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Blais, Denis oral history interview

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Interview with Denis Blais by Don Nicoll, Stuart O'Brien, and Rob Chavira
Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee
Blais, Denis

Interviewers
Nicoll, Don
O'Brien, Stuart
Chavira, Rob

Date
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Place
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Use Restrictions

Biographical Note

Denis Blais was born in Canada and moved to Rhode Island at age three. He dropped out of school at age fourteen to work as a stock clerk at a textile mill in order to support his family. From 1943-1946, he served as a surgical technician in England. He married while in the military. He was very involved in the unions, becoming coordinator of all American unions. He supported Muskie through union involvement. Blais was also involved in civil rights and IWOA.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: Maine legislature; Democratic National Committee; Maine Democratic Party (1952-1954); 1954 Maine gubernatorial campaign; Maine Governor (1955-1956) ; 1956 Maine gubernatorial campaign; Maine Governor (1957-1958); 1968 Vice Presidential campaign; Muskie's Presidential campaign (1969-1972); Denis Blais personal information; the merger of AFL and CIO; the revival of the Democratic party; the connection between Democratic Party and Labor; the Frank Coffin gubernatorial campaign; Blais's election records from 1950; and the 1968 Democratic Convention.

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Transcript

Don Nicoll: State your full name and when were you born and where and then we'll get into less formal, questioning.

Denis Blais: Name is Denis Blais, that's B-l-a-i-s, Denis is one N. It's French. I was born in Canada, the youngest of twelve children, and we moved to Rhode Island, I was about three years old. The principle reason was my dad's health wasn't very good and they thought the climate, the change in climate might be good.

DN: Where were you born in Canada?

DB: But he died- In, it's a little city outside of Quebec City, about thirty miles from Quebec City, a little north of St. George. But he died anyway, I was about four or five years old when he died. And grew up in Rhode Island, went to Catholic school there for seven years and public schools for about two years until I was old enough to go to work. I was a going into sophomore in high school, and I was more of less the sole support then, I had an infirm sister and my mother who couldn't speak a word of English, so I left school then went to work.

DN: And that was after your sophomore year?

DB: I didn't complete the sophomore year. I was fourteen in November and at that time you could go to work.

DN: What did you do in the mill?

DB: Oh, odds and ends. I cleaned bobbins in the textile mill and ended up as a stock clerk and I used that venue to help organize the workers because the strongest group in the textile mill are the loom fixers; they control pretty much who's going to do what. And they'd have to come down for parts for their looms, and I had met the union organizer and I, you know, didn't do any arm twisting but if they wouldn't sign a union card somehow I was out of parts. So we were able to get the lot of them signed up. And then we had an election and people voted union (?) and from there we organized three or four other places.

DN: What year was that?

DB: That was in 1938, '39, towards the end of '39. And in '40 I went to work for the union, I was getting ten dollars a week. At that time that was a lot of money.

DN: You went to work full-time for the union in 1940.

DB: Yeah, I became a business agent there, combination of negotiating contracts and organizing and so on, in 1940.

DN: What was the, and this was the textile workers union...?

DB: Textile, yeah, textile industry. Rhode Island, West Warwick, Rhode Island was quite a large center. Some of the old B.B.&R. Knight Company mills there, and some of the Berkshire Hathaway. Berkshire, of course, is the company that, originally the company that Buffet owns all that stock in. The old B.B.&R. Knight. They had a lot of plants in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, western Massachusetts in the Berkshire area.

DN: Now, you worked for the union until when?

DB: Well, I, until I went into service in 19-, middle of 1943, and I came out in '46 and went back to work for the union as an organizer. I didn't go back to administrative work at that time.

DN: And where were you in the service?

DB: Well, I went to England, I was with the 110th General Hospital Unit. I was a surgical technician and worked mostly in the operating room. Met some of the, I don't know if you remember Dr. Konecki that used to be urologist here at St. -, well he was the chief urologist at 110th General Hospital. I met him when we come back here and kept in touch with some of the people.

DN: So you were in the service until '46. . . .

DB: Forty-six, yeah. While I was in the service I got married.

DN: Was your wife from Rhode Island?

DB: Yes, she was born in Rhode Island.

DN: And you went back to the union after the war?

DB: Yes, I went back organizing for a couple of years and it was sort of a quirk of fate, they, they needed someone in this area who could speak French, because you know, predominantly, heavily French oriented area, and in the mills especially. And they asked me if I'd move to Maine, and I said sure, you know I didn't think- My wife wasn't too happy about it, but, we came to Maine. She cried for the first week walking up and down the streets. You remember at that time stores weren't open Monday mornings, so she thought I'd go to work and she'd go, you know, do window shopping or go and, she walked up and down the street and everything was locked.

DN: She figured she'd gone into the wilderness.

DB: So that's how I came to Maine, because I could speak French.

DN: And how many union members were there in the Lewiston-Auburn area?

DB: Well, at that time it, about eight thousand, just in Lewiston-Auburn.

DN: This was Bates, and. . . .

DB: Well Bates had over two thousand, Androscoggin was around eleven hundred, and Pepperill was twelve or thirteen hundred, and you have Continental and you have Hill Mill, you know, at full employment around eight thousand.

DN: And you were a business agent for this immediate area.

DB: Well I was manager of a joint, we had a couple of business agents and I was managing the, sort of an administrative type of thing. And we had a plant in Brunswick that had about eleven

hundred people, then we had the one in Augusta, was part of Bates, and then Waterville, the Windout (?) Worcester, but it's not the, where George Mitchell's mother was a weaver there in Windout (?) Worcester, I remember meeting her. And then there was another big group in Biddeford. And I stayed as manager until 19-, let's see, '76 or '77 when membership had dropped down considerably and we merged the whole thing, had just one joint board in the wholestate, and I became a state director and manager at that time.

DN: So your territory as manager covered central and southern Maine?

DB: Right. Waterville, Brunswick, Lewiston-Auburn and Augusta, and so on at that area, when I came here. And eventually it took in the whole state.
DN: Now, was Mike Schoonjans. . . . ?

DB: Mike Schoonjans had retired at that time and rather than have the you know, they had reduce staff anyway, so that's when they merged the two area and I became manager of both areas.

DN: But Mike was your counterpart in the early years.

DB: Right, he was in Biddeford.

DN: Now, you were with the textile workers union, which is part of the CIO, and you had to deal with AFL in Maine.

DB: Yeah, when I came to Maine I was, a year later, I was secretary of the state CIO and I held that position until they merged in 1956. I guess, then I became, Ben Dorsky was president at the time, remember Ben? And I became secretary-treasurer of the merged organization until 1961, I think it was, yeah.

DN: And how were relations?

DB: Well it wasn't very good. We got out, our textile group got out of the AFL-CIO in Maine because of Dorsky, and there was a lot of dissatisfaction. The paper workers unions were not happy. He had the backing mostly of the construction trades, and so we couldn't, it was still wedded to the, you know, the, anyone familiar with labor history, back prior to the CIO, most of the union membership in this country were tradesmen. You know, they had a particular craft. Like in the mills, there were some people organized that were loom fixers, and as I say, they were pretty powerful, and you had plumbers and ca-, and so on. With the advent of the CIO, we became an industrial union. Instead of organizing in one plant, seven or eight or ten different crafts, it was all one union. The advent of, well, the John L. Lewis and the industrial unions. So we organized on that basis, beginning, that's when I came into the picture, in '39 or '40. But after 1956 when we merged, there was still some dissention up in national level, you know, for awhile the auto workers were not in, the Teamsters were not in, and you had all these schisms at that level. Fortunately now there aren't those schisms but there aren't that many members either because of the (?) decline in that, especially in the manufacturing industry to a large part to

imports.

DN: Now, you mentioned divisions between the CIO and the AFL in Maine and some of the difficulties you had with the old AFL. You also had very strong working relationships with some of the trade unions, particularly in the Portland area, is that right?

DB: Portland with the Teamsters, yeah, right. We, Ben Dorsky, I mean he was a nice individual, he was wedded to the Republican party, and we'd have all these fights, you know, we couldn't get him to endorse Muskie or Coffin or anybody. And that was principally the basic reason why I, you know, why we split up. And then he got out and then we became sort of a unified movement again and Democrats.

DN: When you came in '47, did you become active in the Democratic party?

DB: Yeah. Oh yeah, immediately, we, in fact in '48 *(unintelligible phrase)* Jalbert used to say you could have a Democratic convention in a phone booth.

DN: This is Louis Jalbert?

DB: Louis, yeah, Mr. Democrat. And we backed Ed Beauchamp for Congress. You remember Ed, then he became a county attorney. And we began an enrollment drive, getting people registered to vote. One of the problems was, people were oriented towards the Democratic philosophy but they weren't enrolled, they weren't voting. And this was true, a lot of them in Lewiston, so our union led a voter registration campaign throughout the state.

DN: And this was 1948.

DB: In the, '48, 49' and '50. This was before the CIO had their computerized, we had a card system, and every member, we knew where he lived, whether he was enrolled, where he was born, members of the family. And we set that up in my office and we began with this full idea. Nineteen-fifty, we backed Jack Maloney for congress, that was those pictures I showed you. That was when I first met Muskie, he was in the legislature at the time, representative I guess from Waterville, yeah, from Waterville. And Frank Coffin wanted to run for Congress. We had a meeting with Frank, and Frank hadn't been active at all in politics. I mean he was just a young lawyer in town and (*unintelligible word*) hey, do something for the party before you can expect backing. That's when he decided, he became state chairman, we backed Maloney for Congress and lost. But it was the first real campaign where the Democratic party and labor really combined, and we went out and we had a sound truck running around all over the counties. We had made a record, "John J. Maloney for Congress." We had, really, I don't know if you remember Scott Hyman. He got hurt in an accident badly, but he was a- our political guy.

He was a college graduate. He was born in Egypt, then he went to work for, I hired, I gave him his first job as a union representative and he was a, you had to keep reins on him occasionally. We had a big squabble one time, he wanted to, he had cards made up saying, "How do you split

your ticket?" I says, "You're crazy, we're trying to get, elect Democrats." Well, Margaret Chase Smith was on it, I said, well, let him go for Margaret Smith, we're not gonna encourage Democrats to split their tickets because then you could vote a straight ticket.

DN: This was with the big box.

DB: The big box, yeah. So that's when we really got, the unions really got active in that '60 campaign, and then of course come-

DN: The '50.

DB: The '50, yeah, the '50, then came '52 when Ed ran. Now I don't know if you were there, we had a meeting, George Jabar and I think Frank and Ed at the Lafayette Hotel in Portland. Victor Reuther, Walter Reuther's brother was there, and Jack Cruikshank, and he was the CIO-PAC director. And the reason we were able to get him up there, Scott Hyman had some close friend of his who knew Jack Anderson, you know he wrote the political column way back then. And Anderson did some investigating and he ran a column about Muskie's chances of being elected governor of Maine, which astounded everybody. And that attracted national CIO and the auto workers union. Now they didn't have any members here but they came up, we had a meeting, and at that meeting Jabar and I signed a check for five hundred bucks. That was I think the first contribution over two dollars that Muskie got in the campaign. And, within a few weeks we got a check from the auto workers union out of that meeting. I don't remember if it came directly to the Democratic party or to Muskie or through the union, but anyway there was a contribution at that time. So that was the, then we went to work and to everyone's surprise, including me, Muskie was elected.

DN: And so you met Ed first in '50 and then you saw him in '52 and then in '54 you were active in his campaign for governor. What were your, do you remember what he was like in those days?

DB: He was kind of shy a little bit, I thought. Now, I don't know whether, I mean he was always very friendly with me but we'd go to some places and he kind of hung back. Well, you see these pictures how he kind of hangs back in here. See, it's always, his head is down, as though he doesn't want to take the limelight. Maloney was running for Congress.

DN: So this is ...

DB: Maybe he didn't want to steal the show or something.

DN: . . . . Maloney?

DB: Yeah, so maybe he didn't want to steal the show or anything. I don't know if you remember, Don, I talked to you at the time, in '64, remember the cropped picture incident? The ...

DN: Yes, which campaign was this?

DB: Fifty-four, the second.

DN: Fifty-six.

DB: Fifty-six, yeah. There had been a strike with ...

DN: Was this picture in the Herald? Boston Herald?

DB: I think it was in the Herald, yeah. There was a strike in the, yeah, the cropped picture, you've got it there. You were excited about that. I'd called you, I was, we played golf in Boothbay Harbor and we were at an inn in Wiscasset, eating, and this thing, I saw that on tv and then I got in touch with him and yelled at a lot of people (?). I said, "It's easy, get the original picture and print it and show that this is a cropped picture," which was very successful. Now, a lawyer in town here, Paul Cote, young Paul, was asked to go to Portland to pick up a couple of cases of these cropped pictures and he called me about it and after I'd done talking he wouldn't even go down and pick them up. He said, "I won't have no part of this, this is just not honest." That was kind of an incident in that campaign.

DN: Paul was a Republican I think.

DB: Yeah, he was Republican county chairman, but he wouldn't go to the airport in Portland and pick up these flyers to distribute. It was a kind of interesting development there.

DN: You mentioned in the '50 campaign particularly, '48 and '50, the work that you did in organizing members of the union, getting them to enroll. Who were some of the people who were most active in that campaign from the union that you remember?

DB: Bert Demers, I don't know if you remember him, was around. He was one of the business agents, and of course the group in Biddeford, Mike Schoonjans, and he had Alex Anastasoff there, who became the manager for a few months after Mike left. And, you know, it was, no one stood out. It was just local shop stewards and everything, everyone going out, knocking at doors and making phone calls and, just a whole bunch of people.

DN: Now wasn't Rose Gilman a member of the union?

DB: Yeah, she was president of the local in Bates. As well as Gilman, there was Herd, Rose Herd was out of the Pepperill plant, and there was a Mrs. Gregoire who became a member of the city council out of the Continental Mill: so there were a lot of people, other than women, who were very active and they all had lists and calling people up in this area and we had the same thing going on in Augusta.

DN: When Ed was elected governor in 1954 and became governor starting January of '55, how did you think things were going to change?

DB: Well, we really didn't know. It was kind of an unexpected thing, we, unplanned you know, we hadn't, we didn't have a program for him or anything. We just figured that anybody was better than Burt Cross, yeah, that was Burt Cross that he beat that first-term election. And we just kind of lived through that first term and very happy that some of his proposals, I can't remember specifically what the programs were, but at least they sounded good even though the legislature was Republican so it wasn't easy to get things done.

DN: Do you remember what the biggest issues were for the union at that time?

DB: Yeah, we couldn't get anyplace, we had a problem especially with workmen's compensation. People laid off and being denied benefits. And that didn't change until the second election. When he was elected for the second term, he asked me to write a labor program or something and I concentrated principally on unemployment compensation, and he used it in his inaugural address almost word for word. And we did get some concessions from the Republican legislature at that time on that issue because he made it you know, a key point, in his-

DN: So that was a major item. Was the labor movement in Maine unified on that subject?

DB: Yeah, on that, on strictly labor issues they were. As long as you removed the party labels we were unified on issues. We did get Ben back in, I think after Muskie's second election, I think he began to see the light a little bit, that he couldn't play with the Republicans and expect to get anything. So it-

DN: Who were some of the leaders in the other unions who were most active during that period?

DB: Well, Al Page was, of course.

DN: Al was with the. . . .

DB: Teamsters. And Ernie White with the paper workers union, I remember, and there was, Connie was in that picture with the railroad workers.

DN: Connie _____? Dave Hastings.

DB: Hastings, yeah, well he was with the Teamsters, too, he was, I don't know what his position was. Al was, I guess, the business agent, Hastings was, maybe he was a business agent, too, I'm not sure just what his title was.

DN: Al was from Auburn and Dave was from Portland.

DB: Yeah, he lived in Auburn, he worked out of Portland. In fact, in, when did McGovern run, was it '70?

DN: He ran in '72.

DB: Seventy- two. I set up a labor committee and I was chairman and Al Page was going to be the treasurer. He had just retired and when the Teamsters hierarchy, who were then supporting the Republicans most of the time under (?) (*unintelligible phrase*) Hoffa, found out that he was going to be the secretary of a Maine labor committee for McGovern, they threatened to cut off his pension, so he had to resign from the committee.

DN: Other kind of labor problem. In the 1950s, were you intimately involved would you say in the development of Ed's programs at the state level?

DB: Well, no, well, except for that one issue that he asked me to write something about. We'd, you know, I'd see him quite often but we didn't, we figured we'd help get him elected and let's see what he's going to do. We didn't try to dictate anything other than the, he asked me to write something on the labor thing and I did, but that was about our involvement in trying to push any particular program other than this unemployment compensation legislation.

DN: How deeply involved were you and your fellow union members in the selection of candidates for Congress and Senate after that?

DB: Mostly for Congress. We backed of course Frank Coffin, it'shard to remember what years. . . . they were. . . .

DN: Fifty-six.

DB: Fifty-six, yeah. And prior to that we had backed Maloney and then Delahanty and, I don't know, it was '54 ...

DN: Fifty-four was Tom Delahanty in the second district, Jim Oliver in the first.

DB: I was at that time more concerned with the second district because this is where our members were, and then the other group, you know, we had district committees, and we participated. Of course oftentimes, I don't know if Frank had any opposition when he ran.

DN: The first time he ran for Congress in the primary, he had. . . .

DB: Roger Dugan, was it? The joker (?)

DN: Roger Dugan, who had run for. . . .

DB: Senate, he'd run for the Senate. . . .

DN: . . . . in the earlier campaign. What, when the 1954 election had occurred and Muskie won, what was your reaction? I know you said you were surprised, but why did you think he won in that campaign?

DB: Well, he had a lot of appeal. You know, when you compared him and Burt Cross, the florist guy, and he'd been involved in I forget what the issues were, but the Republicans didn't like him either. And Muskie had charisma, you know, he looked like young Abe Lincoln, you know, he would go around and he just appealed to people and he sounded good. He just appealed to working people, and I think a lot of the business people. Had to; we didn't have that many members.

DN: How did the election affect your members? Did it give them ...?

DB: Yeah, it gave them enthusiasm to keep working, you know keep their involvement in political matters. They were a little skeptical at first, ah, why should we bother, why should we bother with politics, you know, they won't do anything for us. But after the Muskie election and after Frank got elected to Congress and then, you know, continuing on through Hathaway (?) and then, of course Frank's unfortunate venture for the governorship which is, I'll never forgive myself for that.

DN: Why won't you forgive yourself?

DB: Well, Frank was in Congress and he was, he seemed to be happy, and Ed Beauchamp wanted to run for Congress, for governor, and I knew Frank had the idea but he didn't want the opposition. He says, you know, if I gotta get to a primary, and you know, there wasn't that much money around. And I was able to, well, he came to my house and we sat in the play room with a bottle of scotch, and we sat there for a couple of hours, and he says, "If you can get Beauchamp not to run, I'll run for governor." And I was very friendly with Ed, I think he was county attorney at the time, or something. And he agreed not to run, and then Frank ran and lost through his own making.

I remember we had a meeting at Delahanty's house, Ben was with us at that time, and we'd had a, Lucia Cormier was running for the Senate I believe, in the same election. You know, this is memories (?). And we had, the Democrats had had a survey made that we paid five thousand, the union paid five thousand dollars for, but it was a Democratic survey. And it showed that Frank's problem was in the cities. He thought he didn't have to campaign in, you know, like Lewiston or, and Frank was out on chicken farms all over the place. I can remember Muskie, "Look Frank," he says, because Frank was telling Lucia what she ought to do based on this survey and Muskie picked it up and said, "Look Frank, here's what you ought to be doing." And he was, Frank was a little stubborn and he, ah, he says, "I think this is the right path," and so on, and he lost by three, four, five percent or something. Really very close.

I remember his mother calling me that night. I used to, before we had all these polls and things and predictions, I had made up records of maybe fifteen or twenty voting precincts in the state and I went back through the registers and what the vote was, and at what time of night, and you could pretty well what time they were going to come in, and I would run down these things and make predictions and Frank's mother called me about nine o'clock at night and I said, he's going to lose. She said, "He's ahead." I said, "He's going to lose. It'll be close but he's going to lose." And she was, she wouldn't believe it. But it was a, of course now they're a lot more sophisticated. We never had any exit polls, it was just these kind of, based on previous voting patterns with strictly Republicans and Democrats in certain voting districts, that you would be able to tell with ten or fifteen percent of the state vote in what the outcome was going to be.

I can remember when Clauson got elected, we were at Al Lessard's house, and I had all my papers there and pads and things and he was behind ten thousand votes. I said, okay, fellas let's go to Waterville. And we had three cars there at Lessard's house, we all drove to Clauson's house in Waterville, and by the time we got there he was ahead. And these things were fairly accurate. They're just patterns and that's what all of this modern stuff is based on only they do it a lot quicker with computers. I had to stand there with a little calculator and do it.

DN: When did you start doing that?

DB: I started doing it after 1950 because we had made surveys after the election and began collecting this information. It took about three, two or three elections before I felt confident enough with the background and, you know, you get some plantation out there and some other little place would come in, when they'd vote at eleven o'clock, at midnight, you know, they'd be six voters and they'd all vote, and three to two or five to one or something, and you'd use these kinds of samplings. Which is what the pollsters do. They don't get twenty thousand people that they interview. It's all, theirs is certainly more scientific, but what I did worked. Most of the time.

DN: How did Ed Muskie change from your point of view from 1950 when you first met him to, let's say, 1964?

DB: I don't, I never bothered to try to analyze what changes were; he was always to me a nice guy and very friendly, and, you know, any time I wanted to talk with him I could and I went to Washington. I think you were there then, we went out and played golf at that little golf course along the river there, the little back and forth place, and he was, we had, at one time we had the Democratic outing at, is it Popham Beach? In Brunswick? And I had arranged a golf match; Ed wanted to play golf. The only problem was, who was going to play? You know, you can only play four at a time and I had about twenty people wanted to play, so we fixed it all up so that each one would play two holes, you know, it was, a kind of a round-robin type thing. And Ed got a birdie on the third hole and it just happened that the photographers were there. But he was always very friendly. In fact, you know in the second election, we went, I think you were there, they had just had the guest room remodeled in the Blaine House and Bette Davis and ...

DN: Her husband?

DB: Yeah, little shorty, and we were there and McMahon ...

DN: That's Dick McMahon.

DB: Yeah, Dick McMahon, the late Dick McMahon, there were about maybe ten or fifteen people there. And he invited us to go there at that time, which was very nice of him, I thought. And I met Bette Davis and she taught me how to make a scotch drink. She had been working out in the garden in her old gloves (?) you know, all splinters and things and she was there with her blue jeans on and Gary Merrill, I, you know, in the movies I thought he was tall. He was shorter than I was. And she says, "Young man, would you get me a scotch and water?" So they had a little pantry there off the big living room, and I went in there and I put what to me would have been a fairly strong drink, and I put an ice cube in and some water and came back and, "You come with me young man," and she threw that out. She took the bottle of scotch and poured it about that much from the top and she opened the tap and she ran, "That's how you make a scotch and water." Just one of those things, and you'd had enough. She had about three of those, I guess. So they stayed in the guest house, in the guest room that night. And of course Jane was very nice, she was always real friendly with us and with Lorraine. Never had any complaints, never felt shunned or anything like that.

DN: Did you feel that the party paid attention to what labor's concerns were?

DB: Oh, very much. Oh, yeah. We, you know, they were always looking for money, there wasn't much Democratic money around and we had a little bit that we used. Yeah, I think we, well, here's an example. In 1965, when the Democrats took over the State House, I was the only labor person ever elected to be executive counsel by a Democratic legislature, so there couldn't have been too much resentment against labor.

DN: And that was. . . . ?

DB: Sixty-five and sixty-six.

DN: Sixty-six, Ken was governor.

DB: Ken came in as our term expired.

DN: That's right. You were on the executive council with John Reed as governor.

DB: You've got John Reed as governor, yeah.

DN: What was that like?

DB: It wasn't, we had a big squabble in Lewiston. Couturier was mayor, and a friend of his,

Bill Rocheleau wanted to be county attorney, there was a vacancy, I think Beauchamp had left or something, or somebody, and of course the governor would name somebody and, well I, I wouldn't approve it. And we had seven, of course there were seven Democrats on the council and when, I was going to run for chairman and Dick Dubord convinced me not to because he said, let Broderick, who wanted it badly, his wife was national committee woman, let him win, he says, you've got four votes. (*Unintelligible phrase*), so no matter what happened, he was the chairman but he couldn't, I was, you know, had four votes on the council, and so we wouldn't approve it. And oh, it became pretty bitter in town and the newspapers got involved in it, and finally an editorial came out and said I was right, that Rocheleau was an opportunist and he, and in fact some of the lawyers, I had a letter from, it was Jack Linnells's office, they were opposed to him because he was the only lawyer in the community who would not volunteer his time for free legal aid for poor people or something, and he was resented by the legal profession. So Bill Clifford, I got Ben Clifford named and he ran and was reelected overwhelmingly in that second I believe (?) full term.

DN: And offered a plee in the court.

DB: No, this was Bill Clifford. Robert Clifford ...

DN: Robert, that's right.

DB: Robert was mayor of Lewiston, and Bill was a county attorney. He was part of the firm.

DN: You played a role in local as well as statewide politics.

DB: Yeah, and nationally, I was a delegate to the Democratic national convention in '52 and '56, and the best of them was '68. In '68 I can remember an incident at the, the convention was at the armory in Augusta and there was a move on to make Muskie the favorite son, and we figured there'd be no problem with the exception of Bill Hathaway. So we were up on the platform and Ken and Bill and I were there and a few other people, and Ken said he'd go along, Hathaway says ...

DN: This is Ken Curtis.

DB: Ken Curtis, and Hathaway wouldn't let him. And then I tried to get, I says, let's go out for a cup of coffee, I figured by then the vote would be over. He didn't vote for it. I don't think, I think he kind of took a walk on it, I mean, there was some, I don't know what had happened, there was some little feud between, I sensed anyway, between Senator Hathaway and, no, he was a congressman then, and Muskie. But after the, you know, the nomination it was all right. That was, the nomination was probably one of the biggest thrills I got. I was on the platform committee and. . . .

DN: This is at the national. . . .

DB: At the national convention in Chicago, and a stranger, a woman from California, her name was Braithewaite and then married Burke, she became a congresswoman, she was the first congresswoman to have a baby while in congress, and she and I shared the co-chair, and I don't know why I got involved, it was a defense policy type thing. All the admirals and generals coming in and I was sitting there. But when this thing happened in Grant Park, you know the riots and things, I had gone to Muskie's room, suite, to, what was the first name, McGrory, she was a kind of elderly columnist, Mary McGrory, and she told me afterwards, coming out of that platform committee, she had never been able to get an interview with Muskie, would I try to do it.

So, I had gone to his suite to see if I could hint something and see if he would. And he, yeah, he says, you know, have her call me and so on. Well, while we were there, this is when things were pretty hot at the convention, I can remember Jane sitting there, she had the gout with her foot up on the table, the phone rang and it was Humphrey calling Muskie to tell him he was being selected. You know, talk about the, being at the right place at the right time, it was a really thrilling kind of a thing (?).

DN: Do you remember what the room was like when that message came in, what happened?

DB: Well, I think Jane got up and walked with the gout. Everything, you know, it was, there must have been ten or fifteen people in there. Were you there then? I thought you were, yeah.

DN: Yeah.

DB: You know it's hard to, forty years, well, this wasn't forty, it was still many years ago, thirty, and it was exciting. Then, following that is when I really got involved in the Muskie campaign. His campaign for vice president. I was named the political action director for the whole textile workers union all over the country. We had about 250, 300,000 members. Well, obviously, you know, I couldn't, so I appointed an assistant and I had every state east of the Mississippi and the other person had west, and if you remember I made a lot of trips to Watergate. We were acting as a, well, you had to coordinate union meetings with your political activities from a legal point of view, they told me. So if we, if there was going to be a union meeting in Cincinnati, a sort of a political thing for endorsements, I'd arrange a meeting with the union, official union business, and then at night go to a political meeting.

And then we had, let's see, Muskie was in Cleveland twice, I think, down at that little airport down near the lake, and there was a big fued in Cleveland between the Democratic party and the county, what was it, Cayuga county, and the mayor's office. And I can remember we're putting signs together and I wanted a package of staples. They were, I had to go down to the mayor's office, they wouldn't deliver it to the Democratic headquarters office in the city of Cleveland. It's these things you ran into. And it was a real exciting thing, we had, I had, I'd carry around with me the bumper sticker, I think black and orange, "Muskie For Governor," little bumper sticker, and I had one, and whenever I did an advance for the Muskie campaign, find out where they were coming in and then they'd sit, you know, maybe have a drink or something, get ready,

and I'd always stick that up there so that when Muskie came into the room, he knew that I was there, I was on that advance team.

And it was a, he, one incident that got a lot of publicity, this second one didn't, but the other, it was in Washington, Pennsylvania or something, where he confronted the student group. Well he did the same thing in Dayton, in, not, Toledo, not Dayton, Toledo, in the basketball gymnasium there. And all of the students in the balcony, and we were down on the floor, there was, I don't know, five (?) a couple of secret service people in line, I was the water boy making sure, you couldn't go get a glass of water unless you had a secret service guy with you to make sure you didn't put something in it. And again, one of the students started, so Muskie said, "Hold it, come on down." So the kid slid down, went over the bannister and slid down a pole there, and he comes down on the floor and Muskie says, "okay, you want to talk, go ahead. Floor's yours as long as you want it." Well the kid stumbled around for three or four minutes and Muskie says, "Well, you all through?" "Well. . . . you know. . . . " "Well kid," he says, "don't say that you don't get a chance to speak." Oh, the crowd was, just took off on it. But that was a, there's some, you know, things like that happened that you remember and so, the longer you think about it you can remember more.

DN: You were able as political director for that campaign for the textile workers to go around the country. Were you going to both Muskie and Humphrey rallies?

DB: No, I was, well, I'd gone to the Democratic headquarters in Washington and they suggested that, concentrate on Muskie campaign. You know, they had different teams and John Martin was working on it, well you were for a while (?), up at headquarters and I'd go in there and get a plane ticket and then here you go to this place. Then after I knew where the advance was going to be, then I'd arrange to have union meetings in those areas so, kind of as a cover. I mean it was all legal, even if maybe a little devious.

End of Side One
Side Two

DB: . . . . at that time. Well, philosophically the state was run based, this is my opinion, the power companies, the railroads and the paper industry, they ran the state. And they were, you know, the Republican party was in that pocket. Of course the most recent example we've had of that was when McKernan was governor, with his association with the International Paper Company and some of the others. But, I mean we couldn't expect anything from the Republicans in terms of labor legislation.

(*Interviewer not identified - either Stuart O'Brien or Rob Chavira. Designation: STU*)

STU: So the Republicans were supported by ...

DB: The big money interest and the power, you know, the power companies, Central Maine Power and the others, and the railroad industry was fairly prominent at that time, there were still

a lot of passenger trains, and the paper companies.

STU: So, before the Democratic revival, a lot of the workers and a lot of the smaller farmers. . . .

DB: They didn't vote. So there was no use. What did we have, out of a hundred and thirty or forty, fifty people in the legislature, what did we have, ten? Up until the advent of the Muskie renaissance?

DN: A question was raised earlier about your political activity, Denny, and it would be interesting to know how decisions were made by the union as to which candidates to endorse.

DB: Well, the final endorsements would usually come from the state convention, the CIO and then later on AFL-CIO. You'd get a recommendation from the executive boards, the executive committees, then you'd go to a political meeting called for endorsement purposes.

DN: And the executive committee was made up of ...

DB: Oh, maybe about a dozen people. You had, try to represent most of the major industries. Ernie White was on from the paper workers, and you had Al Page, until he was chastised by his boss about his pension, was around. And Dorsky (?), at that time was coming around. And you'd discuss it, make a recommendation, and then you'd have a convention and it was usually approved. I can't remember that it wasn't. There might be some discussion on the floor, but generally it was handily approved, the recommendations of the executive committee.

STU: I want to go back to before 1940. You said you dropped out of school at fourteen to go work in the mills, but then you jumped and said I went to go work for the union in 1940. I'm curious, how did you go from just working in the mills to going to work for a union in 1940?

DB: Well, as I said, I was stock clerk in this textile mill. And all of the parts necessary to keep the plant in operation were there, spare parts. And when the people who fixed the machinery came down, I had been visited by a, I don't know how he got my name, but he came to my house and talked about the union and so on, and I didn't need much convincing because something that had happened in the early thirties with the Republican party and my brother and employers, and my brothers and sisters worked in textile mills in a little village called Hope, Rhode Island, that's not where Clinton was from, he says it was a different Hope, and I just felt that workers needed to do something and it wasn't hard to convince me to try and, as I say, I had a union cards there and I'd use that opportunity to get people signed up. And I was, I guess, fairly successful, they asked me if I'd do it full-time.

STU: Certainly, I mean, did you see yourself in the '70s becoming a state leader and an area director leader? What were your aspirations at that time?

DB: No particular aspirations. I just felt that maybe I could do something to help people who

worked in the mills, including some members of my family, relatives and so on, I thought maybe I could help.

STU: You mentioned that. . . .

DB: And I had nothing to lose, you know I was making twelve dollars a week in the mill and here I was getting paid ten dollars and about ten dollars on expenses, so that, you know, it wasn't any big gamble.

STU: You said your brother had problems with the Republican party. What would you describe ...?

DB: Yeah, in 1933 or '34 I guess, I was ten, twelve, about twelve years old I guess, during the Depression, they had, well, they didn't have food stamps, you'd get food vouchers. And we applied, I still had two brothers at home at the time, and the older brother applied for work and also a food voucher and the county we were in, it was Kent county was the name of it, and because he wasn't registered as a Republican we couldn't get any food vouchers. I remember that vividly. He came home and he was swearing in French, you know. And he said, what are you gonna do, you gotta eat. So he registered as a Republican and he got a job on the highways and we got three dollars and seventy-five cents in these yellow legal pads, they were yellow like this, and that was kept at the First National Store and when you'd (?) go there, we didn't have food stamps, you'd go there and you'd buy bread or whatever, and they'd mark it down until you used up your three dollars and seventy-five cents. But in order to get that he had to enroll as a Republican.

STU: In order to get aid for food, you had to be a Republican?

DB: Yeah, right. It wasn't, you know, it was just a local-type thing that happened and it certainly soured me and I suppose a lot of other people. And this didn't only happen to him; other people who worked in this village had the same experience.

STU: So, given all these things that you experienced by 1940 when you went to work for the union, how would you characterize your political ideas overall?

DB: I was real radical. I didn't think I personally would amount to anything but at least I felt I would help play a part in getting workers organized because it seemed to me that that was the salvation of the working people. To have, not only wages, I mean my philosophy then, probably more important than wages, because somehow or other the economy's going to take care of that, but people having a right, having a say in how they're going to work and how they're going to be treated and this sort of, a kind of independence, not being under a whip all the time. That to me was, is important, it still is, as just the monetary benefits.

STU: Now as you were heading towards the Democratic party and a lot of things you say about labor organization, was there a strong Communist movement in the mills at this time?

DB: There wasn't any that I ever became aware of. There might have- this was a little village, you know, and I don't, in the cities there might have been, in the larger, you know, metropolitan areas. But Hope was a, there was one little mill there that employed four, five hundred people and probably a thousand people lived in the whole area so it wasn't any, I don't know. I was never aware of, that there was any Communist activities. Now that doesn't mean that we weren't called Communists. I can remember we were trying to organize a plant in Brunswick here in about 1950, I guess it was, you'd go in some of these homes and, "Get out of here, you Communist." You know, you'd knock at the door and the CIO was a Communist. I never personally ran into any, knew of any meetings or anything going on within any part of the union I had anything to do with. That doesn't mean there wasn't any, but I just not aware of it.

STU: You said you felt a really strong connection to workers' rights. Everybody has their battle and they pick you know how they're going to fight that battle. Why in particular workers' rights as opposed to some other issue?

DB: Because I was a worker. And people in my family worked in the mills, and, you know, relatives and, I mean, in this little town either you worked in the mill or you didn't work anyplace. It was the only really gainful employment, so we just associated with these people.

STU: How did you go from someone in 1940 who had no political aspirations in particular to ascending up to area director of the textile workers?

DB: Well, I was a very avid reader. I read everything I could get on labor history in the newspapers and everything, and just got involved. I mean, while in Rhode Island I served, I was appointed by the governor, and this was in 194-, just after I got out of the service they had a, set up a commission on postwar development in the state and so on. I was involved in that. I was involved with the veterans in getting a state bonus. I mean, I just got involved in everything. You know, I was single and I just, full of it I guess, and I just went out and just got involved.

STU: When did, ah, the AFL, which was historically associated with the right, and CIO, Republican party, and the CIO which was associated with the left, when did even discussion begin that they would merge? Or what brought it about as well?

DB: I really don't know. The city, the merger convention took place in New York in, I think, 1956, that the AFL-CIO merged at that time. I can't remember, see, the Teamsters were out of it. See, the Teamsters were the biggest force, the biggest, the biggest support from labor came from the, the Republicans, came from the Teamsters when Hoffa was there. And while they can complain about labor racketeering, I mean, this was at the height of it and they just supported the Republicans right down the line, the Teamsters did. And I think they were out of it at the time, and that kind of left the door open because I don't think, Reuther never wanted to be associated with Hoffa so that when Hoffa got out of the picture, I think that started the reapproachment between the two federations.

STU: Ideologically though, what benefit did both stand to gain from merging?

DB: I think it was just a question that, you know, in union there's strength. By getting together in one big organization and developing common goals that we'd have more, more influence.

STU: Before the discussions of merging in the mid fifties, you were involved with the CIO. Were there any internal problems in the CIO prior to the merger?

DB: There were squabbles within our own textile union, you know, somebody's running against somebody, you don't like this guy, but I mean you have an election and it's over. I don't know, outside of the textile workers union that I was very intimately connected with, I suppose there, you know, were internal battles in just about any organization, whether it be a union or anything else. You know, you have, stockholders wanted to kick out some of the directors or, this happens, it's just a natural sort of thing.

STU: But you would say within the textile workers union it was pretty unified?

DB: Yeah, we had one fairly serious attempt to displace some of the officers, but nothing came of it. One person who was trying to leave it we found out later, very effective and fluent speech, his name was Baldanzi, who quit our union and went to work for the Teamsters in New Jersey. He had tried to lead a sort of revolt within our union. He wasn't successful and left.

STU: What did you personally think of the CIO and AFL merging? Did you think it was a good thing?

DB: Yeah, I just couldn't see why, you know, that they couldn't merge because I believed in the principle of organization strength. I mean, the more, the stronger and if you could unify your programs, and the whole political, I mean, I felt politically it was necessary.

STU: Where was the biggest opposition coming from, in terms of being opposed to the merge?

DB: I don't know, I, it's hard to tell, you know. These things went on at the top and there were all kinds of meetings going on and pretty soon the word would come down that this union was agreeable to it. Some of the holdouts, as I understand it, were some of the building trades unions, the carpenters and some of them who didn't fully accept the idea of industrial unions. See, if you work for a contractor, you've got a local here of carpenters, you've got plumbers, you got this and that, and they were afraid that by organizing on an industrial basis like we did in the manufacturing industries, and you know, auto and, that this would dilute their influence as separate unions so that, but I guess that they overcame that because they're still, you know, they still had their own organizational structure of their various trades. But that was one of the things that was coming some reluctance on the part of some of the, some large unions in some cases, from endorsing the idea of merging.

STU: Not just from a union perspective, what, where was the opposition coming from outside

of people involved with unions in general? Or was there none?

DB: I don't know what you mean.

STU: When I asked where was opposition coming from, you told me specifically like people who were about to immediately gain or lose by the union merging, carpenters, tradesmen. Outside of that, was there any opposition coming in?

DB: I don't know. I mean, I suspect that industry groups, businesspeople, weren't too happy about it. I mean, they knew that the merger would strengthen the hand of the labor movement. I'm sure the Chamber of Commerce or the NAM never liked it. To this day they'd like to eliminate all unions, except their own.

STU: Muskie was already governor when the merger happened. How do you, what was his, was he endorsing the idea?

DB: I don't know. I can't recall it, ever discussed it with him. I mean, it was never an issue that he, I felt that he had no reason to get involved. I just. . . .

STU: You mentioned earlier that you thought that Muskie was shy. I'm curious, was your relationship with him purely political, or did you have sort of a golf-playing relationship with him as well or some sort of relationship ...?

DB: Oh, I played golf with him a couple of times but nothing ongoing. It was just, my whole activity with him came out of labor, then politics, and then Muskie was at, there, and that's how we got together. So that our association was based on political acquaintances and, you know-

STU: Was it always through certain mediums that you would talk, like at a meeting, or would you ever sit down with him and have deep political discussion?

DB: No, we had, I had some talks with him, I served on several advisory committees; he appointed me to a committee on education beyond high school, at which then Dr. Phillips, president of Bates, and I had strong disagreements at a meeting in Waterville. And I served on several other governmental things, Employment Security Commission, advisory council, and I've got a whole list of them here somewhere, and National Planning Association. Most of these came as a result of recommendations either by Muskie and some by Curtis, who was then governor, and Frank Coffin had me hooked into it, when Butler was National Democratic chairman in the 1956 presidential campaign, to be the state labor chairman for Stevenson at the time. So but, most of my, most of it was political. And when Muskie asked me to serve on something, it was political. I mean, I, he knew me personally and I guess he felt he could trust me, you know, my judgment, but it wasn't a, we didn't visit socially or anything like that.

STU: Did you have any like strong political objections to some of his ideas or things that he endorsed that you were opposed to strongly?

DB: I can't remember any particular thing. We might have, you know, had some minor disagreements that, but, keep in mind that while he was governor, he was a Democrat with a Republican legislature, so that we almost had to back him all the way. It was either him or backing the Republicans, and that, you know, to me that was sinful.

STU: One of the, the Republican party repeatedly accused Muskie of receiving large amounts of funds from the AFL-CIO and they went so far as to say, "If you're voting for Muskie you're basically voting for the AFL-CIO."

DB: So, people liked the AFL-CIO I guess, because they voted for Muskie.

STU: Absolutely. How did, what was it about. . . . ?

DB: It wasn't that, it was some money but, you know, in the first campaign I think the Democratic state budget, now this was for a governor, three congressmen at the time, and the Democratic state committee had a budget I think 5,600 dollars or something like that, somewhere around that figure. So it couldn't have been a lot of money. Probably a thousand of that came from labor, and then later on there was a little bit more, because you know, success breeds new friends, and people at other unions throughout the, the CIO especially and then later on even the AFL was sending money into the state.

STU: You're saying that ...

DB: As the, you know, probably more than half of the Republican money comes from out of state, you know. So that there was nothing illegal or nothing unusual about having other unions like the auto workers who liked the idea of a Democrat in the governor's chair in Maine, contributing.

STU: Muskie was a Democratic governor with a Republican legislature. Was it just a matter of, well, he's all that's there, he's the best of all evils, or was it ...

DB: Well, I wouldn't use that terminology, not the best of all evils.

STU: I'm trying to see, what, how did he support the workers rights that made the AFL-CIO endorse him, aside from him being a Democrat?

DB: Well, I, you know, his general philosophy and his family background and the people he was brought up with. I mean, they're all, from a working people's background, working families, so that you could trust the feeling that, you know, he's not going to betray his relatives and his friends who he grew up with.

STU: I'm going to shift gears for a second. How is it that you got banned from speaking at Bates?

DB: Well, it was in the chapel where the, when, the only other time I've been there since, my daughter had just graduated as a nurse and I had occasion to go there. I was invited by Brooks Quimby to speak at the, I think it was the whole senior class, on some political thing. And I can't remember the year, it was in the '60s some time, I can't, there was a big blow up in the paper about it. And I disagreed with Phillips and I called him a fake, and "I said he's parading himself as an economist and all he is is a marketing expert, he wrote a book on marketing." And I said, "If that makes him an economist, then I'm a priest or something, you know, because I go to church." And the funny thing is that, there were maybe three hundred people there, two or three hundred, and Quimby told me after that, I think the class was something like forty-five minutes, and I didn't pay any attention at the time and I ran over almost an hour and he said that was the first time that he'd ever had an issue of this kind, and the class didn't even get up to leave. Well, the upshot of it was was that about two weeks later, the, who was the athletic director?

DN: Milt Lindholm?

DB: No, no. Anyway, I got a call and he said that I had had my last appearance on the campus. Because every year I'd go to the various classes, social studies classes and things, and debate and, I've got records here of, they would write to Dudley, the speaker's bureau in Washington, the AFL-CIO and he would recommend me and I, all kinds of high school debates and I'd go in, and labor issues and so on. But that was it. I didn't, I attacked Prexy on his home grounds. I was told, "You'll never, you'll never be invited again." And I wasn't.

STU: This guy worked at Bates?

DB: Who?

STU: That gentleman that you attacked?

DB: He was the president of the college, Dr. Phillips. He and I in Waterville disagreed strongly on this education beyond high school. My position had been, and I'd gone to meetings in Washington and Boston, that he, his theory was that kids don't go to college because they're not motivated by their parents. I said, "Dr. Phillips, have you ever been in a home where people are just making enough money to get by and keep their kids through grammar school and maybe high school? And do you expect those parents to encourage these people of thinking about college, knowing that they can't do it?" You know, you didn't have the Pell Grants, you didn't have these things. And I said, "It's financial, and until you get some aid for these poor people, either in loans or grants or something, what, you're just hurting these kids, disappointing them by trying to, having the parents encourage them and leading them to think they're going to go to college." And that was the biggest deterrent.

The conference agreed with that point of view and today you get, you know, you find all these, even the Republicans now are not opposing Pell Grants and these types of things. They realize

that a working family now, especially, it takes two people just to bring up a couple of kids, how are they going to save for college? So that unless you have some hope that they're going to get some financial assistance, I don't, I didn't blame the parents for not encouraging them to go to college. So he and I disagreed very strongly on that. This was an open meeting in Waterville that this happened.

STU: Towards the late '50s the country was moving more and more towards that sort of mentality as the civil rights movement started. What do you think unions and the labor struggle, what it's role was in the civil rights movement in general, as it began to happen at the end of the '50s?

DB: Very active, they were very active. My first brush with this, I was, after the war we came back and I was stationed at the McPherson General Hospital, working the operating room there in Atlanta, Georgia. And I got on a bus, I was in uniform, and you know there was black seating in the back and so on, and I looked at, so I moved back there and the bus driver stopped the bus. He says, "You can't sit back there." I said, "Why not?" And he's got a gun strapped on him. I said, "If I can't sit there, I'm getting off," and six people got up, six G.I.s got off the bus at that point. That was, you know, that was long before Rosa Parks, and my feeling, we had in the South, some of our unions, people back in Wallace.

I went down to a meeting in, oh, this was a funny incident, in, this was in '68, was it Wallace that ran in the Humphrey campaign? Yeah. I had an engagement to speak at a union meeting in Lynchburg, Virginia. We were staying at a hotel in New York, I got a plane and flew into Washington, rented a car, in Fredericksburg, not Lynchburg, drove down to Fredericksburg, spoke at a union meeting there, where I had people yelling at me and the Wallace signs on their cars and so on. And finally got an endorsement for the Humphrey-Muskie ticket, after all the verbal abuse, drove back to Washington, I said but, he said just leave the keys in the car and leave it there and I ran and got a plane. About three weeks later I'm at a golf course in Brunswick and the FBI is looking for me. The car I had used was stolen or taken by some guy and he held up a bank. Of course they traced the car, I was the one that had leased that car, and they were up here and taking palm prints from the steering wheel. So then they told me what happened, that the car had been used in a bank robbery after I left it there that night.

STU: I hope you were eventually cleared.

DB: Yeah, I was. I was.

STU: I'm curious, you said in the southern states the union had supporters of Wallace. How diverse was it in general? Were there a lot of black workers?

DB: Certain pockets. The, there weren't too many black members. The, you know, even in our union there was, there were yard workers and stuff, but they weren't skilled workers. And I don't know if you remember the story of the woman actor, Ray, Norma Ray? That movie where she was trying to organize the southern workers and stuff. I think it was shown here at Bates in

one of the educational films or something. And there was, but most of the people in that movie were white, very few black people. And in our unions, the Black people didn't work in the mills to any great extent until, you know, more recently, and they were kind of, the whites was resentment, you know, and, you know, just like the rest of the south. They didn't change because they joined the union, as far as that kind of a prejudice is concerned.

We had some experience with the minorities here. In, I don't know, I can't remember the year, there was a group of Dominicans, probably forty or fifty, that were hired in Bates Mill and there was quite a lot of resentment. And I called a special meeting, I told them, I said, we wouldn't put up with it. In fact, we helped them, we rented a hall on Main Street above where some music place was, they had a little hall there, and I can remember going to a party where they had this pinata, you know, they have, hung something on it, and they banged it and knocked the stuffing out of it. This was their form of entertainment.

And finally, they were ordered to, they were deported, they were ordered to leave. And the night before they left, we had about twenty-five at my house, I had kind of a large playroom, and they came there and how, you know, thanking me, I'd befriended them and, I even bought some records and started to learn to speak Spanish so that, and they felt real welcome. But they were here illegally and they had to leave. But how trusting they were. One kid, of course, a lot of the men had wives back there and they'd earn money here and send it back. This one kid came over and they, all their clothing were piled on the bed in the bedroom and we were downstairs, and he came up, said, "I want to show you something." He takes, he's got a jacket on, and he's got a roll of money, maybe a couple of thousand dollars. I said, "Did you leave this here?" "You can trust these people," he said, "you can trust these people." They trusted one another, and here's a, probably all the money had in the world, and they were just laying there on the bed in a pocket where anybody could take them. But they were very appreciative and, they were here about five or six months. And, towards the end, the resentment gradually died down, you know, from some of the, some of our white people, I like to call Caucasian people that resented them at first. But, you know, this was evolution, it just took time.

STU: Did you make a lot of enemies calling a meeting and saying that "I won't put up with it?"

DB: No, not really. I think people wondered why and what was my motive, and I think, we wrote letters and so on, put stuff on the bulletin board. I think they began to understand, and I'd point out, you know, you came, most of them came from Canada. You know, you were foreigners, you came in here, and you didn't like it because, you know, Lewiston, you had the Pepperill Mill was an Irish stronghold, and then the other mills were French. Now, Little Canada down below on Continental Mill, and you know, it wasn't safe at night for French people to walk up Pepperill, Bleachery Hill they called, because the, and they wouldn't hire, almost everyone hired in the Pepperill plant was not French. So that you had these things here, you know, between nationalities, let alone color barriers. So that it was just another thing that eventually evolved and they, there was no lasting resentment, I mean, I couldn't feel it. After, even after they left, they didn't say good riddance or anything like that. They just didn't mention it any more. It was over with.

STU: After the Dominicans left, or even before for that matter, were there any ethnic divisions whatsoever in the Union between Irish and French, Polish, or ...?

DB: Not when it came to union issues. Not, I couldn't, because you'd have a meeting and they'd be all mixed in the meeting and you'd find some on one side of an issue, some on the other, and it made no difference what the nationality background was. I didn't, course you had to speak French. You'd go to a meeting and you'd have a contract negotiation, you'd speak for a half hour, explain it in English, then some little old lady would get up and say, "*Monsieur Blais, en français, s'il vous plais."* You know, Mr. Blais, French please. So you'd have to go over the whole thing in French, you know, explain. Especially in the first seven or eight years. Towards the end, you know in the mid seventies and so on, it wasn't as pronounced. At first it was, you just had to speak two languages at every meeting.

STU: Were the majority of the workers French?

DB: Oh, yeah. Overwhelming majority.

STU: Was there a strong sense of like French identity among them?

DB: Not really, not in terms of origin. I mean, they felt it, you know, locally, but they weren't, no allegiance to Canada for instance because they came from there. At least I didn't feel that they, you know, there's a revival, attempted revival now, you know, the Franco-American things and so on, and, but, most French people I don't think care anymore. I mean, they're proud of their heritage, but I don't think they're interested in reviving or getting involved in a thing like in Quebec, you know, for a separatist type thing because of the nationality there and language differences. I don't think they care.

STU: You said the speeches would have to be conducted in French as well. What, even though the majority were of French descent, was there a lot of language barrier, was it maybe fifty-fifty, or, of the percentage of people who didn't ...?

DB: Most of the real older ones were the ones who would request the explanation in French. The younger people who'd been, some of them, you know, there's, they came here in the late '30s and early '40s, so by the '60s, you know, the kids had gone to school and so on and of course, they were sixteen, seventeen, they were working in the mills, too, so they were able to understand and spoke English. And the older ones gradually, you know, diminished in numbers.

STU: How is it and when, also, did you become secretary of treasury of the Maine CIO counsel?

DB: About late '48, about a year after I was there, because the textile union was the biggest union in the CIO in Maine, the only one with real big numbers. You had a few shoe workers, a few hundred, so that, as long as I was endorsed by the textile group, I mean, it was pretty much

you know a sure election if I wanted to run.

STU: Would you explain in some detail the situation with the New England mill strike?

DB: New England mill strike?

DN: Being the Bates strike, and ...

DB: Oh, Bates. Well, there was a strike here before I came, in 1945, it lasted three or four weeks I guess. In '55 there was a lengthy strike and the issue was, you know, wage differentials between the north and south, which the company claimed was, you know, keeping them from making a profit. Although anyone who bought Bates stock in the '40s and kept it, probably had a six thousand percent return. You know, it was just a phenomenal thing that they made. But they kept arguing and arguing that they had to, they wanted a ten percent wage reduction although they claimed, it's not a wage reduction. You bring up the wages in the south and then you won't, you know, as if we could do anything about it. We probably had ten percent of the southern textile workers organized and they expected us to bring up southern textile wages.

And it went on and on and that's when we had the meeting in Muskie's office with Louis Laun who was the assistant to the president. And Herman Ruhm, who was the president of Bates. Now there's a skunk; he was hired as president and he was given, I don't know what salary, he was given seventy-five thousand dollars in Bates stock for five dollars a share. It was selling for twenty-seven dollars on the market, at the time. And as soon as he, he got a better offer from Burlington Mills in the south, he left Bates but during the strike he was on the radio and he was, you know, newspapers and so on, blasting the unions and we were wrong. And I sent letters to the editor and went on the radio and it got, most of the churches in town supported the union position. Their leader was Father Drouin, who was the big church in the, St. Peter and St. Paul's, the big cathedral down here on Ash Street, he was a leader. He and the Protestant, Rabbi Berant and Niles, Protestant, those three did a lot to support workers in their, openly in the pulpit, during that strike. And the people stuck together and finally we were able to settle it without a wage cut.

STU: Did the church play a big part in helping the workers throughout your experience with ...?

DB: I wasn't here when most of the plants were actually organized, by the time I got here they'd been organized. See, the organization drive here went on about the same time as, when, all through New England, early '40s. So when I came here in '47 there were already unions. And the big fight at that time, and it was still going on, at that time, whether you'd have a union shop or not, whether it would be an open, even though you had a union, people could join or not join and so on. And in that argument, public debate, generally the church was kind of neutral as to whether there should be compulsory membership or not. And we finally, you know, were able to achieve that, this feeling that everyone, because the law says that if you negotiate, you've got to negotiate for everybody. You can't just negotiate for union members. The feeling was, you

know, if we gotta negotiate for them, why shouldn't they help pay the freight? I mean, that was the philosophy that I always had. You live in a town and you've got a fire department, you may not like the mayor but you still gotta pay taxes for fire protection, you can't say, "Well, I don't like that mayor, I'm not going to pay taxes." So that's the same philosophy I had in union membership. If you take the benefits, you ought to pay the freight.

STU: Wasn't there also a situation where Bates, at the Bates Manufacturing Company threatened to leave, or was that essentially the same?.

DB: Oh, they never threatened, they had no place to go. You know, the theory, the word is persistent, throughout you'll see it in articles written about the textile industry, that the mills went south, they closed down and went south. That's a fallacy; they went no-place. Bates didn't go south. The plant in Waterville, Lockwood-Duchess, made sheets, didn't go south, Wyandotte [Worsted Mill] didn't go south. The plant in Brunswick that delivered, they didn't go south, Continental didn't go south. Continental was the most honest. They had a survey come in and they, engineers, and they said it would cost them two and a half million dollars to modernize the plant to remain competitive. And it was a family owned type thing, Mehan family owned the company, and they called us in and said, "Look, we just aren't going to spend that kind of money. We'll just run this out and close down." And Bates, so many people made millions of dollars on that thing, every six months they'd get a new president and retire him in six months and put him on a pension. You had, in a five year period, about ten presidents of Bates, all taken out of the salesman force, brought in as presidents, and then retire them with a high salary and a high pension. And the, I mean, the people that bought it, Ginsberg from New York, that outfit, they finally sold it to, Virginia Iron and Coal bought the controlling interest in Bates. They had no interest in running it. So the only thing that's left is a little thing here which is Bates of Maine, I guess, that can't pay their rent. They owe the city over three hundred thousand dollars and they go bankrupt and now another group's going to take it over, when their debt gets up to three hundred thousand, they'll go bankrupt. I mean, the city is subsidizing, there's about, I don't know, sixty or seventy people that work there. And it has no business being there. The reason that they left was two: they didn't reinvest in new machinery, and Continental was honest about it. They said, "Look, unless we invest this kind of money, we're too old, we don't feel like it." But these other companies just, they held these things together with baling wire, and after the war you could sell anything. You know, the textile industry was devastated in England and Japan, so that anything you made you could sell, so that they were rolling in dough, and rather than invest it and modernize their plants, they just let them run down and shut them down. They didn't go south.

STU: What was ...?

DB: And imports also played a big part, in it, you know.

STU: What is it that made it a believable threat? What was it about the south?

DB: We, I never felt threatened by Bates going south. They had no place to go. One company,

was it, Libby I think, part of their operation, a guy moved it south, and within three years he shut it down. There was nothing magic about the south. Their wages were almost the same, but they had better equipment. See, their mills were built after WWII for the most part, with money from the New England banks. And these mills here were built a hundred years ago. So that there were modern plants, and. But the New England plants didn't go south. Berkshire-Hathaway didn't go south, none of them went south. Pepperill was bought by Westpoint, who was principally a southern operation, and they transferred some of the sheeting business to the south, but it was going out anyway, so the only left at Pepperill is their blanket division in Biddeford, but that's still here, they didn't go south. Biddeford Textile who makes shells for Sunbeam for electric blankets, they stayed here. They modernized, they got all new equipment, but they stayed.

STU: The slack was picked up by United States' importing textiles from overseas?

DB: Yeah, well that was part of the, see, one of the big arguments within the labor movement, I mean, you had the Reuthers who were free traders, and some who, they weren't affected by imports. And we in the textile industry kept hollering, we'd go to conventions, say, look, you know, are we expendable because we're a low, comparatively low wage industry? And we couldn't get anybody excited about protecting the textile industry. So the imports began coming in from Japan and the new mills in England and then the shoe industry became affected and then gradually everyone, electronics, you know, I don't think there's a TV set made in this country any more. Zenith was assembling one up until recently with imported parts. But the whole manufacturing thing fell out because of imports. And imports aren't that cheap. You go to WalMart and you get something you see "Made in U.S.A." and "Made in China" and they're the same price. They just make more money on the imports, but the customer doesn't get any particular advantage. But between lack of modernization and the import pressure is what ruined the industry in New England.

STU: Earlier you were saying although you never came across any Communist organization or anything like that, that often, well not often, but that you had been accused of being Communists. Did Hayes, who was the president of the ethics committee, there was a big scare at the time investigating a lot of different unions, did he ever investigate. . . . ?

DB: Never bothered me that I know of.

STU: Were the textile workers ever investigated ...?

DB: I don't recall that our union was ever accused of it. The electrical union was, at one time, investigated. There was a group in Winnesocket, an independent union which was, had some textile employees, with a guy named Larry Spitz. He was accused of it but never anything came of it because he, when we merged with them, I mean, he was a real nice guy. I never knew of any meetings that he went to, any attempt that he was making to recruit people. But the electrical industry was one of the, union, electrical union under fire by the Hayes committee and there was one other. Well, of course I suppose McCarthy was attacking everybody, you know,

didn't make any difference whether you were union or non-union. He had a Communist in every closet.

STU: There were rumors circulating that Muskie was going to appoint you, and I don't remember exactly the year, the state commissioner of labor and industry, and you said that, no, you hadn't spoken to him. But you also said, I wouldn't do it anyway, because I felt, feel that ...

DB: He never spoke to me personally. I'd heard it through somebody on his staff, and I told him I wasn't interested. But he never offered it to me or asked me about it or anything.

STU: I'm curious, why weren't you interested, had he, if he had?

DB: Well, I had a, I'd been working for the union at that time for, I don't know, twenty years or so, whatever, fifteen years, and I just assumed that this was going to be my livelihood, my lifetime career, in the labor movement. Because I was, you know, advancing, I became New England director and then I became national vice president, and had I stayed I would have been, you know, when we merged there with the clothing workers union I was one of the top four people who, but I retired before then. But I just had no interest. I had my stint in political work as two years on the governor's council. And that was, of course that was before Muskie was governor, but I had no interest in a political career or, you know, political appointments because after all, you get appointed for two years, the new governor comes in and you're out looking for a job. And I'd built up seniority and I was looking towards a pension which I now have and I eat regularl, probably wouldn't have if I'd gone. Mary Martin was commissioner of labor at the time I guess.

STU: Well, Mr. Blais, I want to say thank you, a lot, for your time, and I just have one more question. If you could characterize, overall, in your political career, how would you characterize what Muskie brought to Maine politics that was special? What did he bring that conceivably hadn't been brought before?

DB: I think he gave people hope. He gave the Democrats hope, and I think Maine people, that there was something other than the Republican party. I mean, and they began picking and choosing, you know, so pretty soon we elect an independent governor. So that it broke the stronghold that the Republicans had on the state and their cohorts in big business. I think that changed the whole complexion of the politics in Maine, that it was possible to get away from that kind of domination, although there's still a, you know, certain amount of it but nothing like it was.

STU: Okay, well, thank you very much.

DB: Okay well, you're welcome.

End of Interview

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