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

Interview U-0494

June Rostan

6 July 2009

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ABSTRACT – JUNE ROSTAN

June Rostan is a long time community and labor activist in East Tennessee and the South. She was born in Valdese, North Carolina, in 1947. Rostan received her B.A. from Maryville College in 1969 and her M.A. in Special Education from Appalachian State University in 1970. In the early 1970s Rostan went to Italy with the World Student Christian Federation. In Italy Rostan became involved in the labor and women's movements. Upon returning to the United States in 1974, Rostan began activist work with several organizations such as the Georgia Power Project and the Southern Appalachian Ministry before becoming the labor education program coordinator at Highlander Research and Education Center in New Market, TN, a position she held from 1977-1982. While at Highlander, Rostan began consulting with the Coal Employment Project, and in 1982 she became the health and safety coordinator for the organization. She worked on two major projects for Coal Employment Project: a pregnancy study of women coal miners and a campaign for parental leave. In 1987, Rostan left the Coal Employment Project and became the director of the Southern Empowerment Project. Rostan is currently a community organizer for the AFL-CIO. Questions focused on June Rostan's introduction to the women's movement and her work with the Coal Employment Project, which fought for rights for coal mining women. Themes covered in the interview include: life experiences that prepared Rostan for activism, Rostan's interpretation of the women's movement in the South, women's issues as a thread in Rostan's organizing work, her participation in the Coal Employment Project, and her understanding of how the Coal Employment Project related to the national women's movement. Rostan also discussed her views of the current state of the labor and women's movement. This interview is part of the Southern Oral History Program's project to document the women's movement in the American South.

FIELD NOTES – JUNE MARGUERITE ROSTAN
(compiled July 7, 2009)

Interviewee: June Rostan

Interviewer: Jessie Wilkerson

Interview Date: June 6, 2009

Location: Greenback, Tennessee

THE INTERVIEWEE. June Rostan is a long-time community and labor activist in East Tennessee and the South. She was born in 1947 in Valdese, North Carolina. Rostan received her B.A. from Maryville College in 1969 and her M.A. in Special Education from Appalachian State University in 1970. In the early 1970s Rostan went to Italy with the World Student Christian Federation. While there she also learned about the labor and women's movements. Upon returning to the United States in 1974, Rostan began activist work with several organizations such as the Georgia Power Project and the Southern Appalachian Ministry before becoming the labor education program coordinator at Highlander Research and Education Center in New Market, TN, a position she held from 1977-1982. While at Highlander, Rostan began consulting with the Coal Employment Project, and in 1982 she became the health and safety coordinator for the organization. She worked on two major projects for Coal Employment Project: a pregnancy study of women coal miners and a campaign for parental leave. In 1987, Rostan left the Coal Employment Project and became the director of the Southern Empowerment Project. Rostan is currently a community organizer for the AFL-CIO.

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 interviewed June Rostan at her home in Greenback, TN. I interviewed Rostan once before in 2005 when I was conducting research for my master's thesis, and I have seen her on several occasions at social gatherings in East Tennessee; thus, the atmosphere was quite relaxed. We sat on the back porch where we had lunch before we began the interview. There were no interruptions during the interview. The interview was shorter than it might have been because the temperature rose throughout the session and both June and I became warm as it was a humid, sunny summer day.

CONTENT OF THE INTERVIEW. Questions focused on June Rostan's life as an activist, her introduction to the women's movement, and her work with the Coal Employment Project, an organization that helped women attain employment in coal mines. Themes covered in the

interview include: life experiences that prepared Rostan for activism; Rostan's interpretation of the women's movement in the South; her participation in the Coal Employment Project; her understanding of how the Coal Employment Project related to the broader women's movement. Rostan also discussed her views of the current state of the labor and women's movements.

TRANSCRIPT: JUNE ROSTAN

Interviewee: June Rostan

Interviewer: Jessica Wilkerson

Interview Date: July 6, 2009

Location: Greenback, Tennessee

Length: One audio file, approximately 67 minutes

START OF INTERVIEW

Jessica Wilkerson: This is Jessie Wilkerson, and I am at the home of June Rostan, and this is July 6, 2009. Okay. I want to start June by asking you what were your very first experiences as an activist? [Pause] I guess-- When did you have your start in this long career?

June Rostan: Okay, I guess I would say college or high school.

JW: What did you do?

JR: In high school? It was weird stuff. It was like-- No, I guess that wasn't really activism. I organized for us to get gold lamee caps and gowns. [Laughs] I don't think that really counts as activist but people in the class did not want them. I think we ended up with black or something. [Pause] So I guess my first experiences as an activist were in college, and it involved working to end the war in Vietnam and also working for students' rights and women's rights, because the women students at Maryville College at that time were treated differently from the men. We

were locked in the dorms at night, so some of us got involved in pushing for changes in regulations and rules for women students.

JW: Um hmm. So did you start organizations to do that?

JR: We used the existing women's, you know, the student, the women's student government was already kind of organized in the dorms. They had organizations, so we kind of used those, and we just put up signs in the dormitories saying that we wanted changes and stuff. I don't remember a whole lot about it. And had meetings with the Dean of Women and we just kept pushing and pushing until we got the rules changed and we got keys for seniors, for juniors and seniors so we could stay out past hours. And then we also were required to wear dresses to class and to the dining room and on that we just started, some of us just started wearing pants in the dining room and it just caught on and they couldn't stop it then. There was nothing they could do.

JW: Did you see that as part of women's rights or the women's rights movement? Or what was it that made you all think that you should start pushing for changes?

JR: Well, you know I didn't really know there was a national women's movement, I don't think, at that time. But I knew that it wasn't fair for women students to be treated differently. I hadn't been treated differently in my own home. Well, a little bit, maybe. I guess my brother got a little bit more leeway, but there weren't significant differences in how we were treated as children and teenagers in my home so to me it seemed very unfair that women students were locked in the dormitories and the men could roam the campus and town all night long. And also that there was a dress code that meant women had to wear skirts to classes and to chapel and in

the dining hall. I mean that was-- We brought the college into the modern age. We did them a favor really.

JW: Well, I was looking back at our past interview, and you had mentioned briefly going to Italy. Were you in college then?

JR: No, it was after. It was after college. In fact I had gotten a master's degree at Appalachian State in special education, deaf education. So I then went to Italy for two years as a Frontier Intern. So I got involved in the women's movement in Italy, and I was in a consciousness-raising group with about four or five other women. And also did a study group session on women's issues with women alumni of the night school, and then I also worked for this group of people who were Waldensians and Methodists and dissenting Roman Catholics ran a night school for young workers to get their middle school diploma. So I taught English in the night school and I helped design some practical based curriculum for them to use that related to the workers' experience. And then I was also a part of a group in Milan that, a women's group, that helped start a women's clinic in a working class neighborhood where women could get birth control. And the debates were starting then, you know, about abortion too. Because at that time in Italy there was no divorce. I think the referendum on divorce was held when I was there or shortly, or maybe it was later because I would go back to Italy about every five years and visit for several weeks. So I can't remember exactly what year the referendum on divorce was. It may have been when I was there from '72-'74.

JW: Do you think getting more involved in the women's movement in Italy was different from the sort of movement people got involved in in the states? I mean, it sounds like class was a more a part of, class consciousness was more a part of it?

JR: Well, the women's movement in Italy, many of the women who were involved in it-- The women in the consciousness-raising group I was in, most of them came from middle class families. They were going to university or they worked in white-collar jobs: teachers, office workers. And then the women who were students in the school came from working-class families and themselves were factory workers. In Italy, the workers movement, the union movement, and the left was really grounded in class struggle, and so the development of the feminist movement in Italy was mostly, was for the most part made out of women who came out of those political—either left political groups or trade unions, many of them had been in the teachers union or other kinds of unions where they worked. So, yeah I think because of that it was different. Had I been here in the United States I think my experience-- It would have been interesting to see how it would have been different because I don't know if I would have been in a consciousness-raising group. Maybe, I don't know. Milan was a pretty big city. I lived outside of Milan in a city called Cinisello which had about ninety-thousand inhabitants. So I think that the women's movement in this country probably took very different form and fashion in rural areas and in cities. And because I was in or near a big city in Italy it made it possible for me to be in a consciousness-raising group and but then also it was a different-- Because the women's movement was inserted, or was part, or grew out of a left, a left movement that was very much based in trade unionism and an analysis of class made it a bit different, too.

JW: What life experiences prepared you for your work as an activist and community organizer? And I ask that because some people have family experiences or saw their parents doing certain things that helped prepare them.

JR: Well, my mother always worked outside the home. She always had a paying job except for maybe a year she took off once or twice when we were born, so that really influenced me.

Because in the fifties not everybody's mother, you know, worked, had a paying job. And so the family, the household work was divided. My father kept us during the day time because he worked the night shift at the bakery, and Mother worked at the office at this big bakery. So he kept us and he would make supper and he also helped with the housework. And so that also-- That gave me a sense of, that men could do those kinds of jobs and share more equitably in the household, in running the household, taking care of the children and running the household. And, let's see, you know it seems strange, but I would say Girl Scouts, too, was a shaping factor. In terms of learning leadership qualities and how to get along in a group and how to really do group work, that Girl Scouts-- And we had a couple of Girl Scout leaders that were really phenomenal. One of the women was, she didn't have any children of her own and she had been raised on a farm, and she could do everything. And so we did a lot of outdoor stuff, too. Like camping. We did fifty miles on the Appalachian Trail when we were in the 8th grade. So we did a lot of things that really helped form our identity as girls who could do lots of different things. So that was a factor. And I guess those are basically the main things.

JW: So you mentioned being in Italy, and being in a city, and that giving you the opportunity to get involved in the consciousness-raising group. But I also wonder how growing up in the South shaped your understanding of women's liberation or the women's movement?

JR: [Pause] You know, let me backtrack, too, and also say I think my two grandmothers were a real factor, too, because both of them-- My father's mother ended up raising her kids because her husband went into a mental institution when they were in Chicago, and she had nine children and she ended up—a couple of them were already married—but she ended up raising these kids and moving South from Chicago to North Carolina so the older kids could go to work in the textile mills. So she was a very strong person. And then also my mother's mother survived four

husbands. She was married four times and outlived four husbands. And so that was also a factor, too. And yet she made sure that her children were taken care of and stuff. But growing up in the South I would think tends to make you, oh, a little, schizophrenic (may be too strong of a word), but there's supposedly this ideal image of the Southern belle. Of course that's about women of a certain class, and we weren't in that class because my mother's family were poor dirt farmers and they had it really tough and my father's family had it tough, too. And so there are a lot of contradictions about growing up female in the South where there's this idealized vision of what, you know, the southern woman is supposed to be, and you know, you're supposed to, if you've got the money, you're supposed to make your debut, you know, to society. To be a debutante. And, you know, all those other things. You're supposed to be a cheerleader and a majorette. And yet the reality is that women in the South have it very-- Have it tough, I think. Even women who were in the upper class, I think, had a hard time. Of course they might have had women servants who waited on them, but in terms of how they were treated and, you know, whether their opinion was respected and stuff, there were some, I think often their opinion wasn't. So I would say, I don't know if it's any different in the North. It might be. But in the South I think there are these contradictions about what women are supposed to do and then there's what you see, what really happens in terms of what women's lives are like and how women who are left widows and other things have to survive, have to end up doing things. And then I think women, you know, women in Appalachia ended up taking on things sometimes and being the leaders and sticking their necks out during some of the things that happened. Even though they were supposed to be chained to the stove and barefoot and pregnant all the time. But, you know, there ended up being women like Florence Reece and the women in the Brookside Women's Group, the Women's Auxiliary at Brookside during the strike there. And

the men were prohibited from being on the picket line so the women went out on the picket line, and I always remember Florence going to some of the men who were sitting down on the railroad [tracks] during the Brookside Strike and really just kind of shaming them and saying, “Aren’t you ashamed that you’re women are up there on the picket line trying to stop the cars from going into the mine and you’re down here whittling on the railroad tracks?” So, a lot of contradictions between how women were supposed to be treated or idolized or put up on a pedestal but then how they were actually treated in life, how they had to do a lot of things that were very hard. How they had to be the economic support for their families lots of times, and then how they had to stick their necks out and be the leaders sometimes in some of the fights.

JW: Yeah, well the contradictions are even in your own family with your mother and both your grandmothers...They worked and did things on their own.

JR: Right.

JW: That’s an interesting idea.

JR: And neither of my grandmothers, I don’t think ever-- Even though I think my mother’s mother may have had a job when she was very young. She may have worked in a textile mill because I can remember her talking about buying a pair of white kid gloves or something with her wages that she got. But my other grandmother never had a paying job, but she worked so hard. She really did, raising all those kids, and she sewed and knit and kept house for one of my aunts for years and years.

JW: How did you come to be involved in the Coal Employment Project?

JR: Well, I was hired part-time when I was at Highlander to work on-- Let's see, I'm trying to remember-- Yeah, I was hired part-time to work on something and I can't remember if it was the pregnancy study or I was hired to do something and it just evolved into--

JW: From what I saw in the records it looked like it was the pregnancy study.

JR: Okay, I was hired part-time to do that. I'd been doing something with them I think, and I was still technically a full-time staff person at Highlander. Coal Employment Project reimbursed Highlander for my time. So I was like the Health and Safety Coordinator for the Coal Employment Project, and I spent probably about half my time at CEP. And I started working on some things around health and safety. That was it and became the principal investigator for the pregnancy study that they did. And then in '82, right after Highlander's fiftieth anniversary, Coal Employment Project had decided to really take the parental leave issue on full steam and so I became the coordinator for that, and I knew that I couldn't do that and still be at Highlander, so I left Highlander to go full-time to Coal Employment Project. I think that was like in late 1982 or early '83. So I did both the pregnancy study and coordinated a campaign to get parental leave in the Mine Worker's contract and as federal legislation. But the women were mostly focusing on the Mine Worker's contract to start with.

JW: So to get the timeline straight here-- You were staff at Highlander. You were health and safety--

JR: I was a labor education coordinator at Highlander. I started out just teaching GED classes for them with a contract with Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, and then after Bingham Graves left to go to work for the union full time, I became the labor education coordinator for Highlander. And I did that for five years.

JW: How would you describe the CEP's goals in relation to the broader women's movement?

JR: Well, it was an advocacy group for women coal miners—for and of women coal miners. In relationship to the broader women's movement, nationally, I'd say it was a clearly working-class group. Women in the organization, for the most part, were women who had been coal miners. Were or had been coal miners. The staff—not all of them had. Some of them had, and a couple of them were attorneys, and a couple of them were just generalists like myself. In terms of the women's movement in Appalachia, I think it's the determination or designation of identity as workers in a particular industry that differentiated that group from other women's groups. Other women's groups, I guess, were based in the community or were groups of women who were fighting for particular women's issues like-- [Pause] Like reproductive rights or freedom from sexual assault and domestic violence or more broad women's organizations. Like there were local chapters of the National Organization of Women during that time, and then there were a few groups that were regionally identified like the Coalition of Appalachian Women, and things like that. So it was that focus on work, working as a coal miner, a female coal miner that set itself, set it apart.

JW: Was there tension there? Were women, especially coal-mining women, did they see themselves as part of a women's movement or did it seem like something separate? Like did they embrace that title of feminism or women's liberation or did it turn out to be something a little different?

JR: I think it was a little bit different. I mean the answer to that is yes and no. I think they clearly identified with women's rights, the struggle to be treated fairly in the workplace and to not be discriminated against in the workplace. In some respects they did not identify, or the

issues, like the abortion issue was never raised. I can't remember there ever being any kind of resolutions or anything around abortion. We didn't spend that much time talking about it, but I think there was just kind of a silent assumption that that could be a divisive issue and so it wasn't brought up. So I think they saw themselves as allied with other trades women's groups. At that time there were some national groups like Hard-Hatted Women, women who were in the building trades and other predominantly male industries. And then also there was a group called women in fire suppression or women firefighters, so they really closely identified with working-class women's organizations. Coalition of Labor Union Women-- They were, women miners joined that if there was a CLUW chapter in their area. They identified with women in unions. And particularly the industrial unions. But all unions really. So yeah, there was a class consciousness I think on their part, but we did end up working in coalitions with groups like— [Pause] Is it called the National Women's [Law] Center? It was a group in Washington that worked on legal issues for women, mostly employment issues, but-- So they aligned themselves, and often they would align themselves with NOW on a lot of things, too. You know, generally, I think women involved with the Coal Employment Project were in favor of the Equal Rights Amendment. I forget what years that period was, but so I think they did consider themselves a part of the women's movement but their enthusiasm and their energy was really relegated to working-class women's organizations and this particular organization.

JW: So how did the Mine Workers, the United Mine Workers treat CEP? What was the relationship like with them?

JR: For the most part it was a pretty good relationship. I don't know-- Since I came there in '82, or well I guess I started working with them in the late 70s, I went to Highlander in late 77, so it would have been maybe '78 or '79 that I started or '80 that I started doing some work for Coal

Employment Project, and the group had gotten formed in '73. So by that time the relationship with the union was pretty good. There were occasions when it got kind of rocky, but a lot of the women were UMWA members themselves, and so they would get their union locals sometimes to sponsor them to send them to the women coalminer's conferences and then toward the middle and end of the organization's history, men started coming to the conference too because they were interested in the issues and sometimes their local union would send them. So they got pretty good, relatively good support from the Mineworkers. It was very tough for the women to run for office sometimes at a, even at a local level. They had a heck of a fight, and one of the women, Joy Hewitt, ran and won district office in the district in Utah, District 22. But I think she only served one or two terms and then got defeated by another woman.

And so some of the women who served in offices early on at the district-- There weren't many of them who got elected to district offices. The UMW was organized by districts, and they were regionally, geographically based. So women would run for local office and could be successful at that, and I guess there were some other women who eventually became district officers, I think. And there was a woman, Linda Rasovich, worked as a health and safety rep for the International. But the first times they ran for district office or local office they usually had a pretty tough time. In '83 when we were working on the parental leave campaign, we encouraged women to run as delegates from their locals for the constitutional convention of the Mine Workers because that's where they decided what things they were going to bargain for in their contract. They were required by their constitution to hold these constitutional conventions every so often, and there were ten women who got elected. Now I went to that convention. It was in Pittsburgh in December and I, you know, there were a couple of thousand men there and there were ten-- I don't know what the official number of delegates there were there, but out of all of

those there were ten women. It was just-- I mean, it's such a stark minority. Now when the men in their district or their local supported them, they really, really supported them. And a lot of the women came from coal mining families, so their fathers and brothers were coalminers. And so that sometimes helped them, but they still had a tough road. They had to win the men over sometimes. And sometimes I think in some instances they faced some pretty tough opposition.

JW: Why do you think the CEP decided to focus on pregnancy and the parental leave campaign?

JR: Because the women had raised it as an issue. They had been talking for several years and had passed resolutions at their conference every year about needing time off when they were pregnant. And so it started out as a resolution on maternity leave and then they broadened it to make it parental leave because they realized that they were such a minority in the union that they'd never get that just for themselves. Then they also said, you know, "There are men who need off when their wives have babies." Some of the women-- Some of their wives don't drive, or if there's an illness in the family of a child or somebody else in the family, there's a serious illness, they often had to drive several hours to a regional medical facility. Like in Charleston, or Morgantown, West Virginia, or in Pittsburgh. And some of these-- In Richmond, or, I don't know, Charlottesville if you're in southwest Virginia. And so the men, they said, really needed the time off, too. So that's why they pushed for the parental leave. They really saw a need that the women needed more time off than the standard six weeks for maternity leave and that they also saw it and identified it as a need that their union brothers had. And they also knew that it would be easier to get it passed if it was a demand that they made on behalf of themselves *and* their union brothers. The pregnancy study-- There were questions in people's minds about whether women continuing to work in the coal mines during their pregnancies could lead to

possible birth defects or problems with the pregnancy. And so that's why they wanted to do the pregnancy study was to see if there were.

JW: Mm hmm. We covered this a little bit, but I'll just ask the question in a different way and see if you remember how people felt about the mainstream women's rights movement. So things like the pageant protest and *Ms.* magazine and consciousness-raising groups or if those were even really thought about much and like you said, it was just more of a labor orientation and thinking about working women's rights.

JR: Well, I think they were aware of things. I mean, the thing about burning the bras at the Miss America pageant, I still wonder if part of that is still mythology. That I don't think people paid-- Of course that was early on the women's movement, too. People did tend to read *Ms.* Magazine because the founder of Coal Employment Project was named as one, Betty Jean Hall was named as one of the *Ms.* magazine's women to watch in the '80s or something. So they-- And I think *Ms.* also gave kind of free subscriptions sometimes. So they tended to read *Ms.* magazine and found that interesting I think, overall. What was the other part of it?

JW: Consciousness-raising groups--

JR: Well, you know, I think that because these women were in rural areas they probably did not participate in consciousness-raising groups. My impression is that was a phenomenon that happened in urban areas, but, you know, their conferences every year dealt with all kinds of subjects. And, oh gee, everything from sexual harassment-- They tended to be practically oriented, to be things that would help women on the job, but, you know, there would be big sessions on sexual harassment and how to protect yourself from it and what to do, what your rights were. And then things around health and safety, particularly protective clothing and

equipment for women because that was a big issue. The gloves and equipment that the companies issued were not-- Usually did not fit the women. And then there were issues around job assignments, so the-- It'd be interesting to look at the workshop titles from each of those every year because there was a committee of women who met every year to plan that conference. So the conference workshops really reflected what was on their minds. What they were interested in. And they usually had a speaker, you know. Often they had speakers who were women who were nationally known. I can't remember who some of them were, but to come and be a speaker. You know, sometimes it was men, you know, the head leadership from the Mine Workers. But we heard and had our picture taken with Gloria Steinem when she was in east Texas once because we were working on a project down there. And I can't remember who else, who other women were who came and spoke. Addie Wyatt maybe from, who was from CLUW and who was an African American trade unionists. Seems like she spoke at one of the conventions although I could be wrong. But go back and review those and see who spoke at those conferences. It was an interesting group of women, lawyers and different things like that.

JW: What was your sense of how coalmining communities, not just the women in the community, but communities as a whole accepted the CEP or the organizing that women were getting involved in?

JR: It was controversial in the beginning, and the women themselves were controversial in the beginning. The stories that a lot of them told, they really were-- Some of them were really under suspicion from the other coalminers' wives and things. Because, you know, if you're working in an underground mine, you're underground with these men all these hours. So there was a lot of suspicion and discrimination toward them in the very beginning, but then slowly but surely it began to wear off, I think, as more women went in to the mines. And now-- I think in the early

years, too, the union didn't know what to make of Coal Employment Project because it was an independent organization, and it was an organization-- Most of the people on staff were women and most of the people who went to the conferences were women. So, you know, because it was independent and not controlled by the union, I think there was some, maybe some mistrust occasionally. But also, I think, some respect. Because the women tended to take on some issues sometimes that the union wouldn't take on. Like, I remember one year, this would have been in the '80s sometime because I was there from '83, or late '82 to '87, we did a workshop at one of the conferences on the environment and on acid rain. And the union at that time had took the position that acid rain didn't exist, that there needed to be more study of it. And that it needed to be studied more in order to prove that there really was acid rain. And the women tended to be more, kind of, "Open your minds. This is the companies that are saying this. This is the company line. You know if something is bad for us, it's bad for the trees. And if it's bad for the trees, it's bad for us." And they tended to be a little bit bolder on some of the environmentally linked issues to mining. And so that sometimes caused some tension between them and the union. I think, for the most part, for the community, Coal Employment Project was accepted, or maybe there wasn't any opinion. It's hard to say who, you know, you have to kind of target or pinpoint who in the community in particular.

JW: Well, it's interesting that you bring up the suspicions. I saw a lot of that when I was going through the records of women's personal testimonies and trying to make it clear that they didn't want these jobs because they were trying to steal people's husbands. And how sexuality really became a big part of it was really fascinating. [Laughs]

JR: Right.

JW: As though coalmining was a safe space for these women to send their husbands. There was no threat. They knew they could trust them if they were there?

JR: And besides, I mean, that's not the most sexy, the sexiest place in the world right? In a coal mine with all that water and dust and dirt and coal and everything. You know it seemed really kind of weird. But it's like, you know, in the very, very beginning when Coal Employment Project started and the women started going underground-- I think the first woman first went underground in '73 according to the NIOSH statistics. There was the same kind of superstition about women in coal mines that there was about women on boats. That there used to be, years ago, that it was bad luck for a woman to be in a coal mine. And that something bad would happen. There would be an accident or something. In fact, that's how the project got started was they were taking a tour in Campbell County, I think, and a female organizer from SOCM [Save Our Cumberland Mountains] was supposed to go on the tour and the guy, the mine operator said you can't let this woman go because it's bad luck. Betty Jean Hall had been interning I think, or maybe she came the next summer, but the people associated with that I think, Neil McBride of East Tennessee [Research Corporation] raised the question about if that's a superstition, are women getting hired in the mines and that's where the idea came from I think to do the project.

JW: Did problems arise that you didn't expect, or, on the other hand, did alliances develop that you wouldn't necessarily have expected?

JR: [Pause] Well, you know, I think that sometimes we get the impression that women's organizations are, you know, just rah-rah sisterhood and everything, but they have their own kinds of problems because, I think women, because of their internalized oppression sometimes play that-- That internalized oppression plays out in weird ways sometimes, and they take it out

on each other. So sometimes there ended up being kind of problems that you wouldn't have anticipated because of the women, the personalities involved, or just suspicion and distrust, or, you know, stuff like that. I was trying to think in terms-- I think some of the support from the men, on the maternity/paternity leave-- I was really rather surprised at how solid support it seemed to get. It got. From those women, there were seventeen women who we brought together for a workshop to train them to work on this, and they developed the language to be used in the clause and they developed strategy for getting it passed at the convention and in their locals. They sent resolutions to the conventions, to the district conventions and then to the international convention. And overall that effort got resounding support and that was a bit of a surprise to me. I thought that they might have encountered some more resistance. But I think because of the way the women presented it and because it was for both men and women then it got a lot of support.

JW: I was going to ask you, and this is a bit of a broader question about your own experiences in the various organizations you've worked in-- How do you see continuity in your experiences as an activist who participated in several movements sometimes emphasizing women's rights, sometimes emphasizing labor or community activism more? Is there something that, for you, bridged all of those things?

[Pause]

JW: I guess I was thinking you in particular because you worked with religious activists, you've done women's rights stuff, you've done the labor stuff, you've done Southern Empowerment [Project], you have a really varied movement history.

JR: Well, the involvement of women is a real thread, I think, wherever I've been. The importance of women having a voice and being respected and their leadership being valued and their ability to be elected as a leader or chosen as a leader has been a very important thread. And also that they get a chance to participate fully and not be discriminated against has been a big factor. And I, you know, I really have to say that when I came back to labor movement five years ago after being away for so long I was really kind of disappointed that a lot of things-- I was not disappointed that a lot of things had changed. Some things had changed and there were more women involved and more women on staff of organizations, but not as many women in leadership some places where they needed to be. And the same thing for people of color. It's still basically is pretty much dominated by white men. They're a bit younger. Some of them are getting older, but some of them are younger. But it's still overall pretty much a white guy's club. And I guess the theme, the other theme is-- Yeah, I think that even runs throughout the religious stuff is that, another thread, is [Pause] the need to stand up for whoever is lowest on the totem pole. Well, that's not a good term to use—lowest on the totem pole. But who is, you know, that group of people that is oppressed and needs to be, needs their voice to be heard? And I guess those are the overarching themes. And that the-- Being grounded in some kind of faith community or some kind of basic belief about people and their ability to do things is that people can change and that we can make things better and that often it looks like that things are pretty bad—and they are pretty bad—but that if you just keep believing and working for it that you can turn things around. And you'll make a few steps forward and sometimes a few steps back, but I think that faith that belief kind of keeps you going when the times get tough. It's not a very profound--

JW: [Laughs] So your disappointment in the labor movement would-- Do you think that-- I mean obviously it's not as easy as this, but either the women's movement didn't do enough to emphasize how economics plays out in women's, especially poor women's, lives and working women's lives or that the labor movement didn't do enough to kind of reach out to its women workers and bring them in, get them involved in leadership positions?

JR: The second one-- I think the labor movement-- I think it's going to take-- I mean there are women in leadership positions, but there are not enough of them who are actually in the top leadership positions. And, who knows, maybe that won't change anything. I tend to think that it will. I mean, if they're just imprints of the kind of men that are the top leaders then maybe it won't change. But they should be more sensitive to the issues for women workers and, you know, of course I think there is more sensitivity to families in general in the labor movement now than there was. But I think it's the second. I think that the labor movement hasn't, or the top leadership in the labor movement. And maybe it's that as women we haven't pushed enough to support other women and to push some of these guys out of leadership. There are more women on the executive committee, of the executive council of the AFL-CIO than there were some years ago. But if you still look at how many women are heads of international unions, there are not very many. And if you look at Change to Win, the heads of the Change to Win unions and stuff, there are not any women who are heads of those unions either. And they're supposed to be among the more progressive. And it, so some of the men leaders are decidedly better. I think Larry Cohen is-- I don't know how he is on women's issues and feminist issues, but in terms of democracy he's just really very good in the CWA which is the union that I belong to as a member of the guild. It's a very good democratic union. So I think the men leaders have improved, and they're open to women's issues more and there are women. But maybe it's going

to take another generation of where we'll see that, you know, it's women who will head up these organizations. And then I really hope it will make some difference. But I think what's happened in the labor movement in the last ten years has been really, really shaped by these male egos. And that, you know, the whole split between the Change to Win and the AFL-CIO really was, I think, shaped by white male egos. And some of these guys-- All of them are probably pretty good people, but it's their stuff that's gotten in the way, I think. And at the local level it hasn't really made very much difference at all. In none of these situations did anybody in the unions, the rank-and-file get to vote. I don't think. I could be wrong. I don't think anybody that was a rank-and-file person got to vote on whether to withdraw from the AFL-CIO or, you know-- Those decisions were made at the leadership levels of the executive councils or the heads at these international unions or their executive boards of their international unions, and the rank-and-file at the local level didn't get a say. And so they continued to work with-- I was on a campaign when this change happened right after I got hired-- Not long after I got hired that the split came, and we had serious layoffs at the AFL-CIO. Well, on the campaign I was working on at the local level it didn't matter. People from United Food and Commercial Workers continued to work with people from other unions from the UAW, from the Mine Workers, because they had relationships that they built for years. They were friends. They were neighbors. They were people who'd worked in the labor movement together. And I see that in the other campaigns that I'm on. At the local level it didn't make that much difference. So I hope that we can develop leaders who will help rebuild the labor movement from the bottom-up and really stay focused on what the needs of workers in this country are. We're going to have to come up with some new ideas. And I hope that women will be a part of that solution of that new leadership.

JW: Kind of paralleling all that, how have your ideas about women's rights changed over time?

JR: Well, I hope that I wouldn't say I've become an accommodationist, if there is such a term. I guess now that I'm older-- I still get angry sometimes about things. Maybe I'm not as vocal as I used to be, and I should be. When I still see a program that's almost all men, maybe one token woman or something, I still get upset. But I think I'm able now to kind of focus on the bigger issues, I hope. That are important. And I guess one of my disappointments—this is not the question you asked—but is that the women's organizations, some of them had a short-lived history. They didn't last as long as they should have or could have. And that's a disappointment.

JW: Why do you think they didn't last?

JR: Well, maybe the other part of it is, maybe they didn't need to last forever because our hope was that those organizations could effect a change. For instance, it would be nice if the Coal Employment Project were still around. But a lot of the-- There are not that many women working in the mines since the '80s. A lot of them got laid off and never came back. And so, you know, it was a question of resources I think that they essentially folded up. They weren't able to raise money, and couldn't reinvent themselves to get foundation money. So I mean I guess the original idea, some of the original ideas were that these organizations-- It's like forming a caucus, you know. You form a caucus in a bigger organization in order to push for some of the things that your identity group wants or needs. I think with the hope that once you win those then you may not have to keep your caucus alive forever. But that you can then integrate back into the bigger organization and you will have brought about that kind of change that you wanted to see and become a part of the leadership of the bigger organization. So, you know, maybe not all the women's organizations needed to survive, but I'm glad for instance that there's still a National Organization of Women. I'm not a member, but I'm glad that NOW is

still there. I don't know how active and effective they are but I'm glad there are still women's-- Of course the League of Women Voters has been around forever, you know. I'm glad there are still women's organizations. We formed a women's group in the Democratic Party here in Loudon County and that has been a really interesting-- Fifteen years ago I never would have done that. So I guess I'm-- Part of what's changed about me now and my perception of the women's movement is I'm also more willing to kind of align myself with women from more-- These women are not terribly middle-class though some of them in Tellico Village, their husbands were in management of auto companies or something. They are more middle-class in a way. But willing to work together with them for common goals and not be put off by the class differences as much, I think. Still committed to the priority on working and poor women and their issues, but willing also to make alliances with women from other class backgrounds to work for things that are needed.

JW: Well one thing that I've been thinking about with-- And we'll wrap up here-- I've been thinking about how, you know, the part of the women's movement that was helping women to break into jobs that they didn't have before came up against this crisis because the economy was changing so rapidly at the same time. So I wonder what your thoughts are about that. If the-- I know Highlander Center addressed some, but I wonder your opinion on how that situation was addressed or if people really even understood how vastly things were going to change and if they could have possibly prepared for that--

JR: Well, you know in the beginning I guess we thought that there were going to be, that when the economic crisis hit that people were going to be laid off for a few years. I don't think we anticipated that there was going to be such a shift in the whole industrial base of the country and-- I don't know how we could have-- I guess we could have prepared. Boy, that's something I'd

have to really think about because it was really good that we had those women's organizations that did that pushing to get women into those occupations and stuff because it did break the mold. And women can go into traditionally male jobs now, and I think there's not as much discrimination. There are not that many women still in those jobs, percentage-wise, but I don't know what we could have done to-- If we had known this change in the industrial base was going to be so strong. I guess we would have pushed to get more women scholarships and stuff to go to college maybe in order to change their economic condition. We wouldn't have counted so much on those traditionally unionized, industrialized jobs to change their economic base. I mean now I'm working in Detroit and, of course, all that's happening in the auto industry. And, you know, there are lots of women in those auto plants and stuff. Lots of them in the UAW. What's going to happen to all of those families is really staggering. [Pause] You know, I guess we would have pushed for younger women to go into professions, and I think they are, though. I think-- My impression is that younger women don't-- There aren't the psychological barriers to some of these things that our generation had to break into. A lot of women become engineers and doctors and lots of women lawyers and stuff like that. And I bet they're starting to become a majority of the people teaching in colleges--

JW: Yeah, I think so. I think the majority of Ph.D. students somebody told me--

JR: And I think the med schools are about half and half or more now. And women as heads of universities. You know, women as heads of universities. There are more of them out there than there are heads of international unions. I bet if you compared. They've really broken through on some ground in that.

JW: Well, are there any questions that you thought I would ask that I didn't ask, or anything that you think you should add that you've thought about but haven't had the opportunity to say?

JR: Well, I guess just once again I would say in whatever aspect of-- Wherever you're involved or wherever women are involved, whatever kinds of organizations—the church, the university, political parties, unions, the workplace—it is just so important for women to be able to have full participation and to be in full leadership if they so desire in those organizations. And some places we've got-- On the church there's been some strides made, too, but in all of those places we just have to be ever vigilant about women's leadership and bringing other women along. That has to be emphasized, that that's a good trait of leadership. Don't pull the ladder up behind yourself, but make it a part of your leadership to bring other women along and involve them and get them going and get them in leadership.

END OF INTERVIEW

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