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## O'Leary, Charles J. "Chick" oral history interview

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## **Interview with Charles J. “Chick” O’Leary by Greg Beam**

*Summary Sheet and Transcript*

### **Interviewee**

O’Leary, Charles J. “Chick”

### **Interviewer**

Beam, Greg

### **Date**

July 24, 2000

### **Place**

Orono, Maine

### **ID Number**

MOH 197

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### **Biographical Note**

Charles J. “Chick” O’Leary was born January 25, 1937 in Bangor, Maine. His parents were Charles, Sr. and Doris (Foley) O’Leary. He was childhood friends with William S. “Bill” Cohen; they played ball together. He attended John Bapst high school and started college at St. Michael’s, then took a year off to work on an oil rig and completed his studies at the University of Maine, Orono, receiving a master’s in History. He taught at Winslow High School then went to Beirut on a Fulbright grant. He later was hired by Ben Dorsky to help with the Standard Paper strike, then succeeded Roger Snow as Director of Labor Education at UMO. He was elected president of AFL-CIO in 1979.

### **Scope and Content Note**

Interview includes discussions of: community history of Bangor; labor issues; growth of organized labor in Maine in the 1930s; work experience program with Charlie Micoleau; Ben Dorsky; Mike Schoonjans; Denny Blais; AFL-CIO; International Paper (IP) strike; interviews with labor leaders in the New England Folklore Archives; and environmental protection.

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## **Transcript**

**Greg Beam:** This is Greg Beam and I'm here with Chick O'Leary at his home at 279 Main

Street in Orono, Maine. It's a little after 2:00 P.M. on July 24th, 2000. To begin could you please state your full name and spell it?

**Chick O'Leary:** My name is Charles J. O'Leary, and that is O-apostrophe-L-E-A-R-Y.

**GB:** What does the J stand for?

**CO:** John.

**GB:** And when and where were you born?

**CO:** I was born in Bangor, Maine on January 25th, 1937.

**GB:** Did you grow up in Bangor?

**CO:** Yes, I did.

**GB:** What were your parents' names?

**CO:** Charles, Sr., and my mother's name was Doris Foley O'Leary.

**GB:** Is Foley F-O-L-E-Y?

**CO:** That's correct.

**GB:** All right. And what was the Bangor community like when you were growing up? What are your memories of Bangor?

**CO:** I lived in a neighborhood that was very ethnic. It was, everybody in my neighborhood was either Irish or Jewish, and it was a fairly close knit community. The, most of my contemporaries either went to St. John's grammar school or to the public schools and then Hebrew school in the afternoon, and one of my neighbors was the current secretary of defense, Billy Cohen, who lived at one end of the street. We lived on East Summer Street in Bangor. I lived on the corner of East Summer and Hancock and Billy lived on the corner of East Summer and State. And he went to Bowdoin, I went to Maine, and that's the story.

**GB:** How well did you know Bill Cohen when you were growing up?

**CO:** Very well. He was several years younger than I am, but he used to play basketball with us in my backyard, and he was a very good ball player.

**GB:** Did you, did you see any potential in him to be, you know, as politically successful as he's become?

**CO:** Bill Cohen was the last guy in the world I ever thought would be in politics.

**GB:** Really.

**CO:** He was a good athlete, he was very academic, went to Bowdoin, became a lawyer, but he was not, I would not have picked him to be a politician. But fate does strange things, and we know he ended up being not only a congressman but a United States senator, and now secretary of defense.

**GB:** All right, now what were your parents' occupations?

**CO:** My father was an insurance adjustor, and my mother pretty much stayed at home. I had two older sisters, and my father was on the road a lot, mostly because of potato farm fires north in the potato barns. Or sometimes he would be called away when there was a major disaster, like a hurricane in Florida. He'd go there, and sometimes we'd go with him. So it was the, that was what he did, and my mother pretty much stayed home, raised the family, cooked, cleaned the house, did all the hard work.

**GB:** So he handled claims for the insurance company?

**CO:** He was an adjuster, that is, he went and estimated what the damage was or made a determination of whether it was a legitimate claim, so on and so forth, that type of thing.

**GB:** You said you'd sometimes travel with him. Did you get a chance to do that a lot?

**CO:** Not very often. We went to Florida, I think, in 1948 or '49 for the hurricanes, and came back the same year, later in the same year, because of the Bar Harbor fire. It was just about that time that Bar Harbor got flattened by the, one of the worst fires in the history of the state, destroyed all the mansions down there and made it possible for non-rich people to enjoy the harbor. But that was the only occasion I can remember traveling.

**GB:** Now, you mentioned that in the neighborhood in which you grew up it was primarily Irish and Jewish. Do you know if that was true for all of Bangor at that time?

**CO:** No, I don't think so. I think that, there, Bangor has a large Irish population, and the, it was centered generally around parishes. St. John's parish covered the east side, and St. Mary's covered the west side, and it was a large Irish community. But, and the Jewish community, pretty much as far as I know, was in the eastern part of the city. The, and then there were the Yankees, who owned everything (*unintelligible word*).

**GB:** Really [laughter].

**CO:** Yeah, so that's the way it was.

**GB:** So, what was the economic structure? You say the Yankees owned a lot of businesses?

**CO:** Well, I think primarily Bangor has always been, since the lumbering days, a warehouse town for the lumber industry, for the paper industry. So, and like many towns in Maine, it also

had a small shoe industry. But primarily it was outfits like Snowe and Nealy, that made lumbering equipment for forest harvesting, and other outfits, that supplied the paper companies with their needs. So I think Bangor's always, and in those days, of course, the railroad was more a central part of the community than it is today. The railroads were real big. And particularly not only with passengers -- I mean, I can remember up until after I graduated from high school taking the train from Bangor to New York. And also not only passenger trains but freight, freight moved by train and particularly potatoes. So there was a lot of, there was a lot of train traffic in Bangor, and right up through the state. Of course, towns like Milo and Brownville Junction were primarily railroad towns. But that was still very prevalent when I was a boy.

**GB:** I see. Now, were your parents very actively involved in the Bangor community in any respect when you were growing up?

**CO:** I think we tended to be more involved in the church than, my mother was more involved in the church than she was the community. And I think there was, I think that there was some exclusion to the politics of the city at that time. I mean, I think Bangor was a Republican town until fairly recently and it was not inclusive, I mean the politics was pretty much predetermined by industry and those people that ran things. So I wouldn't say that my mother was. My father was more of a transient, I mean he was on the road a lot and ran one time, I remember as a boy that he ran for city council and was defeated. But he, I don't remember them being involved in town affairs as such.

**GB:** I see. Do you recall your parents' political beliefs?

**CO:** My parents were Republicans, and I think that Republicanism stemmed from the fact that another Irishman by the name of John Quinn, who later served in the Maine state senate for many years, was a neighbor of ours at the lake in the summer. And I think probably they became Republicans to vote for Quinn. I can remember my father not liking Franklin Roosevelt very well. And I can remember seeing my, he would say awful things and my mother would say that, "Oh now, you can't say that; he's a cripple." And my father would say, "He has a crippled mind." So they were not, I guess they were not what you would say flaming liberals, yeah. Yeah, they were Republicans.

**GB:** Did you take in a lot of that when you were young?

**CO:** I was never a Republican either in spirit or in mind. And I don't know whether that was a revolt against my parents or whether it was because as a student I became interested in history and saw the Democratic party as being more or less the party that could do something to aid people who were poor and oppressed and do some good things for our society.

**GB:** I see, I see. So you attended Bangor High School, did you?

**CO:** No, I went to John Bapst.

**GB:** Oh, John Bapst, okay.

**CO:** Yeah, which until I don't know, maybe until the 1960s, was a parochial school run by the Sevarian Brothers. And so I went to John Bapst and graduated from there in 1955. And then upon completion I went to St. Michael's College in Winooski, Vermont for two years. But my father had died when I was a junior in high school, and we didn't have any money, and as you know it's expensive; it was expensive to go to college, *is* expensive to go to college. I didn't have any money so after completing my sophomore year I left school and went to work for Standard Oil Company on an oil tanker as a merchant seaman shipping out of Paulsborough, New Jersey and Providence, Rhode Island, places like that. I traveled and worked on an oil tanker for a year and a half and got enough money to go back to school and then completed my education at the University of Maine.

**GB:** I imagine that would have been a difficult experience working for a year and a half on an oil tanker, or?

**CO:** It was a great experience, because-

**GB:** Really?

**CO:** In those days you would go to work on it, you'd go to work on a tanker, and you would have six months on the tanker, and then you'd have one month off. And they were, in those days they were not super tankers but they were smaller tankers, and they were always loading and unloading, and so you were in port a very short time and then on, at sea again. So we spent a great deal of time at sea, and as a young man it was a great experience because I got to see some storms that I wouldn't have seen off in the barracks, and had some experiences that I wouldn't have had.

It was the, we traveled up and down the coast from Providence or Paulsborough or Boston and places like that down to Beaumont, Texas, Port Arthur, Texas, or Houston. And occasionally we would take a run down to Venezuela or Colombia, and the last trip I think I made we went down through the canal with a brand new tanker and took it out to San Pedro, California so. So it was a great experience for a young person. It gave me a chance to see a lot, to go through the Panama Canal, something, you know, I don't imagine everybody has the opportunity to do. And so at an early age I got to travel. And also as part of that, the New York Public Library would provide the ships with big cartons of books, and so you always had something to read when you were at sea. And I can remember that there was a writer by the name of Nevil Shute who I read all of his works at sea, most of Hemingway I think, and, so there was a lot of time to read in those days, when you were at sea.

**GB:** Now Nevil Shute, I've heard that name before. What does he write?

**CO:** Oh, he wrote, he wrote a very interesting book that I remember at the time, it was called Around the Bend [*sic* Round the Bend], and it was about an airplane mechanic that becomes a proselytizer, a religious person to the other mechanics. It was very interesting. But I think he's most famous book had to do, and I can't think of the name of it right now, but it had to do with the end of the earth and the coming of the atomic, the atomic bomb in a war and the, and what happens to Australia and these people that are on a submarine. I can't remember the name of it;

it was a great book and then made into a movie. So I had a chance to read, and I had a chance to travel and do a lot of things I wouldn't have otherwise done.

**GB:** I see, I see. So after that year and a half you came back to finish your education at -

**CO:** At the University of Maine in Orono.

**GB:** And was it very different from St. Michael's?

**CO:** Yeah, it was for me because I was older and more mature. And I think, St. Michael's had given me a good background in how to study, but the university had a very good program and an excellent history department at the time, and I had some wonderful teachers there. And it was something I really enjoyed, and I completed my undergraduate work at the university in history and government and then stayed on for a master's degree in history. And I always look back on that time as a very formative time in my life, and certainly the study of history has made whatever I've done a lot more interesting, you know, that's a good background.

**GB:** What aspect of history did you focus on?

**CO:** Well, nothing that I ever used, I primarily was interested in Chinese history, the history of China. And it wasn't until later that I worked my way back, and did my thesis in graduate work on the United States in the period of the 1930s, the Roosevelt era and the Great Depression and the formation of the labor movement in Maine during those years. So I kind of worked my, I worked my way from the Far East back to the United States. And after I got out of Maine, I taught school for a couple of years at Winslow High School. I taught history and English. And I was fortunate during that time to receive a grant that allowed me to, a Fulbright grant that allowed me to study at American University in Beirut [AUB] in Lebanon, and so I went over there for a year, it was less than a year, and studied Arab-Israeli relations.

You know, later on I always used to tell the joke about I went to Middle East and studied Arab-Israeli relations, saw what it was like to see brother against brother, and came back and went to work for the unions, which is what ultimately happened. But in 1964 I was in Beirut and studied under Charles Mallick, who had been president of the United Nations General Assembly and was a very interesting scholar and man at AUB. And then we had the opportunity to travel to Egypt and to Iran and to Syria and Jordan and all of the mid east countries except Iraq, which at that time was having problems also. They were, they were, the Bathist was a political party in the state department, because of the uncertainty of what was happening in Iraq wouldn't allow us to travel to Baghdad. But in 1964 the last place that I traveled in the Middle East was to Teheran in Iran and spent some time in the American embassy that later became famous during the Carter administration. So all of that was a wonderful opportunity, too, so I had some great, I had some great experience as far as being able to travel and study and meet people and all of it was enjoyed.

**GB:** Forgive me, I'm not particularly well versed on Middle Eastern history. What was the political condition in Iran and Egypt and some of those other countries at that time?

**CO:** Well, if you were in Lebanon at that time, Lebanon was really the capitol of a lot of things, including espionage in the Middle East. I arrived in Beirut in 1964, and it had been in 1963 that a gentleman by the name of Ken Philby had defected from, to the Soviet Union from Beirut the year before, and he was part of the trilogy of people that, the British intellectuals, including MacLean, Philby and Burgess, that all defected to the Soviet Union. And there was still a great deal of the Cold War going on and some of it was, of course, spilled over to there, and Philby then actually got out through Beirut. I remember one time meeting his breach partner and talking about Philby with him. But there was always the threat of, there was always the threat of a upheaval in the Middle East even in those days in Beirut. The political climate was everything was balanced so that, particularly in Lebanon because if the president of the country was Christian then the vice president was Muslim, and that worked its way all down to the chief of police and the assistant chief. Everything was balanced, and nobody dared to take a census to find out whether it was fifty-fifty or not. And then later on when we had the Hezbollah and the Black October and the coming of more Muslims into Lebanon it tipped the scales, and of course everything went haywire.

But the, the main focus in the Middle East in those years of course was Israel. You'd walk into a, Pan American was the big airline and you'd walk into their office in downtown Beirut, and it would show a map of the Middle East, and where Israel was it would say, "occupied territories". There were, many of the Palestinian leaders, who had been displaced by the creation of the state of Israel, were at that time of course living in detention camps in Lebanon and breeding a whole generation of people that wanted to go back and take back what they thought was rightfully theirs. I remember meeting one time with the minister of antiquities in Jordan. And he took a key out his pocket and he said, "This is the key to my house in Jerusalem, and someday I'll go home." So there was always that presence of conflict that continues to this day, you know, with different amounts of intensity.

The Iranians had not had their revolution so the royal family still controlled Iran. The Egyptians in the sixties, Nassar probably who was still the dominant figure. And Syria, Jordan was pretty much, King Hussein in those years was a young king with an American bride. It really didn't have anything except a phosphorus industry, and probably I bet fifty percent of its gross national product was probably provided by the United States.

So it was the same area that it is today. Oil was still king. It was an area that still had suffered from the colonial divisions and the breakup after WWI, and it was still intense upon the problem of Arab-Israeli dispute, you know, so. But it was an interesting place to be because there was a lot, if you really wanted to understand colonialism all you had to do was go to Beirut. There was a place called the St. George hotel and it was famous for a number of things, but you'd go down to the St. George Hotel, which looked right out on the bay in Beirut. You'd walk out and if you took a cigarette out of your pocket someone would be right there to light it for you so that, you know, that servant mentality, that old era of colonialism was still prevalent in some of the practices, I think, that were there. But it was a beautiful city in those days and one I particularly enjoyed.

**GB:** I see. All right, and when you came you, did you go directly to work for organized labor?

**CO:** No, I, when I came back I taught school for another year, then I taught for a year at Thomas College, and I, it finally dawned on me that if I was going to make any money, I wasn't going to make it teaching school. And I was just making enough to survive on in those days, which wasn't very good. I think in 1965 when I was teaching I was probably getting five thousand dollars a year, which was big money. So I eventually left teaching to go to work for the state of Maine in a program that had been funded under the Johnson administration in the war on poverty called the Work Experience Program, and it was during those years that I started to meet some of my people who I would work with for many years to come. The director of that program was a guy by the name of Charlie Micoleau, who was Ed Muskie's last, or one of his last chief of staff for Ed when Ed was still in the senate. And so I went to work for Charlie, who was a couple years younger than I am, in Augusta. And we were running this program called the Work Experience Program, which was the forerunner of how to get people off welfare and into the work force. And it was, once again, that was a very interesting experience for me. And I worked for, I worked with Charlie for about a year.

And then another opportunity came along, and they needed a, there was an advertisement for a director of the community action program in Kennebec county, southern Kennebec county. So I became a CAP director, community action director and ran programs like Head Start and dental health clinics and what have you. And did that for another year or so, and then in I think it must have been 1967 or '68 the, Standard Paper, which owned a mill in east, which owned a mill in Brewer and Lincoln, crashed, went out of business, they were going down. And at that time Ben Dorsky was president of the Maine State Federation of Labor. And I had encour-, worked with Ben because we had done some work through, with Charlie and myself, with the carpenters' union on building houses for poor people in the sixties, and had come to know Ben indirectly. And so he hired me to come up and run this program for the unions to take advantage of putting these workers back to work, an on-the-job training program.

Thank God there was also a program that was going that was trying to find a way to reopen the mills. And what happened was that Lincoln Pulp and Paper was bought by Primeway, a company out of Springfield, Massachusetts restarted that mill. And with a small federal grant Frank Knight started the Brewer operation, and both of the mills got up and going again. And I found myself working for Ben sitting in on a, I think probably a half a million dollars worth of money, federal money, to run job training in the state of Maine, which was a lot of money in those days. And so we hired some people that had some trade union experience and knew something about the workplace and proceeded to run on the job training for a couple of years for Ben Dorsky. And then the opportunity, while I was working for Ben I had the opportunity to go to work for the University of Maine as the director of the Bureau of Labor Education.

The Bureau of Labor Education had been formed during the 1964 Johnson landslide, when for the first time ever the Democrats, I think, in Maine, took control of both the house and the senate. And labor, of course, had been active in that role. And as a reward they started a Bureau of Labor Education at the University, of which Senator Roger Snow became the first director. Senator Snow was from a very famous Portland family. He was a newspaperman by training, concerned in the Maine State Senate and became the first, first or second director. There was also a guy from Notre Dame. But after a while the opportunity came along and I became director of that program and ran it for probably seven years, I guess, out of the university. And

about that time, which would have been 1979, Ben Dorsky decided he was going to retire. And when he did, I had been teaching all these guys how to run their unions. And I decided that the opportunity was there to get elected president of the AFL-CIO, if I wanted to do it. And so I ran for the presidency in November of, in January of 1979 and was elected. And in retrospect I don't know whether that was the smartest decision I ever made in my life.

What happened was that when I was working at the university I was working with a guy by the name of, my boss was Bruce Poulton, who was the vice president for research and public service. And Bruce was a pretty savvy guy. He recommended that I not do it; he said, "You ought to stay with the university," you know, and he had also been very helpful to me in cautioning me. The university had the TIAA-CREF, which is a good investment program for college professors. And he recommended that I put ten percent of it in annuity and ninety percent of it in the stock market. I worked at the university for seven years and never touched that money. And when I retired from the AFL-CIO, I had a nest egg of almost a quarter of a million dollars, two hundred and fifty thousand just from leaving it alone, you know. Which was one of the things that helped me retire. So I'm sure that I would have done much better, if I had stayed with the university, financially. But I was young and foolish, and people who are young and foolish do young and foolish things, and I became president of the AFL-CIO in 1979. And I was very fortunate because the guy that was secretary-treasurer then was Ed Gorham, who is the current president of the Maine AFL-CIO. And Eddie was, has, has been and is a very savvy person around the legislature. So Eddie and I had an agreement: as secretary-treasurer he became the chief lobbyist. I would come to Augusta when I had to on occasion, and I'd run the unions. He'd run, and he'd run our legislative program. And that worked for twenty years. So it was, I guess all in all, things turned out the way they were supposed to turn out.

**GB:** I see. All right, now, from your, the first time you went to work for the AFL-CIO before leaving to go to work at the University of Maine, what were your impressions of the organization when you entered, how large was it, what sorts of things were they, well, you mentioned the issues that you got involved in. How prominent was it in Maine?

**CO:** I don't think it was as prominent as it became later, but it certainly was forceful. I mean pri-, and that was I think primarily due to Ben Dorsky, I mean, Dorsky was a dominant figure. If you look back at the labor law that was written from the 1930s up until the 1970s, which is the main body of labor law that we operate under today, all of that's got Dorsky's fingerprints all over it. I mean, he was a master of, lobbyist. He was a, he was a very, very clever and smart man and a very well-read man. He, but he knew the legislative procedure. And, you know, you've got to remember that in the years following, through the 1940s and following the war up through the fifties that Maine was primarily a rural Republican state, and rural Republican states don't generally favor labor organizations. And, but he was able to very tact-, carefully put together some real good legislation that protected women and children and child labor. He was able to put together a marvelous worker's compensation system. He was just a, so.

And at those times- when I first went to work for him, if you said the Maine State Federation of Labor, which it was called in those days, everybody, that *was* Ben Dorsky, he was the organization, I mean he was the, he was the labor czar, so to speak. And he spent all of his time at the legislature. He knew, you know, so it was primarily his organization, and it was going

through a change towards the end of his career when I came to work for him, but he was still a very powerful figure.

And I can remember people from all of the different political persuasions coming to talk to Ben about one thing or another, people like Louis Jalbert, people would come early in the morning to catch up with Ben. But he always had the inside track and generally knew what was going on. And he also had a very good way of having, he told me one time that he had somebody inside every department in Washington, so he had moles so to speak. And of course it was some of these moles that were responsible for getting us federal grants, such as the one I went to work for that allowed the AFL-CIO, during some very lean years, to continue to survive because we were doing other things than political action. We were doing job training, and so on and so forth. But he had the foresight and the ability to put together a structure that allowed him to do that.

**GB:** Now, Ben Dorsky was a Republican. What was your take on that? Because, you know, you said that, you know, a Republican state generally wouldn't be very friendly to organized labor.

**CO:** Well, you know, they were certainly going to be a lot friendlier to one of their own than with a Democrat, and Ben Dorsky knew that. I mean, he knew he couldn't be a Democrat, a labor Democrat in a Republican state. And so, you know, it was a party of convenience for him, I'm sure. And I don't know whether Ben ever went to a Republican convention, you know. I don't think he ever did, I don't recall him, and I remember he had several disputes with prominent Republicans. But I think that was the way it was; he had to work within the Republican Party to make things happen at the State House. And his focus was primarily the State House, you know. We were a state organization and, you know, everything that happened north of the Kittery River involved us, the Maine State Federation of Labor, later the AFL-CIO. And it was nice to have help from Washington, but primarily it all came out of Augusta.

**GB:** Now, did you get the sense that any Republicans realized or sensed that Ben Dorsky wasn't really one of their own? Or did it work quite nicely for him?

**CO:** Well, I think both the Republicans and the Democrats knew that Ben Dorsky wasn't one of their own. He was a, you know, he was a presence unto himself, you know. I mean, he had a way of doing things in his . . . .

I remember one time we were walking down the hall in Augusta, and the commissioner of education, I can't even remember who it was at the time, came walking by. And he said, "Hi Ben." And Ben looked at him and he said, "You're in big trouble with me." And he had that guy worried, you know. I mean, here's a guy that works for the State House, knows appropriations very well, and here's a commissioner of education whose budget depends on the same legislature, and Ben tells him that, you know, "you're in big trouble with me". So the guy walks away thinking that he's in big trouble with Dorsky and 'what did I do?' 'Why me?' 'What could I have done?' And he worries about this. And a couple of days later Dorsky calls him up and asks him for something that he wants out of the department of education and the guy says, "Sure, sure, I'm glad to help you out Ben." And, "What kind of trouble was that we were talking about the other day?" And Ben said, "Oh, I took care of it, don't worry." So, you know, the

innuendo, the inference, the way he would manipulate, I mean he was amazing in how he would do some of those things, you know. So he was very clever.

And he was, it was always that balancing. He did it with the union politics too, you know. When, towards the end of his career when he was getting ready to retire, or everybody thought he should retire, and he would go to a convention and he'd tell the guy, he'd tell one guy from the paper makers, you know, "You know, when I go, you're going to be the president of this organization." So the guy, they'd go to convention, they'd vote all their votes for Dorsky because the guy thought, you know, this is the way it's going to be. I'm going to be the next guy that's going to have that job, you know. And he'd turn around and tell another guy the same thing, you know. And so, you know, he might go to Archie LeBlanc up in East Millinocket, who is a paper worker. I know he did this, told Archie he was going to be president. And then he'd go to Rod Warren at the meat cutters down in Auburn and say, you know, "Well you been around a long time, Rod. Certainly you'll be taking over one of these days." So he'd tell all these guys these stories and work one against the other and nobody, in effect, you know, people ran against him, but they didn't have a chance, I mean. Bob Toole ran against him in, the last time in the sixties. And he primarily had the backing of the central labor councils and some building trades organizations, but Dorsky had all the votes, you know, because he was able to manipulate people and do some things that, that's politics, you know.

**GB:** Did those techniques ever catch up with him or did he pretty much always get away with it?

**CO:** He always got away with it as far as I know, you know. I mean I suppose, people would, you know, it would be years later that people would find out. Some guy would casually say, you know, "Ben told me one day I might be president." The guy would say, "What are you talking about? He told me I'd be president," you know. So he got away with it.

*End of Side A, Tape One*

*Side B, Tape One*

**GB:** Right, we're now on side B of the interview with Chick O'Leary. Okay, when did the Maine, was it the Maine State Federation of Labor, become the AFL-CIO?

**CO:** Let me see, it had to be in the 1950s when the, see the CIO, the CIO nationally had broken away with John and Walter Reuther and the reunification didn't come about until 1953 or '4 I think. And then the Maine AFL-CIO got around to re-, to reunification of bringing, trying to get everybody back in the tent about 1957. But then I don't think we actually changed the name to the AFL-CIO, the Maine AFL-CIO probably until maybe, maybe '79 when I became president. The Maine State Federation of Labor didn't seem to make much sense, though we could identify it with, you know, things were changing, we started to change the name to the Maine AFL-CIO, and most of these state organizations that were an affiliate of the national AFL-CIO had gone about and done the same thing, Massachusetts, Maine, Connecticut.

But it was during the, also during the 1960s, 1970s that it became not only a state organization but more of a regional organization for the purpose of lobbying for New England. We formed a,

and Ben was very instrumental in this, but the Northeast Council of the AFL-CIO was formed. And I remember the first meeting I went to was in Connecticut and, Ella Grasso<sup>1</sup> was governor and hosted our meeting, and it included Maine, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Massachusetts and later on then we added New York and New Jersey to become the Northeast Council of the AFL-CIO. And through a fluke we added Puerto Rico, which has nothing to do with the northeast but was a great place to go to meetings in January, so we did that one year. So that happened and it has probably been since 19-, the 19-, late 1970s, early 1980s been known as the Maine AFL-CIO.

**GB:** I see, so there were some substantive changes when that turnover, or change over occurred?

**CO:** Yeah, I think probably, you know, Ben had so dominated the organization. And, you know, it was kind of like, it was kind of like being majority leader in the senate after Lyndon Johnson. I mean somebody, somebody who's been such a dominant figure. We had to become more of an organization, so we became more of a working type board; we added more staff, we assigned more duties, we did things like that. We looked more like a, we looked more like your standard organization then than we had in the past. When Ben was there it looked more like a kingdom. But, so things changed and I think in the long run it turned out okay.

**GB:** I see. Now, do you know anything, I may be going back too far here, do you know anything about the relationships with the old CIO unions, like the textile workers union?

**CO:** Yeah, there was a, the rivalry that persisted between the AFL and the CIO nationally worked its way right into the state of Maine. I mean, when they split, the CIO had come to Maine in organizing and they were actually dual org-, you know, we had CIO and AFL organizers all fighting for the same people up here. You know, whether that was in the textile industry or the shoe industry or what have you, but particularly in the textile industry because textile was very prominent. There was a strong CIO presence. And when the reunification, the reunification occurred in the 1950s, George Jabar, who had been president of the CIO, pretty much agreed to the fact that Dorsky would continue as president. And George Jabar was quite a guy. He was from Waterville, had been a textile worker, was a real trade unionist. His son, George, Jr., now serves in the state house of representatives, is a lawyer in Waterville. They're a very famous family, very, a family of great athletes.

And, but the rivalry, the rivalry was there and I don't want to s-, I, you know, I hesitate to say hindered, but there was a certain amount of animosity between the AF of L and the CIO that was here. The AF of L regarded themselves, because they were craft unions, people that had, you know, could stand on their own, as the kings of the hill. And all of a sudden we've got these other unions that multi-leveled many skills, I mean, there was a bitterness I think. I know Ben had no love for a lot of these guys, you know. You know, Ben Dorsky wasn't going to ask Denis Blais to be his best man, you know; Mike Schoonjans, though I think he got along with Mike

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<sup>1</sup> Ella Tambussi Grasso, 1919-1981. Served in the Connecticut State House of Representatives from 1953-57; Secretary of State 1959-1971; U.S. Representative, 6<sup>th</sup> District 1971-1975; Governor of Connecticut from 1975-1980. Awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, posthumously, in 1981.

better than he did Denis. And after the reunification, although George Jabar had made a plea for unity in a really wonderful way, the CIO unions never came back into the AF of L in the state of Maine, never with any, you know, they continued to do their own thing.

And of course later on they did their own thing by all collapsing because the industries collapsed, you know. I mean, we lost most of the CIO unions whether it was the meat cutters or the textile workers or the shoe workers, I mean all those industries went in the seventies and eighties. And the only one I think that you could characterize as remaining would be the Bath Iron Works as a non-craft union because the paper makers, there had been two divisions, the pulp and sulfide workers and the paper makers, but they were pretty much craft-oriented, you know, rather than, one was originally CIO and one was the AF of L, but they ended up being more AF of L I think.

So when you go through that whole thing, at least in my mind, I can understand the rivalry and the bitterness that went on, you know, particularly during the organizing in the 1930s. I mean there was a real rivalry that would go on in all these little towns where you had a textile, American Woollen would have a mill in Lincoln and the AFL and CIO would be up there fighting over it, you know. And then when you had the great strike in Lewiston in 1937 that was primarily a CIO strike, and one of the guys that was leading the charge of the, was Al Barket, who later became political director of, the AFL-CIO's legislative, chief legislative political director, is what I want to say. So yeah, there was a lot of rivalry and there was some bitterness I think.

**GB:** Now, you mentioned Mike Schoonjans and Denis Blais. What were their positions within the organization?

**CO:** I think primarily in their own organizations they were business agents, you know. They were guys that were, they were the leaders of the locals that were, Denis might have been head of all the locals in Lewiston-Auburn and some of the other areas. And he was quite a character, quite a presence unto himself. I think Mike and Ben got along better. Mike Schoonjans later served on the Maine Labor Relations Board, and Ben had agreed to, or must have been instrumental in getting him the position. And then Mike had some other capacity within the state, he did some sort of state work I remember at one time, might have been a fact finder or something, but certainly had to be helped by Ben to do that so. But I don't think I ever heard of Ben recommending Denis for anything, you know. This was once again a marriage of, oh, when they got together at politicals, you know, it was always, "What's God damn Blais going to do?" You know, it was one of those things.

**GB:** I see. Now, you mentioned the exodus, I guess, of several industries in the '70-, from Maine in the seventies and eighties like meat packers and the textiles. What do you think caused that?

**CO:** Well, I think primarily it was, well, you had to look at the industry. The poultry industry just went south, you know. I mean they found that they could raise chickens, chickens for slaughter, a lot better in Arkansas than we could do in Maine, you know. And we got outfoxed I think, in the chicken industry, and lost that one. And I think the shoe industry, as the, as an

industry that had sustained itself through two world wars, you know, whether that was making leisure shoes or making shoes for the military or so on and so forth. When we went into the period of the Cold War and with the expansion of trade and the exploitation of cheap labor, you know, American manufacturers found out they could make these shoes a lot cheaper overseas or in where have you, than they could in Maine or New England. And so they did just that. I mean, the beginning of international trade probably goes back a long, you know, it goes back a long way but I mean af-, during the peace and prosperity following WWII then, you know, you can get cheap labor wherever you can get it.

And I remember, I mean, if you walk into a store today, I mean, you can't find a pair of shoes made in the United States, it's very difficult. You can't find a mens sport shirt, a polo shirt made. They're all made in Taiwan or someplace else. Although the soccer balls I remember were made in Trinidad I think or Haiti, the American baseballs were all made in the Caribbean. All of this stuff's made overseas and made by young kids working for next to nothing. Same is true with Mexican labor, you know. So some, all of this, this change was bound to occur, you know. And if you look at the state of Maine today, we still have the paper companies because they still need the wood, I mean, and they, you know, and they're still crying poverty and all this stuff. They always cry about, "we won't build another mill here, we'll build it in the south if you don't give us a tax concession". The same argument they used when Dorsky was president. But we would, you know th . . . .

And then we have Bath Iron Works and the Portsmouth Naval Yard, which are two federal installations that if both of those shut down tomorrow we'd be in deep doo-doo, you know. Because there's a lot that depends upon the procurement practices and the payrolls that come out of those yards, you know; these guys make good money.

And, you know, the nature of the economy today, I mean I don't know, I mean, how well people can live on these MBNA and outfits like that that now own Belfast and set up the community. You know, the telemarketers, the people that call you up and try, trying to buy another one of their credit cards at the 2.9 percent introductory rate. Back when McKernan was governor we had a law that capped what you could make, what you could apply for interest to credit cards. And in order to get MBNA to move into the state of Maine, very conveniently in Augusta one afternoon there was a hearing and a bill that only the AFL-CIO stood up and opposed, that took that cap off the credit cards. The next year the MBNA people moved in, in the same year, and that's another ball game. And then, you know, these same people, four or five of those executives made huge contributions in the same year to the reelection of Senator Snowe, so, you know.

And now the University of Maine is right in bed with MBNA so, you know, they have a, not only have a campus in Belfast that they named after Fred Hutchinson, who used to be president up here. And I always thought they ought to call it Usury U, you know, because the rates they charge. I mean, I have no love for credit card companies, people, you know. When they're sending out credit cards, they send you out a blank check in the mail, I mean, that say 2.9 percent interest on this. So if you're, if you're down to your last pack of cigarettes and you're sitting there with no job and no prospects for your future, you get four or five of these checks in the mail, what are you going to do, you know? I mean, I think it ought to be outlawed, but, maybe

next time around. So we have a changing economy. But it was during those years that I think we lost those industries that we were going to lose anyway eventually.

**GB:** And do you think that shift over to an economy, you know, based on companies like MBNA, is proving detrimental to the economy of the state?

**CO:** I can't figure out the economy of the state any more, you know. I mean, really, I mean, I don't, I mean I take a ride around this community, Bangor and all this area, and I see these two hundred and fifty thousand dollar homes. And I'm saying, "Where are these people coming from," you know? They can't all be surgeons, you know? And I'm sure, I don't think we got that many drug dealers, you know, so where are these people getting the money to build these houses, you know? I mean, I don't know, you know, I think Bangor is still pretty much a warehouse community. I think it still supplies the, you know, but the economy has changed so much, too. I mean, when I was a kid, there was a single bread winner in the home. Now the mother, the father, the kids all work, and it's a struggle, you know. Everybody in the family works. We have the latchkey kids that come home in the afternoon because everybody else is working, and they're working to buy the next new thing, and, you know, I don't think it's a very healthy state. But that's only my opinion.

**GB:** I see, all right. Now get back on track. When you were the director of the Bureau of Labor Education at the University of Maine, did you still have strong ties to the AFL-CIO?

**CO:** Oh yeah, I used to run all their, I used to run, most of the training programs that we were in were for the AFL-CIO. Because it was for workers, it was worker education. And the only workers that were organized were the union workers so nobody else wanted education. So it ended up being things like steward's training, or how do you process a grievance, or labor history or stuff like that.

**GB:** I see, I see. All right.

**CO:** So it was during those years, of course, that I made all of my contacts in labor that I ultimately used to get elected.

**GB:** Really?

**CO:** Yeah.

**GB:** And who were some of those contacts?

**CO:** Well, they were all those people I was running training programs for. I mean, they were, and we put together a book called The Worker's Guide to Labor Law, which explained employment compensation, worker's compensation, and safety legislation. And the two guys that put that book together for me were a guy by the name of Jim Tierney and Ralph Tucker. And Tierney went on later to be majority leader in the house and run for governor, and Tucker is still with the firm of McTeague, Higbee in Brunswick, which is probably the top worker's compensation firm in the state.

So I made some political contacts, and as we ran the summer training institutes people like Gary Cook, who later became vice president of the paper worker's union of the United States and the primary Maine guy, went through those programs. As did virtually everybody that had anything to do with labor in the last twenty years went through one or two of our summer institutes, so it was good politics, you know. I didn't plan on it being good politics, but it ended up that way, you know.

**GB:** And so you became president of the AFL-CIO in 1979?

**CO:** Right.

**GB:** All right. And at that time, correct me if I'm wrong, John Hanson took over your job as director of labor education?

**CO:** That's correct.

**GB:** At University of Maine, right. And, do you know him pretty well?

**CO:** Yup.

**GB:** All right. How had the concerns of organized labor in Maine changed from the time you had, you know, first entered the Maine State Federation of Labor to when you became the president of the AFL-CIO?

**CO:** I think we had the problem more of dealing with the, with the transition in the economy. We had more, we had to deal with more of these workers that were being displaced. So we did a lot of training, and we did a lot of in house type of stuff to try and accommodate our members who were losing their jobs. So that became a very different function. We became more of a service organization, not just a lobbying organization, but more of a service organization and going out and working directly with unions. And I think that was one of the primary changes, and we still had some of the old battles. When I was first elected, we had the "Right to Work" fight, in 1980 I think it was. This was a piece of legislation that we have defeated in Maine seven times and, once in referendum and seven times in the legislature; we had that battle recur. But I think we became more of a service organization and learned to work more with local unions than the Maine State Federation of Labor had to do in the past. And it was because of this hands on, this more direct relationship with the unions that, I think it was very beneficial for all of us. We had a series of strikes, one in Bucksport, one in Winslow, almost immediately after I became president, and in both of those cases we were able to rally the other unions around to make sure that we had support, money and food, for the striking workers.

And that continued and went through all of my term as presidency, of course culminating in the worst strike in 1988 at International Paper. We were very supportive of Local 14, the paper workers that was involved in that strike, and ultimately lost not only the strike but lost the right to represent those workers, and many of those people lost the right to, lost their jobs because of scabs. And this was the inability of a big international union to take on the biggest paper maker

in the world at the time. But here was a company that was willing to lose millions and millions of dollars, International Paper, to prove that they could beat this union, and they did. And that mill to this day remains non-union. International Paper has now purchased Champion in Bucksport, and I think this just will be more difficulty for those workers. One of the first things they did when they made that purchase, they fired all the woods crew, and they fired the woods crew because those are the people that are non-union, so. I mean, this is still a cut throat business. I mean, you know, these big corporations hate unions. They want to do it their way, and their way is usually that people are disposable. It doesn't matter who the hell you are. You can go, and they can get rid of you, and the bottom line is the bottom line, and people aren't very important, in that.

So, I think the fact that during those years we became a service organization was very important because we became supportive of one another and we pulled a lot of people in. And one of the interesting things to me was that, as we pulled people in, was to find out how little they knew about other unions, you know. The building trades, for example, electricians, the carpenters, pretty much independent on their own. They do everything, you know, I mean if you're an electrician, you're an electrician. You can work in Bangor, Maine, you can go to Chicago, you've got work in Chicago. That's not true of other workers, you know. And I think that when the electrical workers around learned that the state workers didn't have the right to strike, or you know, they didn't have any, many of the rights that they have, they were very supportive of them. But there was more of an awareness that different people needed help at different levels in this organization, you know.

**GB:** I see. Have the numbers changed significantly?

**CO:** The numbers changed, the numbers changed significantly, and once again this was due to the foresight of Ben Dorsky, not me. And that was that during the 1960s President Kennedy had first given through executive order the right of federal employees to engage in collective bargaining, he gave them that right. And then Ben, working through the state legislature had gotten the right for fire fighters to engage in collective bargaining. He broadened that in '64 or '66, I can't remember, in the 1960s to include, the first major piece of legislation was the Maine Municipal Labor Relations Act, and this allowed all of the public works people, all of the teachers, anybody employed by a municipality to be organized into unions. And then later on we were able to make that more inclusive to the include all of the state workers and all of the county workers and judicial workers.

So what happened, as the private sector trade unions were declining we still had the base of the paper makers and the ship yards, but we added to that a huge influx of state workers so that when the, in '89 when the Maine State Employees Association became the Service Employees International Union, we brought in ten thousand new members. We had already brought in AFSCME, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees was another five thousand members, so the numbers because of Dorsky's foresight and because of the organizing that had taken place the public employees replaced the private sector people. Now, of course, that has implications when you look at it economically, because these are all tax payer provided jobs, but they're all jobs that are necessary. But our members actually grew during those years because of this.

But people don't have to affiliate with the AFL-CIO. It's a choice, you know, and so it was always the, it was always a battle to get people in. I mean, I think if I had any successes, one of the successes I had was to get everybody under the same tent temporarily. I mean, I think to this day continues, the state employees, all the state employees, all the county employees, everybody's in the AFL-CIO including the Teamsters. The Teamsters had been thrown out during the Hoffa's years, and when they came back in we had, we had been appealing and trying to get the Teamsters back in, we got them in fairly quickly in the state organization. So everybody's under the same tent up here and working from the same program anyway, which was good, is good.

**GB:** Do you recall that relationship with the Teamsters back when, you know, Jimmy Hoffa was at the head?

**CO:** I don't recall it because I only recall talking to Ben about it. Back in 1946 or '48 there was a municipal strike and, in Portland, some sort of a strike that Hoffa got his hands into anyway. And he came to Portland and called Ben Dorsky up, and I said, "What did you do?" And I don't think Ben told him in these words, but I think he wanted to tell him, "The best thing you can do is get the hell out of the state of Maine." And he did. But the Teamsters of course had to go through those years of Hoffa and so on and so forth, and there's no apologies for the fact that some of these guys were gangsters, you know. And of course that was the picture that industry wanted to paint of organized labor, you know, that we were all aligned with the mob, you know, that everybody was a crook, you know, with these guys stealing from you, all this stuff.

And every now and then, you know, we would have an instance where we had a treasurer of a local union that would steal stuff, you know. But I mean, it's like, you know, we had more bank presidents however that were, where the, you know, if you were the bank president and you embezzled, or if you were a bank officer and you embezzled it would probably, if it appeared in the newspaper it would be on page forty-six of the *Bangor Daily*. If you were a steward of a union and you stole five hundred dollars from the local treasury of the local union, you'd be on page one, you know. You know, union criminal, you know, it was all this crap. And the reason for that of course is that the advertisers, the people that owned the newspapers are big money, you know, and nobody's ever going to make, you know, they're never going to sell newspapers saying unions are the greatest thing in the world, so, or sell advertising.

**GB:** I see. What part do the Teamsters play today?

**CO:** They're affiliated with the AFL-CIO, and they're, I think during the days of Hoffa when we thought of them as primarily over the road drivers, they're a very big union today both in the public sector where they will have some people, bus drivers and so on and so forth in some towns. But United Parcel Service, UPS, all of those people are Teamsters. And so in addition to your over the road drivers you will have whole segments like UPS that are all Teamsters, and so they're pretty big and pretty powerful. And pretty cooperative, I mean, the guy that is current head of the Teamsters. I think there's a real good working relationship with the Teamsters in Maine anyway.

**GB:** I see. On a different vein, I know that the endorsement and support of organized labor has for a long time been very important to political candidates.

**CO:** At least Democrats.

**GB:** Yeah, yeah. Do you recall some of the, some of the candidates, I guess gubernatorial or senatorial or for congress, congressional candidates, that you've been involved with or the group has been seriously involved with over the years? Do any stand out in your mind?

**CO:** Yeah, I think probably, well, in my time probably the most, I lived during the Brennan years, you know. Never throw your Brennan signs away because he's always running. Well, Joe became governor about the same time I became president, and for the first eight years he was governor when I was president of the AFL-CIO. We didn't always have the best working relationship, but he always got our endorsement and was a good governor. And one of the greatest things that Joe Brennan ever did was he appointed George Mitchell to the United States senate, and then Mitchell went on to have his own career as a United States senator. So I think probably the, and become such a dominant figure in this time, George Mitchell, and then his decision not to run and so on and so forth. I think George Mitchell probably was the single most important figure that, you know, in my relationship with people.

And I think if you look back beyond that I think Ben Dorsky would have said and had said it to me that Ed Muskie was the most important figure that appeared in his time. And for different reasons, you know. I mean, what do you remember about these people? I mean, I think Ed Muskie will be remembered as a statesman, someone who ended up as secretary of state under Jimmy Carter. But I think as far as a legacy when I think of Ed Muskie, I think of the guy that cleaned up the rivers. I mean, that is, you know, I mean, you can't imagine how bad the rivers were, you know. I mean, you couldn't swim, when I was a kid you couldn't swim in these rivers. They were open sewers, you know, they were filthy. I mean, the paper companies dumped all their toxic materials into them, municipalities discharged all their waste in them, and it was Ed Muskie that cleaned up the rivers. And I think if you look back at George Mitchell's career, I think he's going to be remembered for a lot of things, but his role in the, after he left the senate his role as a, in the Irish peace process is going to be a major part of George's legacy. And I don't think he's done yet, you know. Who knows what will happen with George.

**GB:** Well he's on the list as a possible vice presidential nominee.

**CO:** Anybody that can father a child at sixty-five, probably be on anybody's list. I mean, he's a, but I think the endorsement has always been important to those people, particularly Democrats. It was very difficult to endorse a Republican. There haven't been many Republicans who cared a damn about the working people. And when they did, it would be still very difficult to get an endorsement for them. I think there have been instances where there have been Republican politicians that have done some wonderful things and been very good. I think of, Olympia Snowe, for example, I think has done some good things for workers and has had an outstanding record as a Republican. I don't, I remember during 1988, during the Jay strike, and Senator Cohen was still in the senate at the time, and we wanted to prohibit the use of scabs. And

we were trying to get that legislation introduced and trying to get a fair hearing and trying to get him to be supportive of that. He gave me a bunch of crap, you know. I didn't think he was primarily interested in it, and, you know, he was a Republican, you know, I mean that was it, you know. He had bigger fish to fry than worrying about twenty five hundred people in Maine that were his constituents, you know. It was very difficult to get any politicians to go up there, you know, during those years.

**GB:** So it didn't help out that you knew Bill Cohen when you were young?

**CO:** No, no.

**GB:** Didn't work to lobby for him.

**CO:** Yeah, and you know I remember seeing Billy and running into him in airports and talking, and we were friendly. But, you know, when the rubber bit the road, I had an issue that was anathema really to the Republicans, you know. They weren't going to give workers any rights. And he was a Republican, you know. Now he's secretary of defense, you know, well that's great, you know, I'm proud of him. I'm glad he got that great job, but when he was in the senate and he could have made a difference for twenty-five hundred people in Jay, he didn't do it, you know. But that's the way it goes.

**GB:** Now about Muskie's environmental legislation, did anyone within the organization, within organized labor see, was anyone opposed to that? Because, you know, there's often been that side, sort of conflict between, you know, the industrial interest and environmental interest, you know. What was it, paychecks or pickerel was the slogan?

**CO:** I think that there were, yeah, I th-, I, definitely there were people that were opposed to it in organized labor because they saw it as a threat. Any time you talked about environmental legislation, particularly the paper makers, they saw it as a threat to their jobs. And it didn't, it didn't haunt Ed Muskie as much as it did Bill Hathaway. And Bill Hathaway, I think, you know, I think Bill Hathaway got more burned in that than Ed did, and I think it was once again one of those pieces, some of the legislation Dorsky was able to frame in the terms of jobs, you know. I mean, somebody's got to build all these plants, you know, to take care of the sewerage and it's going to be you guys, you know. Of course chances are it wasn't those guys, it was Ciambro, you know, some non-union contractor.

But I think, I think Ben really liked Ed Muskie, loved Ed Muskie might be a better word, and I don't think he'd ever say a bad word against him. But I, you know, there were divisions in the trade unions about environmental legislation. There still are to this day, you know? I mean, if you try to, you know, I mean what would happen is if you said you can't dump toxics into the river, the company would get all the workers together and say, "You know what's going to happen, boys, if we have that legislation. It's going to cost us millions of dollars more to run this plant, and we're going to have lay off two hundred men the minimum." Well, you know, if you're looking at a work force of, everybody's making, everybody's making fifty thousand dollars a year when the average annual income's closer to ten, and they got the best job in town with nowhere to go, you know, what do you think that, you know, they're going to be opposed to

the legislation, you know. I mean, a paper maker who's making fifty grand a year loses his job as a paper maker, you can't go anywhere, you know? So it became a real bread and butter. It might have been payrolls or pickerels to the academics who studied these things, but to the people on the floor of a paper mill it was my job, my ass, and I'm going to lose it if this environmental crap goes through, you know. I don't care if the river's clean. I'm eating well, I've got two snowmobiles and a pickup truck, you know. So I think it came down to that. But I mean then you had a whole series of things, too, that happened, you know, you know, the committee of environmental disasters like Love Canal and things like that I mean, make you think, you know.

**GB:** Could you pause for a second and let me put another tape . . . .

*End of Side B, Tape One  
Side A, Tape Two*

**GB:** All right, and we are now on tape two. So would you say that the leaders and administrators within organized labor were I guess, less averse to environmental legislation than some of the workers were?

**CO:** Yeah, I would say that's probably true, I think. Everything is political, you know, I mean, so everything had to be, you had to take all of this into consideration, you know. I think that the people that were the leaders of organized labor were probably out in front of some of the people who were the rank and file, and they were cautious not to get too far out in front because they'd be in big trouble. But I think they, particularly someone like Ben, I think Ben really saw the big picture of many things that affected the state, you know, so I think that he would be, he would be the type of person that was, that was more supportive of this type of legislation, you know. Even with the risks involved in it, you know.

**GB:** I see.

**CO:** Of course if you're king there's not much risk that's involved, and Ben pretty much was king of the hill, you know. I mean he, you got to remember that we're talking about legislation, when, in the 1970s, and Ben had been president of the State Federation since 1937. I mean he became president of the AF- of the State Federation of Labor the year I was born and held it for me until I was old enough to take it over, you know. And that's a lot of time, '37 to '79, you know.

**GB:** Forty-two years, that's amazing, that's amazing. So he must, he must have been either very young when he took the position or very old when he left.

**CO:** He was both, yeah. He had started out as a motion picture camera operator in the 1930s, and in those days that was a very dangerous occupation. I mean, they used phosphorus and all this other stuff. But he did that at the Bangor theaters and became active then in organizing other theater projectionists and became president first of the Bangor City Labor Council I think in '35 and then in '37 became president of the State Federation. So yeah, I mean his term, he, a lot of years of seeing a lot of different things. And he, Ben was a very well read guy, but he also,

he had, because you've got to interact and see a lot of different things happen at the state legislature, you know, whether it was dealing with the grange or dealing with agricultural interests or dealing with the temperance society and Martin Buber or whoever you, you know, he got to see a big, big picture of how the state operated, how the state worked, and I don't think he ever lost sight of that. Even at the end of his career he had a, he had a way of looking at things that could put it in perspective for the long run, you know.

**GB:** I see. Now, did you say that you had, I thought of this when you said that he took over, that he became president in 1937, did you say that you had written your graduate thesis on the advent of labor, organized labor in Maine in the thirties?

**CO:** Right.

**GB:** Is that it?

**CO:** Right.

**GB:** Was Ben Dorsky instrumental in that?

**CO:** Well, the guy that was primarily instrumental in that was the professor at the university by the name of John Hakola who also wrote an excellent book on the history of Mt. Katahdin. But John Hakola was a mentor of mine, and I was working, looking for a thesis topic, and he suggested that I deal with Ben. And I remember I was, Ben said, "There's some stuff down in the cellar that might be of interest to you," and it was akin to, say, like one of the early discoverers of the pyramids, you know. I think if you go out in the desert and you dig around there you might find something. Because I went down in the cellar of the State Federation of Labor that year and found records from 1905 to nineteen fifty-something, all packaged, boxes, correspondence, all of this stuff. And, you know, writing a thesis when you make a major find of that kind, though it's still difficult, was pretty simplified as far as primary sources. I had them all, you know.

So, and what we did, John Hakola, who, I wrote my thesis, but John did something more than that. He catalogued all of that information, and we gave it, I talked Ben into, Ben and I worked, and John, worked together, into giving it to the University of Maine for their archives. And so they have all of this material going back, which is fascinating material to look at and review as a historian because it shows the different organizing techniques of what they were doing during the 1930s and all of the political stuff. And you've got to remember that all of this type of material between 19-, oh, the twenties and the thirties and the forties and the fifties, that much of the business we did was by letter. Not by fax, not by, there were no computers, so, and there were no telephone, we didn't do business on the telephone like we did later on, you know. So this exchange of information between people, the back and forth correspondence would paint a picture of what was happening. So it's, so that was very valuable. But I'd say John Hakola pushed me into it and Ben provided all the primary materials for my thesis.

**GB:** I see, I see. And basically how did organized labor get started in Maine? I know that's kind of a loaded question, I mean you wrote an entire thesis on it. Could you give me kind of a

quick summary background?

**CO:** Well, primarily the organized, what we call organized labor in Maine probably goes back, one of the, the first strike that ever occurred in the state of Maine occurred off the, in the country, maybe in the new world occurred off a fishing boat off the Maine coast about 1605 or something like that. It was way back. But the organization of labor pretty much in the early days followed craft lines, the carpenters, the brick masons, the laborers, the electrician, the quarry workers, the people that cut mar-, granite, the railroad people, the engineers, the conductors. All of these industries, all of these occupations that were organized, one of the first cohesive types to bring them all together before the Maine Federation of, before the federation of any kind, were the Knights of Labor in the 1800s, 1860s, 1870s, 1880s, was a very, very prominent organization in Maine. A guy by the name of Charlie Schontras has done an excellent study of that, and Charlie was a professor at the university.

But the craft type organizing was there from the beginning, and then it was in the 1930s first with the National Industrial Recovery Act where Roosevelt in a trade off with industry gave workers the right to organize, and that piece of legislation was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court as a restriction on trade I think. But it was after that in 1935 that the Wagner Act, the National Labor Relations Act was passed, and that was kind of the, Ben used to say, the Magna Carta of trade unions because it opened the door. And so from the mid 1930s the amount of organizing that went on in the state was very intense. They tried to organize everything. And the paper industry was organized fairly quickly but I don't think that organ-, that didn't culminate until '54 with the organization of S.D. Warren in Westbrook, but once you've organized the paper industry and the railroads were organized and you had the craft workers to begin with, and then the textile and the shoes, it just built. And then the natural progression as we moved more into the end of the twentieth century was these public workers that we took in. So in a nutshell that's how it happened.

**GB:** I see, wow, that's interesting. All right, I just have a few more questions. I meant to ask you before and I got a little sidetracked, did you ever get a chance to meet Ed Muskie yourself?

**CO:** Yeah, I met, I met Senator Muskie on many different occasions both when he was campaigning and when he was in the senate. And then I served on a committee with him after he left the senate having to do with the providing of legal services to poor people. One year, Senator Muskie, Elmer Violette, John Martin, and myself had a panel that went around and tried to work out some recommendations that Ed as chairman later made to the state legislature about providing more legal services for the poor. But I remember the senator from some of his later campaigns and, coming to visit us at the Bureau of Labor Education and speaking and so on and so forth. And I remember being in Madawaska one time, and he was supposed to be there at such and such a time, and he was always late. He was always late, and then once he started to talk, he'd never stop, you know. But he was a fabulous, he was a fabulous speaker, orator, and, but after two hours it wore out, you know. He was a great campaigner, and that was the context I knew him in. I didn't know him in the context of working on legislation or matters like Ben might have known him in, you know. Not, I didn't know him the same way obviously I knew George Mitchell or later politicians.

**GB:** So you must have worked with Muskie on the Maine Committee on Legal Needs?

**CO:** That was it, yeah, yeah.

**GB:** What did you actually accomplish with that group? What did -?

**CO:** Well, I think one, I think one of the things that we accomplished was, at least in my recollection, was that we made the legal community more aware of some of the needs of the citizens of the state of Maine and some of the areas where they were not providing services, or the people weren't getting legal services. And I think in, I think in some ways that this resulted in large law firms being more cognizant of this and also of lawyers providing more *pro bono* services for poor people. So I think it did at the time make a contribution, and it was largely, you know, if you had Ed Muskie as chair person of this and he was recommending a plan of action to the legislature and he'd do it in a forceful way, you knew that there were going to be changes, you know.

**GB:** When was that that you worked on that?

**CO:** God, you know, I can't even remember. It must have been, it must have been the mid-, '84, '85, in that period of time.

**GB:** I see, I see. And how, does that committee still exist?

**CO:** I don't know.

**GB:** How large was the committee? You had -

**CO:** I don't remember how large. I remember going to hearings up north, and I remember one particular one in Caribou that John and Elmer and I and Ed were at, but the full committee was larger. But we were parceled, you know, we would, different people would take different geographical hearings. So that's the one that comes quickly to mind probably because I saw a picture of it recently, too. I came across a picture of the four of us sitting together.

**GB:** Really. What were your personal impressions of Muskie?

**CO:** I think I was at the age of probably being in awe of somebody you would, you know, I was in awe of Ed Muskie. He was such a, he was such a physical presence in the room for one thing. He was a very tall man; he took up a lot of space. He had a very resonant voice, I mean he had a commanding presence, and he could say, he had full command of the English language. And when he was angry, you knew it, you know. So, yeah, I think he had a real awe-striking presence.

**GB:** Was he easy to work with?

**CO:** I don't think, I have never heard anybody that said Ed Muskie was easy to work with. You know, I think he probably was very difficult to work with. In the capacity that I was

working as the committee member with him, he was not difficult to work with because he was going to do it his way and we were all on for the ride, you know. So in that regard he was easy to work with.

**GB:** Oh, so he really just kind of took hold of that committee and went with it.

**CO:** Yeah, yeah, I mean, he would conduct the hearing.

**GB:** All right, finally I have one more question. You were telling me before we turned on the tape about this New England Folklore Archives and some information that's contained within that. Could you kind of tell me about that again so we can get it on record with the tape?

**CO:** Sure. Back in the 1960s, probably the latter part of the sixties, early part of the seventies, under a grant, I think from the Adult Education Act, we did some recordings of labor history material. And I was working with Ben at the time and I think had written the grant or I had organized it, and it was in conjunction with Sandy Ives, who was the director of the Northeast Folklore Studies Center at the University of Maine. And I did some interviews, Jay McCloskey who is now U.S. federal attorney did some interviews, there was somebody else that did some interviews, and there were two sets of these I think. And I know, I remember I interviewed George Jabar, and I had interviewed Ben Dorsky on one or two occasions. And later on they were, but this material would add to an understanding of the period and I'm sure would be available through the university.

**GB:** All right, great. Well, I'm done with my questions, so do you have any final remarks you'd like to make, anything you'd like to add or emphasize?

**CO:** No, I think I've told you everything that I can tell you today. I think it's all been very interesting.

**GB:** All right, well, it certainly has. Thank you very much.

**CO:** Well thank you, you've been a good interviewer.

*End of Interview*