expectations.

INTERVIEWER: So you would send your daughter to a women's college that's on the ball!

CONROY: I'd encourage her to go there. And they're doing good counseling.

- INTERVIEWER: What else would you tell her? What about all the problems relating to sex, like do you live with a guy or don't you. Do you get married or do you put it off?
- CONROY: I've always been a believer--and I think those of us who have never raised children are the real experts (laughter).
- INTERVIEWER: Everyone else has to defend what they've done. You're the only ones who can be objective.
- CONROY: But from watching my friends raise their kids, I really believe that raising a child is an education process and that the character and ability to cope or whatever is done very early. I really don't like to tell anybody what to do. I like to feel I help every-way I can and give them the tools they need in order to make a decision when they have to make it. I would certainly be very attentive prior to age seventeen about the kind of prejudices or feelings that the child would have about the world they live in, in the hopes that when the time comes at age seventeen to make that decision, that they've got the necessary wherewithal to make it. And having all that, if I had a daughter who at the age of seventeen decided to be a social worker or a teacher I guess I'd have to say well, I guess if that's how you see it, then I guess you'll have to live with that. Now these feminists are raising small children and trying to protect them from sexist kinds of influences. It's a hard struggle because they're getting it from everywhere. You can perhaps build up a home atmosphere but the neighbors and relatives....
- INTERVIEWER: The rest of the world does not go along with it.
- CONROY: Right, the neighbors and the relatives and whatever.
- INTERVIEWER: And the school.
- CONROY: They just don't seem to deal with that, so it probably would be very hard. Yet, I think children suffer from the problems of the parents trying to program them, suffer a lot with that. I think a lot of this rebellion you see is coming from that, not all of it, but some of it.
- INTERVIEWER: So, in other words, you wouldn't try to program your daughter. You might want to protect her from other people's programming but you wouldn't want to program her yourself.
- CONROY: That's putting it very well, I think. Yes, and I feel that way about everything, including if they're going to live with somebody. Because I've known some young women who apparently

have lived with a guy and have been sexually active, I don't think promiscuous but active, and it doesn't seem to have hurt them all that much. As a matter of fact, a couple of women who then did marry might have had better marriages as a result of it. They got to know each other very well and perhaps more of the real world before marriage instead of getting married and finding out what the truth was.

I don't envy parents trying to raise children today. It's a giant headache and I'm glad I'm not having to do it.

INTERVIEWER: Some kids complain that they're confused and they can't get their parents to give them any advice. Most of them complain that their parents give them too much, and some complain that they really aren't getting any help from anybody.

CONROY: Well, that's one of the reasons I'm a great believer in birth control because I think there are an awful lot of parents who had children....

INTERVIEWER: Too soon?

CONROY: Who didn't want children. You know if you didn't want your children and you couldn't adjust or change your mind, those kids are going to have a lot of problems.

INTERVIEWER: So I can assume that you'd at least let your daughter know that it's a good idea not to rush into parenthood regardless of what she decides about marriage.

CONROY: Yes, indeed, yes (laughs). I don't think they should make a permanent decision about anything before they're at least thirty-five.

INTERVIEWER: Some people say fifty, but that's putting it off a little late.

CONROY: I remember a friend of mine told her daughter, 'cause her own marriage was a sad experience. She married again, finally, and it turned out very well, but in the interim between the bad marriage and the next one, she kept saying to her daughter, "You will not date until you're thirty-five." Of course, the kid was so small she didn't know what she was talking about. But mind, "You're not dating anybody until you're thirty-five." But she married well and her child is now married and has her own baby. So I don't know. I have a good friend whose kids are just so messed up she is just frantic. They got into drugs; they've both been in prison, and they had a fine home and a devoted mother and father, so I can't understand it.

INTERVIEWER: Any other kind of advice! that you'd give?

CONROY : Well these other people that I know, such as this twenty-three-year-old and this girl who's just about to have a baby, I give them all kinds of advice. They pay no attention.  
(laughs)

INTERVIEWER: What kind of advice do you give them?

CONROY: Whatever they're doing, I say, "Really, you know, you have to think about this and that." To me, they're growing. So I say, "Listen to your Aunt Catherine." If they get very excited about something that really isn't worth getting that excited about, I'll tell them to calm down. "Well, I can't do it!" "Yes, you can." That sort of thing.

INTERVIEWER: Now you told me earlier, off the record, that you thought your own attitude had changed when you had a hysterectomy and had health problems, that you thought you became a little more relaxed about what you thought was important and what isn't.

CONROY: I think that was a dramatic time for me. That was health problems which didn't slow me down a whole lot but did cause me some concern. It was a very deep concern to me at the time, because I was so scared and my mother was so poorly.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, that was before your mother died?

CONROY: She was already in a nursing home. Yes, and she was not mentally able, because she suffered so severely with hardening of the arteries, to deal with anything. So trying to take care of all these problems without letting her know was hard.

INTERVIEWER: She didn't know?

CONROY: She didn't know about any of it. I made up stories about why I wouldn't be out to see her for a week, so she was not aware that I had any health problems. Maybe it wouldn't have mattered. I kind of realized after a while that she didn't remember anything I told her anyway.

INTERVIEWER: You had a hysterectomy and double mastectomy?

CONROY: In a period of two years I was in the hospital five times, not very long. And I moved from Chicago to Milwaukee during that time, so things were kind of wild. I didn't have to physically move; the union moved me. The movers packed me.

But I did have to do a lot of things. I was in the hospital about ten days and I think within two weeks I drove out to see my mother in the nursing home, pretending that nothing had happened. I said I was in a meeting in California, which is not unusual. But I did tell the nursing home and told them not to tell her, so that they would know where I was. And I would call from the hospital to talk to the nurses and see how she was. So the pressures! And then I thought I've got to live longer than my mother because I don't know what's going to happen. Then I did a whole thing about making up a will to make sure in case something happened to me that somebody would be looking out for her, because I had no brothers and sisters.

INTERVIEWER: That was really a difficult situation.

CONROY: Yes, it was a great pressure. I did run scared for a while, although it was interesting after the first surgery, after telling me that it was very successful, the doctor told me, "Even if you do develop another malignancy don't be upset by it. And don't assume that every pain you have means you're dying of cancer because you probably won't be," and he was very encouraging. Even after the second operation the doctor in that case said, "This is very successful and there is no evidence of any other malignancy and don't live in fear." Well with all this assurance that I shouldn't live in fear, I'm learning to cooperate as much as I can, so I try not to worry. But I think probably the first few years you kind of worry. Now I don't think about it a whole lot. I don't think in terms of a long haul; my plans are made on a short-term basis, figuring ahead a year or so, thinking I will retire and live to a ripe old age possibly, but that on the other hand I might not.

INTERVIEWER: Has it changed your view? For instance, that trip that you said you had put off for so long, did you feel more urgent about taking it?

CONROY: No, I think that I was glad that I was free to take it because I didn't, for years, go very far because of my mother. So, of course, she died a year ago September. I probably might have put it off, for no special reason. Well, traveling is not that big a treat. I travel and work so it was kind of a busman's holiday. But to be free to travel and just go where I want to. My two friends were after me. They wanted to take the trip and I had always said, "Someday we'll take it." They were saying, "Now we can take it," and I agreed yes we could. I had a very dear friend who had a severe heart attack and his doctor told him he was very lucky that he didn't have

cancer. My doctor told me I was lucky I didn't have a heart attack. Now, as I look at his experience in the past four or five years compared to mine, he has suffered a lot of pain, difficulties. You know he is fearful he'll drop dead or have another terrible attack. See, I really have had no pain with any of this. None of these things where I had cancer were painful. I did not suffer. Surgery, nowadays, they make it so comfortable for you that.... Oh, after the hysterectomy I had what they call the hysterectomy position. You walked around holding your stomach. We all walked up and down the hall like that. You know, you had a little pain, but they give you something for that and it finally goes away. So I can't say that I really suffered, but I know he has a hiatal hernia and that is really something. He has a lot of pain. He's had some minor tremors where he was back in the hospital and it was very scary for him. So I think he's had more discomfort with his heart attacks than I've ever had with cancer. Now I realize heart attacks don't do any more things than that, but you can continue to have these small ones or you can go just like that. Mine isn't that predictable, but then I could die of something else. Everybody's got to go with something. I'm kind of a fatalist. I always figure G-d has something in mind and whatever it is, it's alright with me.

INTERVIEWER: That's a pretty good philosophy. Any other advice you'd like to give to other young women in the labor movement? Or have you just about said all you want to say?

CONROY: Well, I keep saying to our gang, to people I talk to here, we have to develop a real active sense of sisterhood. Men who achieve, achieve because they get a lot of support from the "old boy" system. We have to have that same sense of, even if I'm not ambitious to do anything more than I'm doing, I must make sure you are doing everything you can do. I hope that women get a sense, finally, automatically--it's going to have to be conscious for awhile because the culture is such that women don't help each other except in a family sense, but not strangers or beyond home--but I think we have to develop a sense of, this will succeed because we help each other do it. And so, if there's an opening for something, find a sister to fill it. And help your sisters find their own potential. That's my advice.

INTERVIEWER: That's a fine closing statement.

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