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**U.16 Long Civil Rights Movement:  
The Women's Movement in the South**

Interview U-0487  
Norma Jennings  
27 May 2010

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## ABSTRACT – NORMA JENNINGS

Norma “Corky” Jennings grew up in Maryville, TN in the 1940s. Jennings discusses her childhood in Maryville, TN. She describes her marriage, being a young mother, and her divorce from her husband. She talks about her first job at a sewing factory in Arkansas, as well as her subsequent move back to Tennessee and getting hired at the Levi’s jeans factory. She then tells the story of the wildcat strike in 1979. She also discusses her involvement in the Tennessee Committee on Occupational Safety and Health.

FIELD NOTES – NORMA JENNINGS  
(compiled May 28, 2010)

Interviewee: Norma Jennings

Interviewer: Jessie Wilkerson

Interview Date: May 27, 2010

Location: Maryville, TN

THE INTERVIEWEE. Norma “Corky” Jennings grew up in Maryville, TN in the 1940s. In the 1970s she began working at the Levi’s factory, where she joined the United Garment Workers of America, Local 402 and eventually became president of the local. She was fired from the plant after leading a wildcat strike. Later, she worked for the Tennessee Committee on Occupational Safety and Health and successfully lobbied for a “right-to-know” chemical safety law in Tennessee.

THE INTERVIEWER. Jessie Wilkerson is a graduate student in the Department of History at UNC-Chapel Hill, currently conducting research for her dissertation which will explore social justice activism in southern Appalachia, with special attention to women’s activism, from the late 1960s through the 1990s.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. I met Ms. Jennings at her home in Maryville, TN. Jennings and I have never met in person, but we have spoken on the phone several times and have written to one another. Jennings spoke candidly about the hardships in her life, as well as the struggles that she as overcome.

CONTENT OF THE INTERVIEW. Jennings discusses her childhood in Maryville, TN, and why she decided to marry at a young age. She describes her marriage, being a young mother, and her divorce from her husband. She talks about her first job at a sewing factory in Arkansas, as well as her subsequent move back to Tennessee and getting hired at the Levi’s jeans factory. She then tells the story of the wildcat strike in 1979. She also discusses her involvement in the Tennessee Committee on Occupational Safety and Health.

**Interviewee: Norma Jennings**

**Interviewer: Jessica Wilkerson**

**Interview date: May 27, 2010**

**Location: Maryville, TN**

**Length: 1 disc, approximately 82 minutes**

Jessica Wilkerson: It's May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2010, and this is Jessica Wilkerson and I am interviewing Norma Jennings. I just would like to start, Norma, by asking you what your childhood experience was like.

Norma Jennings: It was fairly happy--middle class. My dad worked for the newspaper here in town, and my mother, after I was about fourteen, she started carrying papers for the same. They had motor routes then and she did that. I had two younger sisters. We all went to Everett to school, and I got married the year I was fifteen, right before my sixteenth birthday. He had graduated and enlisted in the Air Force, but when I was a child, there was just one disruption at one time. We moved to Greeneville, Tennessee for about a year-and-a-half and then back to Maryville, right back in school with the people I knew. I didn't like the move to Greeneville very much.

JW: Why did you move there?

NJ: My dad's job. At that time, he worked for the *Knoxville Journal* and he delivered the bundles and took care of the carriers and all that. Then he got an opportunity to get a job with the *Daily Times* and he moved back and took that job. He had a six-week break between jobs then. He sold a little cabin he had on the lake, and we spent six weeks in the Midwest, just touring Texas down into Juarez and then the states

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all up through there. We got to go to the Grand Canyon and several things like that. That was about it then, until I jumped up and got married [laughter]. We had two children in two years, and he was in the Air Force and we traveled some. That's about it with my childhood.

JW: So you were young when you got married.

NJ: Very young.

JW: What was that decision like?

NJ: Impulse. He was leaving and you're madly in love, and he's going in the Air Force; he had just graduated that year. He's going in the Air Force, and so we jumped up and eloped to Georgia. We were supposed to just be his last day here and we went down there and got married. I had told my folks we were going to the mountains, and I took my bathing suit and all this good stuff. We stopped and wet it in a restroom in a service station on the way home. We weren't going to tell them until after he come back from basic training, and I couldn't keep it that long, so I told them about three days later that we had gotten married.

JW: How did they react?

NJ: I thought they'd just be tickled to death, and that's the only time I've ever seen my mother cry except when her father died. She did what most parents would do-- heartbroken, you know. You've jumped into something and you don't know what you're even getting into. They didn't have a problem with him; it was just us getting married that young. I mean, he was just seventeen. The first thing, my mother said, "Oh, God, are you pregnant?" "No, we've only had sex once. Can you get pregnant?" [Laughter]

JW: [Laughter]

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NJ: She said one time's all it takes, but I wasn't; we used something. Oh! But stuff like that, you know, that's how ignorant we were. We were smart enough to use something, but that one time, the night before he left, and thank goodness I didn't get pregnant. The whole family was just whispering, "I'm sure she is. They wouldn't have got married," but it was fifteen months later before we had a child, so we got through that okay.

JW: My grandmother did a similar thing--went and got eloped; she was still in high school. They kept it a secret because she wouldn't be able to keep going to high school if she was married; there was some law--.

NJ: No, they would let me go, but you're ostracized. The girls I used to run around with, their parents didn't want them running around with a married woman. He was in Biloxi, Mississippi and he took basic training, and then he became an instructor down there on the radar equipment. I entered high school down there. It was a very small community and tight-knit, and I was let know pretty much the first week they don't want a married woman in there--you're contaminating their children. They might jump up and get married, so they didn't want it. It got to be unbearable; I just finally quit. I mean, they'd give out assignments and ignore me. I'd give a test and they'd swear it was lost. You know, just stuff like that. So if you don't have a grade, everything I got the first six weeks I went there was incomplete, even though I was there every day and took every test. They all got lost somewhere, so I quit. It was years later, I think in the seventies, when I finally went over and took my GED and got it. I did that just to go ahead and appease my parents that I did have something, but that was about it.

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JW: So how did you end up back in Tennessee? Did you wait?--so you were with your husband in--?

NJ: Up until 1961, and we were in Little Rock, Arkansas; that's where we were living. He was supposedly bowling on a bowling team, and he wanted another child. And by then, ours were about four and five, so I agreed. We did; I got pregnant and then he announces when I'm six months pregnant that I really need to go home to my folks because he's met somebody he's madly in love with. The bowling's not been bowling, and he's drinking and he had written a bunch of bad checks. I called my folks and they came and got me, and I came back here and had my son here. Then, he got court-martialed. He had taken a lot of money and he had also wrote a whole bunch of bad checks and he had gambling debts. He got court-martialed, and they sent him to Leavenworth for a year. So, when I had the baby and when it was six weeks old, I went back to Little Rock because I was drawing for the children. It was a big amount of money; I think it was a hundred and thirty-seven dollars a month, [laughter] but I got into public housing out there and there were sewing factories out there. I went back; my folks took me back and we found out when we got there, he had lost all of our furniture and everything in storage. So my mom went down to Goodwill and we got enough for us to make it on. I stayed out there because I wanted to be independent, and the stigma of what all had happened was here. I got a job at a sewing factory. We could afford the public housing with my Air Force check, and then the other took care of everything else. As long as he was in prison, I could draw the check. Nothing changed; he was just writing to the other woman all the time. She was leaving her husband with her three children and that sort of thing.

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I stayed out there until he got out of prison, but I got a job at a sewing factory. It was some job, too. I had never worked in that kind of work. I had worked at a little root beer stand occasionally to make a little extra money [laughter]. I didn't have a ride to begin with, so I had to walk to work every day, and it meant going across the river there in Little Rock, from North Little Rock to Little Rock to get to this sewing factory. I figured out after a while, some of the women at the factory told me it was a lot shorter if you walked the railroad trestle, but you could only do it at these hours because then the train comes. So I did the railroad trestle, and then I finally met a lady that would give me a ride. She picked up several people in that area. I got a ride to work then, but I worked out there about a year-and-a-half and got the experience. When he got out of prison and nothing was changing, I had saved enough money by working to come back here, so my mother and dad came with the U-haul trailer and just brought us back. I stayed with them for two months, and then I got on at Levi's because I was experienced. I worked out there for seventeen-and-a-half years until they fired me.

JW: Now how old were you during all this?

NJ: Lets see; fifteen, and I had the two; Scott was a year old when I come back; almost two years when I come back. I don't know, probably that spanned about seven years. I was twenty-two.

JW: And you had lived a life [laughter].

NJ: Grew up fast, let me tell you. Grew up fast. My mother said, "You go back out there, you won't have a support group. Why do you want to do that? You stay here and you can stay with us. But I mean, they were up in their forties, late forties, and here they are with three little kids and me. They had just built them a nice house on the lake



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and all that, and they couldn't even enjoy it. They had all these extra people in there, but once I got on at Levi's we were okay. I had lived out on my own; I didn't need to live back with Mom and Dad. My mother never had a lot of patience with kids, so she certainly didn't with grandchildren. She had three girls and my sister had three girls, and they were the apple of her eye. These were boys and she didn't really understand boys that much, so she was constantly on them, complaining about something, fussing at them about something. The youngest son had a problem with wetting the bed, and oh, she just couldn't handle that. He needed whipped and he needed this and that, you know. A lot of it was just the uproar the child had lived in for a while, you know. It gradually got better after we got out on our own. We rented a house and moved out and that was it, lived on Levi money.

JW: Do you want to just go ahead and describe what it was like starting at Levi and what your work was there?

NJ: I started on the evening shift, and I hemmed the bottom of the pants. It was a more relaxed shift than day shift because there was very few bosses there. I met some very nice people that really helped me get the hang of what I was doing. I was never fast enough on those machines to make big money, like just a very few people in the factory could do that. But I made a little bit over minimum wage all the time, and I was there every day. I had an excellent absentee record, and I took every penny of overtime they'd give me, worked every Saturday. But I worked the evening shift; you go in at three and you worked to eleven-thirty at night. It was hard keeping a babysitter for those hours, so finally—it took me almost a year—but I got on day shift then, and it was quite a bit more hectic. I did the hemming on that, and then they were changing things, so they wanted

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some people that would be willing to learn two or three and fill in where people were absent, or the slowdown where they were retraining them in a different way. I took that job; it was strictly hourly pay, so it worked out better for me. I knew exactly how much I had coming in every week, so I took that and that's what I did until they set up a line where they repaired mistakes after the inspection. They set that up and I bid on it and got it, and that's what I was doing when they finally fired me.

JW: So when did you get involved in the union there?

NJ: I joined the day I went in.

JW: Did you just know or was it a--?

NJ: It was pretty much Tennessee closed shop. You didn't have to join, technically, but your life was miserable if you didn't [laughter]. Yeah, it was like ALCOA. They all belonged to the union, you know, so I just automatically joined. I just never gave it a second thought, whether it was the thing to do or you had an option or not. I just knew I'd worked in the non-union one in Little Rock. When they said you had a union, I figured it had to be better, so I joined it real quick. I wasn't an officer or participate any more than my dues for several years before I got involved in it. One lady that was there had been president of the union for a long time and it was the same group. You know, you just went and voted, but I did go to union meetings. Then later, that changed hands; she left the plant, retired or something.

Then, I knew the lady that got elected president of the union then. She lived out in Eagleton Village, I had moved out there, and our kids knew each other. One of the ladies from the other group of officers had decided to retire and that job came open, so I ran for it and got it. It was just doing the financial work, where you collect the dues and then you

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do all that, so I did that. Then, when Levi set up a whole bunch of new equipment and it really got to where the turnover was terrible, then the expectations of what you could do because we had an automated machine were ridiculous. It was awful cozy at the top of the union right then with the company. They just explained it and so that was okay. Once they explained it, it was okay; it should be done that way.

They went through about thirty people in three months in a new section they set up. Now, that's almost unheard of anywhere, so when time come for election, a lot of people were wanting change. I thought *now I kind of know how a union operates*, so I ran and I won. Then I got all this dumped on me that I thought would be easy to handle, [laughter] and it's not easy to handle because you don't really have any power against the company. They can tell you one thing and then they will do as they please, and you have no power.

These women have kids and it's like men were in years ago. We'd all got so comfortable--I figured out later, not at that time--with what we were making, that we weren't willing to sacrifice anything to change it. My grandfather was trying to get a union--ALCOA threatened to throw them out of the houses when they struck to get unions. They struck two or three times before they finally got it. So, I didn't know that much about it--that drastic--but Levi's kept promising and they would even send memos to the union that we could read. They would authorize us to read them at the union hall and say, "These are the changes we're going to make and it's going to be better." But where they had us over the barrel was until you are a permanent employee, you can't join the union. While you're training, you can't join, and that's the people they were running through.

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Then they made the mistake of hiring the children of the people that were working there already. You get a bunch of mamas mad about the way somebody was treating their children, then we got support, and from there it wound up with a short strike and they lied, like that supervisor would not be over anybody in the plant, so they bring her out afterwards, after we agree, and we go back in and they hand her a clipboard with a timewatch and she goes around and times everybody. You can be fired if you're not doing your job correctly and in the right amount of time, so they handed her a lot of power to intimidate people. "We talked and we talked and you said she wouldn't be over anybody. She wouldn't hold that kind of--." "Well, we really don't have to abide by anything she says." You know, convoluted bullcrap.

So it kept rocking on and they didn't change, and they were setting us up for a strike because they had cameras and the head man out of the district over here was ready for us to walk because it was brewing and the plant manager knew it was going to happen. So they had us all primed up and then they brought us in there and wanted to know what was going on. I told them what we expected and he said, "Well, that's not going to happen. We run the place; you all don't." I said, "I understand that, but we were hoping this," and we "blah-blah-blah" back and forth. [I] walked out on the floor and raised one finger: we were walking out at one o'clock, and they went. I stayed until most of them were out and then I walked out, so they couldn't say I led the strike. It's one of those technical things they play with.

We stayed out, I guess, close to six weeks, but we went to jail; me and seven or eight of the men did for defying a court order. We had an old judge in Knoxville, though. He was ornery as all get-out and very pro-business. I don't know why he felt any

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compassion for us; he was strict. But I'll tell you how scary it was--none of us were doing anything. Some of the men went in and cut some tires on a tractor-trailer or something once, but there wasn't any violence at the plant. They had guards they brought in from Texas and part of them were Mexicans. We found out later that four of them were ex-cons. One of them would do wheelies inside the plant--you know, it's fenced--in the parking lot, and then he'd come up and try to tempt them to just do something. "I got my gun here. Which one do you want to be shot with? You want the first bullet or the second bullet?" You know, that crap. Men and women were camping out; they brought their campers and camped at the gates. They pretty much ignored him, but he was an ass. It just kept on and on, and when we wouldn't go back in, why, the judge ordered us. He ordered us back in. We didn't go, so that's when he arrested us. He ordered us to go back to work and we didn't go, so he jailed part of us.

JW: How did he choose the people to--?

NJ: He jailed me because I was president, and somebody identified some of the young men. Oh, they had a list of about thirty or forty people they were going to throw in jail. He wanted to send us to Sevierville, not Blount County, because we were so rowdy that we would have probably caused a riot over here and damage to property--the people that didn't go to jail would. Oh, they painted a picture--Levi's did--there would be a mass riot and their plant would probably be destroyed. After they got through I said, "Now, listen. We all want to go back to work. We're not going to blow up our livelihood or burn it down," and it's a brick building to begin with. "There won't be any kind of destruction."

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Our lawyer talked for us and then the sheriff from [Blount County] there; they had already deputized them. That's how well planned it all was. He stood up and he said, "There's no need; I don't worry about a riot over here; these are civilized people, and we'd be glad to have them in the Blount County Jail," and that did it. We went to Blount County.

One of the oddest things was, my mother was at the *Times* getting her papers for her route, and I'm coming from [court], handcuffed and shack...I mean, they put shackles on us. My feet were shackled; I had a chain around my waist; handcuffed; and it was attached to that. They kept us over there for three hours, waiting for the crowds to disperse before they would walk us to the car, afraid somebody would shoot them. I mean, they were way back in the thirties with their thinking, [laughter]. But ALCOA supported us even though it was a wildcat until their international called them off and told them they had to quit supporting us and that we couldn't meet in their building any more because it would cause their union trouble. United Steel Workers, you know, had to worry about something like that. But anyway, we went to jail and we was in there for three days. We signed statements we wouldn't strike any more and we'd go back to work. We went out and held a meeting at Sandy Springs Park, and nobody's going back to work until Levi settled something, so I thought we'd be going back to court, but they buckled then.

JW: Levi's buckled?

NJ: Levi's buckled, yeah. When they took us back to court then and I appeared in court after getting out on bond, the judge said, "What's going on?" and I started to explain it. He said, "I've just had enough of this," or something to that effect. He turned

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around to the Levi people, the big people that imported from California to protect them, and said, "You will settle this. There's no more of this. You meet with these people and you meet with them until it gets settled." We met for three different days and got it settled, and everybody went back to work. There was me, and [there were] two young men that damaged some property when they walked out. The cutting room was down at [a business park], and they damaged some stuff as they left the building, so they got fired; I got fired [for leading the strike]. But we voted for arbitration, so I worked a year after I got fired. We did just fine. We got along with them and they got rid of her; they retired her, the [supervisor] that caused the strike, but they used her as the bad guy all the time. They moved her all over that plant, but she retired. Her husband worked at ALCOA.

JW: What do you know about her? Why was she willing to do this work for the company?

NJ: I don't know why because she didn't need the money. She didn't even need to work. I mean, they were in their late thirties when they had one child born. He worked at ALCOA. The men out there told me he was an a-hole from the beginning, so he guessed he married one was the only thing they could figure out. But she loved that power. She thrived on that. There was another lady doing a job exactly like hers; there was two, and she was never that way. She did as she was told, but she wasn't one of these [that] rides and play soldier. I ran into one of the women, I didn't even remember, and she had worked for (26:00) and [that supervisor] said, "You know, she just hunted some reason to ride you all the time. She had to let you know she was in charge, and your job was just in her hands." She said, "She handed me a pair of pants and said, 'You fix this.'" She said, "I didn't do that. It's not one of mine, and she told me to fix it or go out the door, and I

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said, well, that's fine with me; my husband' working," and she got up and walked out. She said, "That's what I remember about her, but she had some of those people that had young children; divorced; needed the job," and said "She just rode them to death." And they did; it was complaints all the time. Then, when mamas worked out there and she started working on their kids, it got somewhere. But it all worked out; I worked another year, and by then my youngest son was about seventeen, so--. I went to work at a little place out here--the World's Fair was coming that year--at a little old grocery store they had bought across from the airport. I worked for there for a while and then Marian and them, I'd known them from the Steel Workers union at Alcoa, her and her husband at the time. They come out there and then the next thing I know, Doug Gamble comes out and they start talking to me about this job.

JW: Um-hmm, with TNCOSH [Tennessee Committee on Occupational Safety and Health].

NJ: So everything just kind of worked out, you know?

JW: Yeah, yeah.

NJ: It's amazing.

JW: Well, so how did the experience of that wildcat strike affect you? That must have been such a crazy experience, and being taken to jail when you obviously weren't a criminal; you weren't doing anything bad. So what did that--?

NJ: It was a little bit scary, and then it just made me angry and determined, and I kept going back to--I went to Little Rock with three little kids depending on me and I made it, and I'm going to make it through this. Now, I never intended to topple Levi's, of course, but the main thing is, now that I've gone to jail and we've gone this far, is get as



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many people back in there to work as we can without them losing their jobs, because eighty percent of it was women and there were a lot of them with drunken husbands that wouldn't work--on their own--that kind of stuff. I had been that path; I knew how scary it was, and I admired them all because they stood. We only had about nine people out of that whole plant that crossed that picket line, and that was fantastic considering you had eight-hundred-and-something people there. It was just a very few of them went back. Some of them went back a day early simply because the company announced it was settled and we would start work the next morning, and we weren't; we were scheduled for the next day and some of them went in, but we didn't have a picket line up then. We went almost two weeks with no picket line and nobody crossed. The company knew--they got the court order to pull the picket line; they weren't picketing; they just didn't go to work. They were waiting for us to say when you'll go back to work. We got lots of donations from businesses, food and stuff, and we got quite a bit of money from businesses for the ones that really--you know, you're getting in deeper and deeper. We've been out a long time here. All they had to do was apply, and we'd write them a check.

JW: How long were the workers out on strike?

NJ: About eight weeks that time before we went back, and we'd been out a couple or three before that. The only other thing that happened that really made an impression on me, and I lost my train of thought there, so I'll get back to it. Glad you're recording this [laughter]. The people that complained the least were the ones that was digging the hardest. The ladies that worked there that's husbands worked at ALCOA, they couldn't poor-mouth often enough. They complained, they whined, all of that, and the folks that stood and just never complained about anything were the ones that were losing the most,

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getting down to their electric bill they couldn't pay and things like that, you know? And going to kitchens to get food and things. A lot of the steel workers, especially the older men in that steel workers union that could remember when they organized, they were really good about money, the retirees were, from Alcoa. They come by with checks all the time to help out somebody.

JW: So it's really a story about community too, isn't it?

NJ: Yeah, and which ones didn't want their name attached. There would be businesses here that would donate some money, but don't mention their name, and things like that. I kept thinking *well, why, if you're going to donate would you care?* Two-thirds of the people that spend money in this town at that time worked for ALCOA, and they have a union. But, like Proffitt's Department Store and some of the older--I found out later, from my dad, were the ones that fought the Steel Workers, only it's the aluminum workers originally, fought those so much. Proffitt's Department Store--a lot of the businesses fought that union tooth and nail.

JW: Do you want to say a little bit about how you learned about your father's labor history?

NJ: Yeah. During that strike, the company was taking pictures of us. One of the men that owned the *Times*, which my father worked for in the circulation department, his daughter got interested in us for the newspaper and she wrote several articles. I forgot the man's name now, but there was the group in Knoxville that first gave us publicity and he came over and talked to us because he had heard about the strike, and I gave him an interview. Now, it was so calm after the first three days strike where we just stayed out a few days; he actually came to the plant and somebody came in and said, "There's a man

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out here that wants to talk to you, Corky,” and I went out and that’s what he wanted to do. He wrote two good, big articles on a little paper he was running, and then the *Sentinel* picked that up, which that really helped us a lot there.

Well, when it got so kind of nasty, my dad started saying, “The first thing they’ll do is those checks you’re writing, Corky, for these people, they’re going to try to nail you that you all are using this money for something else.” So I took the checkbook to him and he, on the *Times* copier, ran copies of all the checks and which account it came out of because that’s one thing I did--we kept the account open that the International had access to, and all the donations went in one I opened in the officer’s names at the Citizen’s Bank in Maryville. We put those in there, and we wrote checks to people off that. Our International being the jackass it was, came down after the strike and they were going to audit our books because they had lost money while we were striking. We made up those back dues to them. Our people agreed to have the dues taken out, instead of once a month, twice a month, to get them paid back their part of the dues. Then they come down, and they’re going to audit us and see if we used any of their money on this strike.

With the separate bank accounts, they didn’t have a prayer. Everything from Levi’s went in that account and our donations went in this one. So I bring this big sheaf of papers to them and I said, “Here,” and they start going through them, and they said, “Well, this adds up to thousands of dollars.” I said, “Yeah, and not a one of them had a name on it that said it belonged to the United Garment Union. If it had, it would have gone in your account, and it didn’t, so just do whatever you think you need to do.” I said, “Amalgamated is in Knoxville and they’re very active, so you just do whatever you need to do,” [laughter] and they went back and shut up.

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I learned a lot about people you thought were your friends that were nice--I mean, it was your representatives that come in and talk to you, and so nice, and then they took our money and then they sold us out in a heartbeat. Later--much later, one of the men that was our rep after the strike told me that this Calveena Little, which she and two or three at the top of that organization after a big upset, were from down in Alabama. They had been representatives down there. Erlinbach was the man that breaks strikes and straightens things out. Oh, she just--he was wonderful. She would stand at union meetings and tell us how wonderful he was and how close their communication was.

Years later, when he finally admitted all he had done and the lies he had told--and I don't know why he admitted it to her, but the man that was here that told us about it--last time I heard, he was over the garment workers union--it's merged into something else--she told him "I can't believe it. I trusted him and he lied to me." I mean, the man's making hundreds of thousands of dollars; what makes you think his mouth is golden? [Laughter] You're just a little fleck on him right now that's aggravating him. She said, "I just can't believe it. He assured me that none of that had happened; you all were making it up."

Because I was mailing them the papers; anybody that wrote anything about us, I mailed to the International. I thought *boy, we had good representation there, didn't we?* *She forgot which side she was on*, but it was disillusion. My dad did tell me when he started running [copies of checks], he said, "Don't trust anybody." He said, "We went through about five strikes in eight years," and he was just a kid in high school when it all started. He said, "The very people that stood with us out there sold us out." He said, "Don't trust anybody; they'll use you and then they'll throw you under the bus." He

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never got over it. People came up at his father's funeral, wanting to shake his hand, and he just turned around and wouldn't shake hands with them. I asked him, "Daddy, why didn't you shake his hand?" After we got out of there he said, "Well, there's just a problem with me and him at one time and it's still not over."

Years later, he told me why he didn't shake. He said, "All we suffered"--they actually had armed guards on their porches at night to protect his father that was president of the union in their strike. So our strike was really mild and nice and orderly compared to what they went through to get that union. In fact, there's history on that too you've probably looked at, where they shot them out of the windows in the plant and stuff like that. But he said, "I lived through all that when I was an impressionable kid. I was still in high school." And then for those very people that stood up there and patted him on the back and what a great job he done sold him out. Then they built the union hall and went to the Steel Workers and they didn't put his--Steel Workers didn't want his picture put up when he was organizing the union because it wasn't a steel worker. But there was enough of the older men; they hung it and I don't know whether it's still there or not. It doesn't really matter, but it was important to my grandfather that they do it. But they did, so Dad said, "Yeah, just take a lesson. You're top dog right now, and they'll turn on you in an instant." He said, "It's a bad business."

JW: What about the women that you worked with?

NJ: A lot of them stayed true. In fact, I'm still acquaintances with some of them. We've all kind of drifted apart. I have a couple of them that were officers with me, and then several of them have died. They were a little older than me. But most of them that were officers when we were in there fighting this stayed loyal always, even after I left

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when I lost the job. They would still come out, and one of them was my vice-president. See, I got to stay president of the union for two years after that because the International led Levi's to believe that once I was out of the plant they wouldn't have to deal with me any more. Well, that's not true. That's not what their bylaws say. So I got elected two more times after the strike, and then it was getting really testy. Levi's was working hard to get rid of me, but it threw all the work onto my vice-president because there would be times something would need to be handled right then and they'd have to call me. I'd have to come in, and then they'd do everything they could to make it harder for me to get in. I'd sit outside, waiting, because he was busy and he's in there trying to negotiate it without me, that kind of silliness. And after two years, I decided *they're going to try to destroy that union, and they'll stand a better chance of the stronger ones getting in if I leave now and let them manage their own business now*. I'm not in the plant any more. It makes a big difference if you're in the plant. You're awfully detached when you do what the major unions do, and that's your main officers don't work there any more.

JW: I had a question and then I--.

NJ: You're as bad as I am! [Laughter]

JW: I am! [Laughter]

NJ: [Laughter] I do that. It comes back to you; it don't come back to me.

JW: Well, I was going to ask you...

NJ: ...Here I am wasting your tape with this silliness.

JW: No, it's not. So my question is: What motivated you to do all this? So many people will just sit back and kind of take things or just take things day-by-day and not

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really try to make major changes. So what was it that inspired you to keep at all this, even once you were fired, to stick with the union?

NJ: The motivation before was the way they were treating a bunch of young people, and I had some backing. The motivation afterwards was to stay and do all I could for the people that stood with me to be sure they didn't lose their jobs, and to give that union a chance to survive. It might not be as strong, but it's important that you have one. At least there's some rules that have to be followed then, and I had worked in a shop where there was no union, but that was the main thing. I didn't want them to destroy it, so I'd stay, and then transition time came, it would be all right. They'd still be there and they'd still have their union, and that woman would stay gone. I didn't know when they would try to maybe bring her back in; you never knew. So, after two years, I pretty well knew she wasn't coming back.

The people at the top, the ones that set up the surveillance cameras and all that-- and there was a couple of union officers that sold us out, too. They were keeping the company advised. They were over this whole region and both of them got fired over that strike because they were assuring California if they went in and provoked us into another strike that it wouldn't last more than a week or two. Then they would have control again and it didn't work that way. So that's when they sent the lawyers in from California.

But once I started something and it started escalating, there wasn't no way I was going to bail out. And then after it was over with, even though my job gone, I wanted to be sure that union made it, that they didn't manage to break it. They weakened it, but that happens all the time; but it was there the day they shut the plant doors and closed down and went to the Philippines or wherever they went that time. I told the people then--I said,

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“Now, you mark my words. Five or six years, they’ll be closed down and gone. I met some people at that conference that so many people have worried about me going to, and Levi’s is one of them that’s approaching their countries. The Philippines has a sewing factory, and they’re paying them fifty cents an hour; they work twelve hours a day and they live in a barracks; they get to go home one day a month.” And I said, “Then they took the El Paso plant, moved it into Mexico, and since they send them back across the border to have the size label, their Levi label, sewed on them, they can put “Made in the USA” on them.” So those people lost almost two dollars an hour when they moved it across the border if they stayed with them. So I had those two things to tell them, so “be careful--your job’s going to be gone--be ready. Now, start training for something else or decide what you’re going to do, but don’t keep running up bills you can’t pay, thinking it’s going to be here forever.” Sure enough, I was right within one year [of what I predicted]. They closed it down.

JW: And you learned about these other plants from the conference in--?

NJ: Amsterdam.

JW: Can you describe what that conference was about?

NJ: It was women’s role in working, and they also dwelled a lot on how each country has governments that allow some of this to happen, even if they’ve got laws that says it shouldn’t. But mainly, they were talking to the people that work with the workers. That’s who attended the convention, primarily these ladies from the Philippines, two or three ladies from India, and there was the girl from Texas, and me, and there was a couple more from Holland. It wasn’t the big group, you know, eight or ten people. They were talking about the problems they’re having with unions and health care for women



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and fair treatment for women as far as the wages they're paid, the kind of jobs and the bullying that goes on, threats, and things like that.

JW: Was that your first time traveling?

NJ: Out of the country, other than Mexico, yeah. And it was scary. I think it's the Marshall Plan in Washington that financed it, and that's where--you mentioned her name earlier.

JW: Brenda Bell?

NJ: Brenda Bell. Now, she got the money from them to pay for me to go. It was a big experience for me because I had never stayed in a hostel; I had stayed in a motel. Well, over there, you know, you share showers. It was a little room, very nice, and then the house it was in that the meetings were in--this was down the street from that--you went upstairs and you had the meeting room up a set of stairs. Then you went to the next level and the kitchen was on that level, and I guess the bedrooms were either up or way down one; I don't know; that's as far as I got. They did cook a lot of food that I can't eat, for one thing. The Indian girls cooked some [food], and the spice in it--I get strangled on it. So, I decided when they were going to cook, going to be polite, you know, do all of that, and just not eat much of it, just piddle with it. Then I'd walk down the street to this little restaurant. Now, I've never been anywhere, don't speak Dutch or anything [laughter] and I get to this place, this nice-looking restaurant and I go in and eat, and I go up to pay and they said, "No, no charge." So, I go, "Okay," and I get on this tram and ride around a while and the girl from Texas come with me, and we did some sightseeing. Neither one of us, now, can speak anything and we don't know how much money, what to put in the meter on the thing. We rode for free most of the afternoon [laughter]. I got

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back and I started asking some of them about it and they thought it was hilarious that we just, dumb-like, had managed to get through the whole thing. I found out the reason they didn't charge me at the restaurant: they thought I was staying in the hostel that was right next door to it which they owned.

But it was an experience, and then my son was stationed in Belgium at the time. They had been over there about six months; he was in the Army, so they drove down to Amsterdam and picked me up when the thing was over and I stayed three days with them, then come back to Amsterdam and flew home. But going through customs, all that was brand-new to me. Now, young people do it and it's fine. Here I am, this middle-aged woman [laughter] trying to navigate all of this. I just knew I'd get lost somewhere. You can't speak in their language, so--.

And, silly-like, as an American, I just assumed I'd seen people from Holland talking on TV and they spoke English. Well, the majority of the people don't speak English over there any more than the majority of us speak Dutch or Spanish [laughter]. Just, I tell you, naïve as all get--, but it was fun. I enjoyed it. Back then, it didn't bother me. I figured whatever happens, I can handle. And it was a big experience. I would have never been out of the country if it hadn't been for that. But yeah, Brenda is the one that got the money and brought it up and talked to me about it. She was great with things like that. Once she got an idea, she kept after it [laughter].

JW: So what years were the strike and then you being fired from the plant? What period was that?

NJ: Oh, I guess the first strike was in [pause] '79, '80, right in there because they fired me, I believe it was '80 or '81, they fired me. Because the World's Fair started in

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'82 and I was still president of the union. So, from '78 to '82 is about when all this took place [pause] and then they closed it in about '86 or '87, '88, right in there.

JW: So what was that like to lose your job after you had gone through all of that, and you had, still, a couple of young--you still had children?

NJ: I had one still at home. The other two had gone into the service. He was five [years] younger than them, so--. A little intimidating, but I was working at that little market and then another job came along. Then, a year or so later, he joined the Navy, so I had all three of them gone; it was just me. This is a nice thing about it--when I had just bought a trailer--mobile home--the month before they fired me, and I got fired, and of course that stops all your money coming. I had this trailer out at a mobile home park out on the highway going toward the mountains, and the man there was one of them that fought my dad's family over the union. He owned a car place here--Payne was his last name, and his son was a lawyer here in town at the time this happened. He owned that trailer park. Well, he said people complained about noise around my trailer, so I had to get it out of there. I thought *boy, where am I going to come up with money to move this trailer and everything?* So I just sat tight and we got through with the strike and then had to deal with it. I kept my lot rent paid, so it got worse and worse with him.

My dad owned some land across the street from him and a group of the [loyal union members]--I was going to move the trailer, and of course, short of money, but I was going to have to move it over that. My dad said, "Quit worrying about it. I'll give you this lot, but you need to get a septic field put in, and I'll have the water put in if you can manage the septic field. Well, one of the women that had stood with us so strong lived out at Rockford, and her husband operated heavy equipment. He came and dug the

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field and all that, and put the tank where it was supposed to go. I paid for the tank. We got it all set up, got the water in, got the electricity turned on, then we moved the trailer down there. This man that moves trailers said he'd move it for fifty dollars when I talked to him. I said, "Why would you do that?" I mean, everybody kept saying it would be two, three hundred dollars to move it. He said, "My dad worked in the Steel Workers with your grandfather in the Aluminum Workers at ALCOA, and I'll move this thing. They're not going to run unions out of this county," so he moved the trailer and it cost me fifty dollars! So, I got it set up and I lived down there until they sold out and moved.

It was exciting; I wouldn't trade it for anything, and the trip to Holland--I mean, I would have never been able to do that and see other people and what they're dealing with and how much better we have it here. The thing that scares me the most right now with all this going on with our economy is that if they manage to wipe unions out, these people are really going to know what it's going to be like, because so many wages are based on keeping the union out, just like (54:37) does. They pay good benefits, and they pay good wages. When you wipe out all these unions, you'll find out that's not out of the goodness of their hearts. It's to keep skilled workers, but you can't control that. That's up to them to take care of themselves now, but I hate to see it happen after all the hard work that went into getting us to this point. But, I wouldn't trade it for anything. It was a stigma after I left TNCOSH and then to try to get a job because of it, because I had been in the union around here, see? After TNCOSH folded, there was no jobs for me.

JW: So were you ever able to find [a job] after that?

NJ: I worked for my dad for the *Times*. I carried a motor route for a while, and then...

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JW: ...But, like in a factory or anything like that?

NJ: No, no, nothing like that again. And the trailer, you know, I was paying a hundred dollars a month payment on it, minimum on utilities. So, it worked out just fine, but--.

JW: What about with other working people? Did they support what you had gone through? Did you feel like that...?

NJ: ...They went on with their lives and I went on with mine. We're at different places then. So, it wasn't like you stayed together as the big group like you would if you had stayed in the union, see. You'd have seen them at meetings, so you weren't up to date on anything like that.

JW: I'm thinking about how in the '70s there's also a women's movement going on in the country. There's important legislation that was being passed and women filing lawsuits to get equal pay and things like that, and I'm wondering if that affected you at all, or if you thought of yourself in relation to other women?

NJ: No, didn't think of the bigger picture like that, no. I resented the fact we didn't get paid what men got paid. I had enough sense to know that from the paper. And we still don't; we're still not there. But it wasn't a big issue; I had a job and it was enough to take care of my family, and I had put up with what I had to, to keep that job. That was kind of the mindset. The main thing was just to get from day to day to day. You don't think in a big picture like that, or I didn't. I mean, it was just get through this day and take care of the kids and get the bills paid.

JW: Did the men in your plant--it was mostly women, but there were men there also?

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NJ: Oh, yeah, quite a few men.

JW: Was there sex segregation in the plant, where men did certain jobs?

NJ: Um-hmm.

JW: Did they get paid more in those jobs?

NJ: Um-hmm. It was higher-priced jobs. And men got promoted quicker to management level except on the lines, over the sewing lines. That was primarily all women that ran that, but they answered to a man that oversaw what they were doing, see? Things like your shipping department, a man ran it; the cutting room, the man ran it; and most of the men worked in the cutting room with those big bales. In the shipping department, it was men, and then the women, there was a line set up where they double-checked. They'd pull odd pairs of pants out of the boxes and check them to be sure everything was okay for the quality. That was all they did. But the supervisors, and then the whole group of supervisors answered to a man, and then it went on up the ladder. All the mechanics were men. Finally, right toward the end before I left there, they were beginning to train a couple of women, but they gave them a hard time, let me tell you.

JW: Did they?

NJ: Yeah, even one of them was his wife, and the other men didn't like the fact a woman was doing what they could do because it was a better-paying job. Now, there's some of the women in there that could sew really fast. You know, some people are just more skilled, and they made excellent money because you got paid per pair of pants. You turned out production; you got better pay. They were really good, but out of eight hundred women, they were a select few, like twenty-something women that could actually make a really good paycheck out of there.

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JW: So did you have the sense that women ever--? I mean, did people get upset that they couldn't get into those higher-paying jobs? Like, you had children that you were supporting; you weren't relying on a man, but you weren't allowed into--you and other women weren't allowed into certain jobs just because you were women.

NJ: It would have probably bothered us more, but we were so concentrating on just surviving that that didn't come in. And the women that had husbands working somewhere else, they weren't looking for upper pay. They're earning pocket money, so they were perfectly content. They didn't want responsibilities or anything. This was so they could take a vacation that year, and do this and do that, or get the kids through school or something. They had a name, but their primary care was coming from a man, so no, they would have never defied--. Never. "No, the husbands make the money and we just do what we're supposed to do," and that's their mindset. And for a lot of people, it works out fine, but for an awful lot, it don't. And there's really a penalty when it doesn't. You drop down a way below what ALCOA was paying their people to what we were getting paid, and a lot of those women were not understanding at all how bad it hurt a mother that was supporting children to have no paycheck coming in because she didn't have a husband there. They very much resented any money we gave those women. They weren't getting money. Well, their husband was making good money at ALCOA, but they still resented it.

JW: So there was tension during the strike?

NJ: Tension about that and the resentment they had toward the women that did get some of the donation money, and the rules we put on who could have it. They felt like they had been slighted; they should have got it too. They were equal and they were

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striking, so I saw a lot of people with no compassion if they're sitting easy. If they've got a decent home and living made and they're not struggling, they don't have much compassion for other people. They cannot put themselves in that position. In their minds, they can't. So you learn. I just assumed everybody would pitch in. If these people need help, then we pitch in and help them. No, no, and a lot of them were some of the people that were on the committees that Levi set up to do public work that got them a lot of publicity and they backed them in it. You know, they'd take little projects around here and do it for people, and those are the very people that complained the loudest when we helped people during that strike.

JW: Were you able to bond more, though? I mean, I imagine if there's that sort of tension that the people who do have it really hard can work together and relate?

NJ: Yeah, and they were on that picket line, pack them a sandwich, and come sit on the picket line in a lawn chair for hours. Some of them that's husbands worked at ALCOA, the most they'd do is their husband would drop them off and pick them up in an hour-and-a-half or two hours, when he got back from something he was doing. That was their contribution, if they even came. Since it was a wildcat strike, toward the end, the Steel Workers were warning their people to stay away from it. They didn't want to get sued. I thought *boy, what happened to guts?* [Laughter] Like this company is going to take that much trouble and go through the expense of suing them. You've got to call them sometimes when they make those kind of statements.

JW: So what was it like getting started with the Tennessee Committee on Occupational Safety and Health?



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NJ: It was scary because I was in over my head. I mean, these were very well educated people, very knowledgeable about all the things we were supposed to be working at, and they, in my mind, they had it all memorized. They had been working on this a good while from the ground up. Then suddenly, I'm in this and I'm just kind of floundering and wondering if I can really do it, and second-guessing myself a lot because I truly felt like I was in over my head, and they were going to get disgusted with it and I'd look bad and they'd think I was an idiot or something like that. So it was scary. They were all very nice to me. I mean, it was just my fears; it wasn't the way they treated me. They taught me a lot and made efforts to see that I got to go to things that would explain a lot of things--little seminars.

Doug [Gamble] could write those grants and he had me write one. That finally convinced him to let me use his, and I'd just change a few words and get it more down. That will tell you how green I was. It was typed in a type that was very tiny, and when I did my insertions in it--see, I ran a copy and then erased that and did my insertions--it was a different sized type, so it just stood out, every change that had been made into it [laughter]. We went ahead and sent it in and of course at that time I knew the man that was over that organization. It was the Catholic group that donates--they had been funding us from the very beginning, and I'm sure they all got a big laugh out of it, but I learned. It was an embarrassing learn, but I learned [laughter].

But just having to read those grants in great length, you catch on to how to express yourself to the people lending the money better understand where you're coming from. I'm usually just very blunt, and you can't be very blunt with most of these groups. You've got to be roundabout and kind of flower it up a little, and I learned. But then the

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money dwindled. Once they got the Right-to-Know law passed, boy, the money went to the dickens then. All those groups that had zeroed in on that picked other things now, of course, to put on their up-and-coming issues, so it dwindled.

I went to D.C. once and met with several people up there and then the group put me in touch with them, but so many of the people they put us in touch with after this was over, just trying to hold it together, were--I didn't find them very honest. They lead you on to think that we're going to get this money and this is what your part of it would be. This is what we expect from you; you agree to that, and then you find out they got the money and they owed to this group over here and this group over here, and some of them just got it and they didn't parcel it out with anybody. So it just dwindled, and I didn't have the skills or anything else to know how to set us on our way to another project that would bring in that kind of money. I knew I needed to find one, but I couldn't find a project anywhere that would fit with what TNCOSH was. If you did come up with an idea, there's no money available for that idea; they've all shifted to something else. It seemed to me like a lot of the fundraisers that were interested in that or the funders that were interested in it just kind of cleaned their slate and picked something else and that's it. Tunnel vision, nothing else, that's exactly what they--and it was their money; they could do that.

JW: Well, in the years that you were working on the Right-to-Know laws, what was your job in that?

NJ: To bring the real working people into it.

JW: And how did you do that?

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NJ: Well, I knew a lot of people, and then I started talking. I was working at that little market and one of the best guys that I ever met was a guy that had worked in Chattanooga and he had handled some chemicals down there and now he's allergic, can't work anywhere--I mean, certain things in his life, even in his home. I was sitting there talking because it was slow after the World's Fair, and he was telling me about that. Doug and them were working on getting speakers for this thing in Knoxville, and the unions were furnishing a few speakers. I said, "I had this guy. What did they think of him?" So he testified, and it turned out real well because he talked just like I talk. He didn't talk, you know, like a thesis from college. He talked about his real life.

We found several people like that, but mainly, I was just trying to find workers that would be willing to stand up in a hearing like that and talk about a variety of things, not just what happened at my plant, but people with a lot of different jobs that are being affected by not knowing what's going on. And there's no recourse for them other than hire you a lawyer and file a civil suit, and everything leans with the company because they've got all your records. And then they lied about what's in that stuff. I mean, we could sew black and I broke out for days. The dye in the black was what it was, and all they'd tell you is, "Go in and wash your hands off." Well, you dry your hands out; that don't help you. But there were several dyes people were allergic to, and the lint off them, you breathe it. I had bronchitis one whole winter; couldn't get rid of it when we sewed black that whole winter. Never had it before, but you couldn't prove that's what was causing it.

But I felt like I was a fish out of water, and yet I did pretty good with some of the unions. Of course, a lot of the unions were way ahead of ours as far as the chemicals,

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people like the chemical workers that [work in] Oak Ridge were way ahead of us on education and knowing about [chemicals]. But they were real good to share information. Then they used me a lot to see if I couldn't get the unions to participate in some of these hearings, instead of hiding--"We don't need it; we've got our protection in our contract. We don't want to make anybody mad." That used to infuriate me when they'd say, "Well, I don't want to get our company all riled up." Oh!

JW: I remember in the oral history that I think Brenda Bell, maybe somebody else did with you; it was for *Southern Exposure* magazine. I don't know if you recall this, but you had a very resolute manner. It said that you had decided which side you were on, and that cost you friendships and that you weren't going to stand with the company, that you were going to be with people--. So how did you come to that? And I hear you saying similar things now, that you have a very resolute way.

NJ: I don't know why I did that. Sometimes you do things and you look back and say, "Was I thinking when I jeopardized this much, you know, my job and everything?" I don't know; I guess it's something you have. You get tired of being the underdog and you get tired of nobody listening or doing anything for you. I just made up my mind that I've took it until I've got my kids this far and I'm just not much going to take it any more. I had to then--I felt like I had to when they were so young. I was in a position at that time when all this happened that I could afford to gamble, and before, I couldn't. I mean, there was our health insurance; I went years with no health insurance, until I got on Medicare. I mean, you sacrifice a lot when you do that. I made it anyway, but you do. People get secure with the health insurance and unemployment; there's not any of that if you haven't been working. I just cringe at the government's figures on how many people

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are unemployed. That's only the ones drawing unemployment. The ones that have lost their unemployment aren't counted any more. I mean, they just play figures until it's irritating. I guess I'm just stubborn, just like when I got married I was stubborn. I'd stay married, you know. You set things and then you do them and then you have to deal with them, and that's kind of what I did with the strike. I said, "I'm just not going to put up with it any more," and then I had to deal with the repercussions.

JW: So, throughout your activist work, either with the union or TNCOSH, throughout that, what have been some of the biggest challenges that you've had to face?

NJ: With [TNCOSH], it would be the raising money. I never had to do that before and I had no contacts. I mean, all those folks that had worked on the civil rights movement, or a lot of them had, and they had connections with each other, Bill Troy and them, and I just didn't have those connections. I didn't know how to approach those people, and that was the thing that made me feel like I was letting TNCOSH down and that it was my fault when it folded. I was embarrassed that I couldn't do it; I felt ashamed that I couldn't do it; and yet, I didn't know any way to keep it floating other than me leaving. You know, there just wasn't any way. It evidently had lived its time, but at that time, I didn't think that. I thought there had to be a way and I was missing it. So that's one reason I've not been back in touch with many of those people. I feel like I let a whole lot of people down. Right or wrong, that was the way I felt, and I felt like I failed. They put a lot of faith in me, and I failed. But it's those things you do in life; you fail at a lot of things.

JW: So what have been some of the most important and most successful moments or the proudest moments that you've had?

## Norma Jennings

NJ: [Pause] I can't ever think of a proudest moment I've had that had anything to do with work. Recovering from the depression, I was proud of that. I was proud of the way I took care of my mother when she was dying with dementia. That was about seven years of hell. My dad had a stroke and died, and I was dealing with their problems because he couldn't admit that she had a problem. They were testy with each other, and I was caught in the middle because my sisters lived away, so all that fell on me. That was really hard. And you carry a lot of guilt for that. You look back and say, "Why didn't I do this? Why didn't I recognize this sooner? And you can beat yourself up, and then I finally just decided *you know, that's life*. People live it and they do their best, and quit expecting perfection out of yourself. Just quit expecting to be able to do everything that you were required to do. It just doesn't work that way. So, that was the hardest part. As far as the job, once I was no longer in touch with those people, it was always in the back of my mind. We won a strike, but I failed at that, and I failed with TNCOSH and I couldn't keep it going. We cut a lot of corners, even moved it over here. I made a trip to Washington, got lots of promises with the folks I met up there that they had put me in touch with. Nothing came of it, so I felt like I had wasted that money by making the trip when we could have lasted a little bit longer if I hadn't done that. I got to where, by then, I was just second-guessing everything I was doing. You can't do that, but I did. So, when I left, I felt like I had let a whole lot of people down, and it was hard to live with. Then, I walked from that right into family problems that I had no control over. It just got to where it was just all piling up, but I wouldn't trade the relationship with all those people as far as what I learned and how exciting it was. It was a long way from a sewing factory!

[Laughter]

## **Norma Jennings**

JW: And you got the Right-to-Know law, which was--.

NJ: Yeah, with all of us working together we finally got it passed, and it was one of the few states that did. And it pushed then that we've got now a national law. And I met a lot of very nice people, very nice and very helpful. I mean, I know they probably thought she doesn't have a brain in her head at times, but they still plugged right along with me, teaching me these things and showing me how it was done and things like that. I appreciated that, but like I say, the main thing was when it folded I was devastated that I couldn't keep it together, just couldn't keep it together. Years later, I see some of the others that are gone, but I didn't have a thing to do with them being gone; this one, I did.

JW: Well, just about all of them, from the time, have crumbled as the economy changed and the factories changed.

NJ: And the mission for that is unnecessary now, what we were trying to do. So now you find a new one, and I didn't have the skills to find a new one. What was going to be next on the agenda, you could get money for.

JW: You were also working in a difficult political climate.

NJ: Yeah, and in this area. I mean, up North you could do better in the larger cities. Down here, there's just not that much interaction. You've got the folks that got this started, but there's not many of those any more. You're probably maybe running into some of the new up-comers that are thinking along those lines, but it seems like after that was over with, you just didn't hear much about anything going on here, helping about anything for people that needed help and things. It just kind of fizzled out after that. And then, we don't have many unionized plants around here, or even any plants any more; they're gone. That's what you were talking about. It changed; the whole scope changed.

## **Norma Jennings**

JW: Did you ever get involved or participate politically locally?

NJ: No.

JW: No? You stayed out of that?

NJ: I'm a Democrat, but there's very few Democrats in this county. I don't care what you say, it will go Republican. If the Republicans dropped a bomb on us now, they'd find an excuse and everybody would vote for them again [laughter]. I don't know what makes them do that, but they do. My grandmother and grandfather, she was a Republican and he was a Democrat and they cancelled each other's vote every election.

JW: [Laughter]

NJ: They voted every election too. He worked at Alcoa and he told her she was crazy; if she had ever had to hold a job, she wouldn't be so happy to be a Republican. [Laughter] And my dad and mother never discussed politics because he was a Democrat and he had a hard time finding a job after participating in the strike at ALCOA and his dad being president of the union, so he never discussed politics. They voted every year, but they never, ever discussed politics in front of us.

JW: Well, I won't take too much more of your time.

NJ: I'm enjoying it if you're enjoying it. I haven't been able to talk about some of [these topics] in years. My children sure don't want to hear it. They've got their own things going.

JW: Well, I bet they would be interested to hear this because they watched you do these things.

NJ: Yeah, some of it, they did, yeah.



## **Norma Jennings**

JW: Well, is there anything you want to add, or any topic that we haven't talked about that you would like to bring up?

NJ: Not that I can think of. I think you've hit about everything [laughter].

JW: Well, I bet you I could think of a few more things and come back to you.

NJ: If you do, that's fine. I'll be glad to talk to you. I've already hung myself now. So come back; I'll tell you anything.

JW: Well, thank you for doing this.

NJ: You're welcome. You're welcome, and I appreciate your patience on what happened the last time you were trying to get in touch with me.

JW: It was okay.

END OF INTERVIEW

Mike Hamrick, August 24, 2010

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