

Where We Come From Who We Are



Service Workers Oral History Project
Service Employees International Union, AFL-CIO, CLC
Local 82

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HUMANITIES COUNCIL
of Washington, DC

Mary Martin

Interviewed by Glenda Lewis: October 1995

As she relates in her interview, Mary Martin has been an activist in Local 82 since shortly after joining the union in 1959. She has held many offices within the union and served on many of its committees. At the time of her interview, Mrs. Martin was the President of the Local. Since that time she has changed offices and currently holds the office of Secretary/Treasurer.

I've been a member of Local 82 since 1959, which totals 36 years. I joined Local 82 when I was working at the General Accounting Office building. At that time, the Service Contract Act had not been passed and I was working 4 hours, 6 hours. I even worked 5 hours at night in this building. My first contact with Local 82 was when I attended a membership meeting. That was in 1961. Also that year they were having elections of officers and Board members. I was at a particular membership meeting, and someone nominated me as Recording Secretary. Since there was no competition, I was officially Recording Secretary of Local 82. I had never been a recording secretary, but I knew some points about it. When I attended the first Board meeting, I was very impressed with the other Board members who at that time were working. Those same people are [now] either retired or deceased. But that Board inspired me to become more involved with Local 82 because of their commitment to the Local. I found out later that these people were coming to the Local union after work for years helping out with mailings, filings, and whatsoever. The union also had committees, and these people were part of the committees.

I was appointed to serve on the Social Committee, and I was very impressed with the efficiency of that committee. At that time, Local 82 would have fundraisers which were called cabarets. The cabarets were being held at the Presidential Arms, located on G Street, which is no longer there. The cabarets were being held on Saturdays. So on Saturday mornings, the committee met. Money was collected, and members who had money brought it in. Everybody served at the door. At that time, you could collect money at the door, but now it is dangerous to do



MARAT MOORE

Mary Martin

*How I Became
Involved*

that. So the cabaret was a success. That was just one of many cabarets at the Presidential Arms.

When the Presidential Arms started to deteriorate, by that time Local 82 had merged with Local 536, the cabaret was held at the Capitol Hilton Hotel which wasn't as successful as the previous ones. After that one we never had another Cabaret that I know of.

A Changing Local

During the years that I was Recording Secretary of Local 82, the Local went through many changes. By the time the Service Contract Act had passed, the SEIU President who is now deceased, Ed Sullivan, ordered 82 to merge with Local 536. We did, and Robert Bailey, who was President of 82, became Recording Secretary of the merged local. Arline Neal was the first Vice President and George Tucker was the President. The two Executive Boards merged. Eventually the Board consisted of mostly our Local 82 members because the other members of the Board were pulled by the President. In 1971 George Tucker resigned.

Arline Neal decided to give up her job with the Human Resources Development Institute of the AFL-CIO and become the official President. During that time the President and the Secretary/Treasurer were full time officers and Business Representatives, which meant that they had to negotiate contracts, represent members, visit buildings, and anything else to keep the union going. ...Because we were in a small office, we had to have our membership meetings at the old Hamilton Hotel which was located down at 14th and K Streets. It is no longer there. We did have a pretty good crowd who attended these membership meetings.

So with various things happening here, there, and everywhere, we finally moved from 1424 16th Street to Kansas Avenue, N.E. We had a larger area. We could have membership meetings there. By that time, I had been elected Second Vice President. In another election, I was elected First Vice President. In an election in 1987, I was elected Secretary/Treasurer. I was Secretary/Treasurer from that point until 1991 when Arline Neal, the President at that time, decided she wanted to retire. At that point I was appointed President. In 1992, we had a regular election, and I was elected President.

Organizational Structures

I think I know a little about different areas of Local 82. We have Constitutional Bylaws which I follow—Local 82's Constitutional Bylaws, SEIU's Constitutional Bylaws, Federal laws. We have to follow all these. The members really don't understand the

legalities that we face in doing different activities. Our members, at this point, are not interested in serving on any committees. We're mandated to have a COPE Committee which is a committee on political education. We're mandated to have a Civil Rights Committee. We're mandated to have an Organizing Committee. The only committee that is operating at this time is the Organizing Committee.

The SEIU is involved in political activities, community activities, and requires the local unions to be involved also. In 1992, at the SEIU convention, I was one of the members to be elected to the SEIU Executive Board.... I have attended meetings in different states since that time. I have learned a lot from what other local unions are doing. We have various reports for what they shouldn't do and what we shouldn't do. That's an education right there. Since I know this, I am required to keep Local 82 in a legal position. A lot of members don't understand this. Each officer has duties listed in the Constitution and By-laws for Local 82. Even the members have a responsibility. We try to provide each member with the Constitution and Bylaws if they request it.

[We also went through] the merging of Local 82 and Local 525. [Local 525] was established to organize the downtown area of D.C. That Local was called Justice for Janitors and was headed by Jay Hessey. He organized or oversaw the organizing because he was chartered to do that by President John Sweeney [the former President of SEIU, now the President of the AFL-CIO]. John Sweeney wanted to get the organizing done. He provided a subsidy and human resources, which were senior organizers. Their job is to continue to organize downtown D.C.

Justice for Janitors

In the meantime, a situation came up where it was decided it wasn't so much the contractors as the owners of the buildings [who were the problem]. From the SEIU research, we found that Washington D.C. has such a financial problem because the owners of commercial buildings are not paying the proper rate of property taxes. As everybody knows, we've had demonstrations concerning that. We've had praise. We've had criticism, but it is going to continue. Even though we have an election of Board Officers and members coming up in November and December, the organizers are going to continue mainly because they were chartered to do so by President John Sweeney. No

Local Union bumps their International Union. SEIU has locals all over the United States, Puerto Rico, and Canada, and there is no way Local 82 is not going to continue to organize, especially being located around the corner from the International. So that's where we are today. That is a quick summation. ...

Working at GAO

At the General Accounting Office, the only person's name I can remember was Jack. I've learned that he is deceased. The company's name was Middlesex and is no longer in this area. I don't even think it is in existence. Middlesex's policy was that the employees work all night—from 11 at night till 7 in the morning—in office buildings.

Strikes

Whenever there was a strike, I would take leave from my job and walk the picket lines. Or I would walk the picket lines during the day and work at night. None of us were paid anything. What amazes me is various times I would be out in front of the buildings and the members were not out there with me or the organizers. I remember a picket line being held at 1717 H Street. At that time, Local 82 had only one business representative and his name was Larry Owens. Before Larry Owens, there was another representative named Charles McCullough. When there was a strike going on, I would catch the bus from Southeast where I lived. The only person I would see walking was Larry Owens. So I would take my picket sign and he and I would walk until 12 o'clock. It was very interesting because at 12 o'clock, I saw members coming from George Washington Hospital. These were our longtime members, and they would walk with us until their lunch period was over. Some of those members are dead now. I know a couple of them are retirees....When they left, I would walk until about 5 o'clock. I had been there all day. I would get back on the bus and get to work by 6 o'clock at the National Association of Letter Carriers.

[Most of the strikes were about] salaries. That was mostly what it was for. The companies didn't want to increase the salaries. They wanted to keep them at minimum wage. They didn't have vacations. Those were the issues. During the same strike, the contractor was General Maintenance. At the same time, General Maintenance had the Brookings Institute. The strategy was we picket this building on H Street, and at the last moment we bring out the members from Brookings. At that time we had a Shop Steward named Katie Romans, who is now deceased. If it had not been for

Katie Romans, because she was able to bring those people out in the street, ...the strike [would have been] over. This had to be in the '70s.

During that time, we didn't have organizing campaigns. The members at the buildings would agree to go out on strike. I would walk then. One time there was a strike at the Washington Post building. Those members were told what to do by Arline Neal, and some of them weren't even out there walking. I would walk in the Washington Post line, but I had to be at the AFL-CIO at four thirty. The printers were out; everybody was out. They didn't have what you call organizing campaigns. That came later. The AFL-CIO established the Organizing Institute and members or people attended this Institute. Some of these people were assigned to Local 82.

Organizing

[Before the Organizing Institute] all we had were picket signs that we made. We walked in front of the buildings with as many people as we could get. We didn't get much publicity, just a little bit. [We'd see] if it could be settled that way. Sometimes it was; sometimes it wasn't. But we really didn't have an organizing campaign at that time.

With Local 82, there are good stories and bad stories. There is frustration and happiness. 82 has gone through so many changes, not only with the membership, but with the officers and the Boards. Arline Neal said that Local 82 is unique. We are unique. We have seven jurisdictions, and each has different problems. Sometimes we will negotiate dozens of contracts in one year. In terms of the Federal sector, we have a problem with General Services Administration . They are the Federal agency that calls for bids from the contractors. A contractor could be in the building for two or three years, and then GSA would decide to put it out to open bid. All contractors including the current one could put in a bid for the job.

Stories of Local 82

In the 1980s we had whole buildings laid off. One hundred in this building. One hundred fifty in that building. That kind of stuff. That precipitated the displaced workers legislation which was written up by 82 and presented to the D.C. Council. That legislation stayed around in the City Council for years and I've heard that, it has been passed. When it was passed by the D.C. Council, Congress did not bother with it. Once it was passed, private contractors appealed it in the courts. I think it is

law now. During the 1980s...the contractors were laying off everybody. The reason why they were laying off was because they had wanted members working in the building who had two or three weeks vacation. It was easier to get rid of them. That's why they did it. There was nothing we could do. President Clinton issued an Executive Order guaranteeing that there could be no layoffs in these buildings for at least 90 days at the onset of a new contract. However, even with one of the latest buildings with layoffs—the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)—we found out that their contract with the cleaning company did not include the Executive Order. We are still in litigation on this matter. We can't do anything until we find out why they did not honor President Clinton's Executive Order. In the meantime, these people are still laid off.

Since we merged [with 525], the Brigade has had a demonstration in front of George Washington University Hospital and Howard University. I'm naming these because they are not part of the commercial jurisdiction. Something that has been very impressive to me is that everyone knows about Justice for Janitors. Lately we've been called terrorists. I don't appreciate that. But we are known to the Mayor, the City Council and to Congress. We have left the 1970s, when nothing was going on, for the 90s when the Justice for Janitors was established. I have walked in picket lines with Jay Hessey and 525 when they were separate from us. I have walked in those picket lines and come down on the bus when I went to work. They are very good about picking me up. Some of the Business Agents have walked with us and 525.

I think that I've done my share for 82. I've volunteered my time. I am and have been unpaid; and that doesn't bother me much. What bothers me is the noncooperation of the members. That bothers me because the whole membership has changed. There are still some out there but they're getting ready to retire. They know what they've been through. So with the history, I want to start with them and bring it to the present....

If any person is working in a union building and they do not have a decent salary—that is, above minimum wage—and if they do not have vacation and sick pay or leave, including health benefits and contributions made to the pension fund, it would be in their best interest to belong to a union. It would also be in their best interest—especially if they are called janitors or custodians—

because in the District of Columbia they make the lowest salary. They are always at the bottom of the totem pole. We represent custodians, we represent a few nursing aides, and we represent a few nurses. But we are not really in that jurisdiction because we have another Local here that represents hospitals.

Any time you're young and someone asks you to join the union, you are going to have to pay union dues. It's worth it because then you have a procedure to use. When you are in a union, there is a grievance procedure. If you have been unjustly terminated, the union will represent you, and that is a privilege that you have. We have proof of that with so many people being terminated. It's to everybody's best interest to belong to a union, no matter what the critics say because that's your only bet. The union represents at all levels, even politics because with all the testimony going on downtown in Congress now, the officials at SEIU are testifying for the members. I have to send letters out in the members' name to the Congressmen. I try to encourage the members to call their Representatives. If you live in D.C., Eleanor Holmes-Norton is your representative. She is pro-labor. There are several Democratic Senators who are pro-labor. As everybody knows with the "New" Congress [that] was elected, most of them are antilabor. That's why we keep fighting all the time. And when a member pays the unions fees and says, "What have you done for me?," look at your wage as opposed to someone not in the union. Look and see if you have paid sick leave...or paid holidays. All of that is what you are paying for. If you don't believe it go to a nonmember building and see what you get.