TRANSCRIPT – IRA GRUPPER

Interviewee: Ira Grupper

Interviewer: Sarah Thuesen

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START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

ST: Today is June twentieth, 2006. I am Sarah Thuesen and I'm interviewing Ira Grupper today in Louisville, Kentucky at his home. I thought we would just start today by talking a little bit about your background and how you made it to Louisville. I know you've discussed some of this before in previous interviews, so we won't hit on every topic, but there are a few things I wanted to ask you about that. I know you grew up in New York City, right?

IG: I grew up in New York City, yes.

ST: And you were born in what year?

IG: 1944.

ST: What did your parents do?

IG: My father was a bookkeeper. Well, he was a welder during World War II and they didn't know that asbestos was a carcinogen and he was a full-suited welder. He had top security in the Navy. He was a civil employee of the Navy during the World War II and afterward, it made him sick. He didn't know what the cause was, but he went to school and became a bookkeeper and he did that the rest of his life. My mother was a stenographer, a secretary and a stenographer, and she did that until the first child was born, me, and then she was a stay-at-

home mom for a long time. She went back after my brother became a teenager--he's five years younger than I--and did that for the rest of her working life.

ST: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

IG: Just one brother, younger than I.

ST: I know you mentioned in the interview with Tracy K'Meyer that part of your growing up years were spent in a housing project in Brooklyn.

IG: Yes, we lived in the Coney Island section of Brooklyn when I was raised and then when I was thirteen years old, we actually moved one step up on the socioeconomic scale to a city housing project, also in Brooklyn. I was there all my teenage years until I left home.

ST: Can you think of moments during your growing up years when you became aware of class differences?

IG: Yes. I guess what I should say parenthetically, but not parenthetically, really prefatorily, is that I was raised by parents who were from Orthodox Jewish stock, what you in the Christian world would call holy rollers, although my father was politicized during the Great Depression of the 1930s. And my mother became less ritualistically observant as she became older, not because she was estranged from religion or not estranged, but because it just was not as valuable to her as before. So that had an impact upon me and you asked me about my life in the projects, is that what you were—

ST: Right and your awareness of class differences.

IG: I suppose I became radicalized when I was about thirteen years old. My father would bring home different tracts. He was not an organizer or an activist in the way that I am or the way I became subsequent to being thirteen, but he was a very decent man. He would bring home this thing to read and that thing to read and I began to read and began to understand a

little bit about what was going on in the world. Even before that, I remember seeing the Army-McCarthy hearings on television and I didn't understand the whole thing, but I remember and I remember somebody saying something about McCarthy going after the US Army as being riddled with commies. There was a lawyer, I think his name was Welch, who was a Rock-ribbed Republican. He was no progressive guy. And he got on Joe McCarthy, told him basically that he should be ashamed of himself. That was very important; I thought that that was important. But I suppose if I had to talk about what affected me emotionally the most, because that affected me intellectually, what affected me emotionally the most was Rosa Parks when she refused to move to the back of a bus. That was 1955, so I was eleven years old at the time. I remember being very very interested in what was happening, though I didn't understand really the ramifications of the boycott. But I did see people walking instead of riding the bus, and taking carpools. That was very important to me. This is helpful to you to talk about it in this way?

ST: Yes.

IG: Okay, and then I think intellectually what made me go bad (laughs), go left, was that I did a lot of reading about the Spanish Civil War and 'la guerra civil en España.' I remember going to a rally in New York City organized by the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, which was one of the two [U.S.] groups that fought in Spain. There was the Washington Battalion and the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, but it's just known nowadays as the Abraham Lincoln Brigade—known, it's not known. History is passing people by, but it should be known. I read everything I could get my hands on. I have a whole bookshelf full of books on the [Spanish Civil War]. I was going to say it's an esoteric interest of mine and again it shouldn't be esoteric, it should be real, but that understanding of internationalism--.

I became a socialist of sorts. I say "of sorts" because I thought I knew more than I did. By the time I was sixteen, I thought I knew everything. I was a very shy kid. You wouldn't be able to tell that now. I was very shy and reticent, except when it came to political things and when I was sixteen, I thought I knew it all in the same way that Mark Twain, the story about Mark Twain when he said, "When I was sixteen, I couldn't believe how little my parents knew. And by the time I was twenty-one, I was amazed at how much they had learned." That was me. But I read and I read and I became a socialist and an anti-racist. I first became active in New York City around 1959, I want to guess.

Then in 1960, when the sit-in occurred in Greensboro, North Carolina, my father came home from work. Or was he laid off at that time? I don't know. No, I think he was working. We talked about what had happened in Greensboro and this was in February of 1960, the first day of February. "The next day," he said, "There are going to be some people picketing the local Woolworths in the neighborhood. Would you like to come?" I hope I didn't put this on the other recording with Tracy, but I don't remember what I said to her, so here I'm just telling you. So I said, "Daddy, sure I'll come with you," which meant I had to play hooky from school and I was a sophomore, I guess. I don't remember.

The thing I was concerned about the most was not the fact that I was going to picket. This was the first time I had ever done anything like that. But I was concerned that other kids in the school would see me, maybe on television, and I wanted to be like everybody [else]. Because I had very bad eyesight and I felt very inferior [because of my vision]. You don't want to be different when you're sixteen. You have pimples and you just don't want to.

It was gangbusters after that. I just went to all different kinds of meetings and rallies. So that was the genesis of my activity. I can't give you one particular incident or episode. But, as I

said, intellectually it was the Spanish Civil War, emotionally it was identification with the people being victimized by the Army-McCarthy hearings and Rosa Parks. And then a little bit later, my own activism began and I guess it was a combination of all those things, or as you intellectuals would say, "a mélange of events" probably caused all that.

ST: I'm interested in your young interest in socialism. I believe in the interview with Tracy, you had mentioned that you attended a rally of veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Were there any family members who steered you in that direction or did you come to this by yourself?

IG: As I said earlier, my father was not a political activist in the same way that I was, but he always would bring home different tracts and things. And I went with him to one or two events. I was very proud to go with him to the picket at Woolworths in support of the Greensboro students. But no, it was mainly me. I was an autodidact, I suppose, self-educated.

ST: The tracts your father brought home, do you remember what sorts of organizations they were from?

IG: Different socialist organizations, different progressive groups. There was *I. F. Stone's Weekly*, I remember, the *Guardian* newspaper, which was an independent socialist paper. It was then called the *National Guardian* and then later it was called the *Guardian*. He would bring home various, he brought home papers from the Communist Party [among other groups]. There was a fellow named M. S. Arnoni who put out a publication called *The Minority of One*, or *A Minority of One*. I. F. Stone was very important to me, because he used mainly bourgeois sources to expose the system. He would quote from the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times* or what have you. He didn't use just the left. So I would say that all of those together were what turned me on. [. . .]

ST: Let's talk just a little bit about your work in the South. You left to go to the South in the mid-60s, is that right?

IG: Yes, I was active in New York first. I was one of the people who did not see just a problem in the South and not a problem in the North. I thought that racism was universal in this country. So my first activities, in fact the first time I ever got arrested, was in New York City. But I really wanted to go South. In fact, I wanted to go South soon after the Greensboro sit-in when I went to that demonstration and that was 1960. I was sixteen years old and my parents, well my mother would never have approved anyhow, but my father said I was too young. He would not sign. I could have gone if I had some papers signed, but he would not sign a paper. So I stayed active there. Tell me your question again.

ST: I was just curious how you made it to the South.

IG: Okay. One of the things that I did in New York was to volunteer to do work with a group called the Friends of SNCC [Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee]. There was a SNCC fundraising office in New York City. I got to know the people there pretty well. I had thought of going South first around [1960 or 1961], but I was just very involved then. In '64, I was involved in, there was a boycott of New York City schools. That was the first time I ever got busted. I was involved as an organizer in that and I was arrested for, oh I don't know, conspiring to keep children of school age out of school or something like that. I was just in jail one day. There was a minister named Rev. Milton Galamison, a very important African-American leader in New York, and Bayard Rustin was involved in that also.

At that time, if this might be helpful to say as well, although I recognized that the problem was in the North as well as in the South, the focal point of activity was indeed in the South. The pimple bursting was in the South. Racism was manifesting itself in the most vicious

and brutal ways. And I think even before I went, in ’63 I remember watching on television the police dogs biting people in Birmingham. I was just aghast. Even my mother, she didn’t want black people being bitten by police dogs, but she didn’t want her son to be involved in any of this mess. She just wanted me: “Such a smart boy he was. Why can’t he just go to school?” But that really impacted me. I had never seen police dogs attack people and actually, I remember seeing flesh being torn off and that really--.

So I told the folk in SNCC that I really want to go South and I was hired first to work in Atlanta in the SNCC [research] office, some office job. There were all kinds of demonstrations, but I first learned to do research. I worked in the research office of SNCC and then became active in the community as well. Then about four of five months after—I’m very bad with dates, I can’t remember what I ate for breakfast this morning, but I can remember incidents forty years ago. But I can’t give you an exact time, I’m sorry to say.

ST: That’s quite alright.

IG: But I remember meeting a woman named Johnnie Mae Walker, and Johnnie Mae Walker was a leader, an African-American woman was one of the leaders of the movement in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, in the southern part of the state. I remember where we met. There was a forum at AU, Atlanta University, in the Interdenominational Theological Center. Stokely Carmichael was speaking and, actually, he made a statement that I disagreed with and I had the temerity, the absolute chutzpah, to get up and disagree with Stokely. He didn’t like that. (laughs)

ST: What was the statement?

IG: I don’t even remember. I can’t remember what it was. I’ve tried to think about that. But anyway, Johnnie Mae Walker, she says, “You’re pretty smart for a white boy.” She says,

"You're coming with me to Hattiesburg." I looked at her and I said, "You have to talk to me about that." But sure enough, another few months later, two, three, four months later, I wound up in Hattiesburg and [so I moved from SNCC to COFO]. I was not officially on the SNCC staff at that time. I guess I was, but I wasn't tethered to SNCC at that juncture. I worked with COFO, the Council of Federated Organizations, which was a coalition of all the civil rights groups in Mississippi at that time, then in addition, with the MFDP, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which SNCC and other groups, CORE [Congress of Racial Equality], helped form, to challenge the right of the regular Democratic Party to rule because they didn't allow black people in.

So I was in Hattiesburg and in June of '65, I guess I was there about five, six months. I don't remember how many months I was in Hattiesburg. But in June of '65, I went to a demonstration in Jackson, Mississippi and it [became known as] the Fairgrounds Motel. It was a very famous or infamous incident. There were nine hundred and fifty of us who were arrested in front of the State Capitol in Jackson. Why? Because we were protesting the illegal convening of the Mississippi State Legislature, illegal because it had disenfranchised African-Americans. We were put on these big trucks. They looked like semis, except that instead of solid metal sides, there was fencing. It was like a prison on wheels. That's exactly—it was not like, it was a prison. We arrived at the fairgrounds and we got off the trucks and then we were brought into a compound building of the fairgrounds, a huge building, absolutely humongous, where cattle had been kept and then moved, and where we would be staying. They booked us. "Booked" means they ask you for the color of your hair and your eyes and your height and your weight, etcetera.

Then we had to pass through a cordon of Mississippi [state] highway patrolmen, police, all of whom had these big truncheons, these batons. A billy club is a little stick and a baton is a long stick with a weight at the end, maybe lead. I don't know what was in there. After we were booked, we had to pass from one building to another, passing through this cordon of police. In an effort to get us to move faster, they started to jab us with these batons. Then they started to swing the batons. I was jabbed and then I was hit in the back. I sort of, you know how you reel back in pain? Whereupon I got hit again and the guy was a big bruiser, must have been six foot one. I don't remember exactly what happened then, but I must have passed out, because the next thing I remember in my consciousness was being in a second compound building with a bunch of other prisoners. So what must have happened was I must have been hit and some of the other prisoners picked me up and carried me, but I don't know. I can't say that for sure.

What I should say first is that it was all males. The women had been separated and I didn't see my jailed sisters until we were released on bond about two weeks later. They were taken elsewhere. In this prison, there were additional beatings for us protesting the cops segregating us. They put the black guys on one side and the whites on the other.

If I may tell you an incident which had a very important impact on my life then as well. You have to understand the tenseness of this all. There had been beatings and there were guards and you know, you're in an area where there's no reporters, there's nobody to observe. These were pretty vicious people, the cops. When it came time for dinner, as a form of control and humiliation, the police or the guards told the white prisoners to line up first. What I should say prefatorily is that we were all seated on a cement floor in this huge compound building. Again, it was where cattle had been kept. That's why we called it the Fairgrounds Motel, because it was a fairgrounds. It was literally, not figuratively, literally a fairgrounds.

So they forced us, as a form of control and humiliation, they made the white guys line up first to get our food. The food consisted of a sandwich and milk or maybe more accurately, two stale pieces of bread around a stale piece of baloney, no condiments. I mean, you don't ask for mayo. The milk was some very tepid water with a little bit of milk powder in there. And it was hot as hell. There was no air conditioning, no fans. It was just out in the open. Well no, not out in the open; it was a building. So each white guy singly got his sandwich and his cup and went back to his spot on the cement floor and sat down cross-legged, put the cup on the floor and the sandwich on top of the cup, Sarah. After each white guy was served, it was the turn of the black civil rights prisoners. Each one of them got his cup and his sandwich and went back to his side of the compound.

So the whites were sitting on one side and the African-Americans were sitting on the other. And nobody ate and nobody drank and there was no talking. After the last black guy got his cup and his sandwich and put it on the floor, put the cup on the floor with the sandwich atop, folded his arms, crossed his legs, we all picked up our sandwiches and milk and we broke bread as one. There was no prearrangement and my eyes still well up when I think about that. I mean, if I were a Christian or a Catholic, I would have thought of holy communion at that point. It was amazing. So that was another thing that influenced me in my thinking and my understanding of brotherhood and sisterhood, or what I'd like to think is my understanding.

ST: An unplanned moment or display of solidarity there.

IG: That's right, solidarity and also love, also respect, because it was solidarity in the sense that nobody would eat until everybody else did. But it was also a form of understanding of what human beings are all about, I think.

ST: How did you eventually get out of the—

IG: Out of the slammer.

ST: I didn't know whether to call it a jail or the fairgrounds.

IG: It was a jail. It was not officially a jail. You couldn't look up in the yellow pages under "jail" and find it. We were bailed out, somebody, I don't remember who, some organization. Actually, soon after that I went [north], there was a wonderful organization called the Medical Committee for Human Rights, doctors and nurses who would treat civil rights people who had been hurt and my back was bothering me quite a bit. So they paid for me to go east to get looked at by an orthopedic guy. [The doctor said] I just had bruises and contusions and just let time heal. So I spent about five, six weeks getting better and I was back with my parents for awhile.

Then I didn't go back to Mississippi directly, but I went first to Washington, DC, where I was on the staff of the MFDP office in Washington and I helped arrange appointments with legislators and we went to talk to people in various agencies. The EEOC, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, had just been formed. It was basically a concession to the power of the civil rights movement, is what it is. I helped arrange appointments with some of these folk and I accompanied folk from Mississippi who went there. There was an attorney named Bill Higgs.

ST: Higgs?

IG: Higgs. Marion Barry was part of that also, who later became the mayor. In any event, I did that for awhile and then moved back to Hattiesburg, Mississippi where I had been. And then from there, a friend of mine who was the project director of the MFDP in Columbia, Mississippi, thirty-six miles to the west, he came by and he said that he was really short of people who were experienced organizers to come to his town and he was very scared, because a

lot of the civil rights workers, primarily white civil rights workers, had left to go back to college to keep their 2S deferments. At that time, if you were eligible for the military and you were a student, they would defer your eligibility. They would defer your being called up. There was a draft and so a lot of the white students wanted not to be drafted, because they didn't want to go to Vietnam. I'm not criticizing them for that ( ).

So I moved to Columbia and I was in Columbia, I guess, a total of almost two years and was very involved with—well there were the main leaders at that point. There was a fellow named Curtis Stiles, an African-American fellow from Jayess, Mississippi near Tylertown and also in the southern part of the state. He was the main organizer. He opened up the project. Then there were several local people, Willis Johnson McClinton, W.J. McClinton. Curtis was a graduate of Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and W.J. was a third grade school dropout, functionally illiterate, who later taught himself to read and write and became a real expert in filing appeals for social security disability claims and people denied assessments and loans by the ASCS, the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, which was the main thing that a poor black farmer relied upon to get loans for crops and all. So they became fast friends. They opened the project about a year and a half before I got there. That Freedom House was dynamited, well it was bombed by the Klan, fire bombed. But it survived and that's where I eventually came to. We slept in sleeping bags on the floor to be below the bullet line in case they would do it again. Paranoid is the fear of the unreal. This was not the unreal. This was a real fear.

ST: Pretty real.

IG: Yeah. But the town itself did not the experience the enormous amount of bombings say that McComb, Mississippi experienced or the kind of governmental terror as it was

experienced in the Delta. In the Delta, you had huge plantations and that of itself was a deterrent, because there were large numbers of African American people working on a plantation. You buy your food from the store that's owned by the plantation. Everything, your life was subsumed under the aegis of the plantation. But in the southern part of the state, African Americans had a modicum of independence. There were a number of small farmers and they grew okra and butter beans and corn, tomatoes, cabbage, raised some cattle. So that's why the Klan, in my opinion, was so strong there. They wanted to maintain control. It was not that the Klan wasn't strong elsewhere, but it was particularly brutal and not in my town, in the place called Laurel, Mississippi, the headquarters of the Klan. I showed you that Klu Klux Klan sign; that where it came from, Laurel.

So that's what I did. I did a lot of stuff there. Well, I was in jail in Columbia also. (laughs) That's another story. But yeah, we had a boycott of the downtown stores and Curtis, W.J., and I spent two weeks, it was about two weeks in jail. They were in a colored cell and I was in solitary confinement in a white cell. I really did not think I was going to make it out and I'm not a paranoid person. I really thought that my days were numbered. I was very scared. I've never been so scared in my life.

ST: This would have been what year?

IG: '66. I went on the Meredith march after James Meredith was shot. I marched a hundred fifty miles from Batesville to Belzoni. I had to go back to the project, my project in Columbia, because somebody had gotten busted and I had to help bail this guy out, and came back and I joined the march just a few miles, maybe ten miles outside of Jackson. I just missed the big tear gas. There was a big tear gassing of demonstrators in Canton and everybody was teasing me, saying, "You knew about it." (laughs) I didn't know about. I didn't know about it.

Anyhow, that's my history. I didn't start in the very beginning in the South. I started in the very beginning of the civil rights movement to be involved, but it was in the North, not in the very beginning. I should also even say before that, there have been movements for civil rights ever since there have been commissions of civil wrongs. It was not like the black movement needed white folk to organize a movement, no. The movement for civil rights began in Thermopylae in 480 BC with the Spartans and how many tens of thousands of demonstrators. It was a continuum, maybe not an organized continuum, but history has always been a struggle and I was a foot soldier. A foot soldier in Thermopylae was more than a foot soldier, though. (laughs)

ST: I wanted to just go back for a minute and ask you one thing. You mentioned Stokely Carmichael and that made me think about the growing black nationalist movement that you have during the late 60s. How did that affect your work as a white person in the South?

IG: Well, that's an interesting question. On the Meredith march is when Stokely made his famous speech about black power. There was also a move to try to get white people to organize in white communities and to organize among their own folk. I fully supported all of that. I thought that was smart. But I think that some of it was not smart. I think that there was a little bit of artificiality to some of it. There was a place for interracial organizing, but the basic point of needing to organize the proletariat, the working class, which was black and white workers, was very valid. So I thought that that was a situation that I felt comfortable, I felt okay with.

ST: What prompted you to move back to New York?

IG: I didn't have any money, first of all. It was a place I knew. I was absolutely broke. I didn't have any money. When you asked me about my background, I don't want to plead

poverty to you. I never missed a meal that I can remember, [when I was growing up], but we never had money for anything. So I went back to New York and the first job I got, you know if you have the gift of gab, which I would like to think that I have a little bit of, you can be an organizer or you can be what I turned out to be in the very beginning; I was a salesman. I worked on Wall Street for awhile for an employment agency when I first came back. Then I worked as a union organizer for a union in New York City.

ST: What union?

IG: District sixty-five, Retail Wholesale and Department Store Union, which then later became the United Auto Workers, but that was years later. So I'll tell you how I moved South. I have to give you this background. After I was a union organizer for awhile and I left that and I needed some money quickly, so I became an outside salesman, which I really loved. I loved that job. This was not door-to-door. You would be given leads. It's not like you're selling encyclopedias. There used to be a saying, and it was probably true, that the dirty movie houses on forty-second street in New York City were filled with salesmen who had made their sales in the morning. They would in the afternoon go to the dirty movie houses. Me, weirdo that I was, I went to various movement offices to help stuff envelopes and things of that sort.

Among the places that I visited, that I frequented I would say, was the fundraising office of SCEF, the Southern Conference Educational Fund. They had an office on lower Broadway. That's where I met a man named William Howard Melish, a minister, a wonderful person, and where I really got to know Carl and Anne Braden. Now I had met Anne and Carl in the Deep South soon after I went South, I couldn't tell you where, but I met them. I was very impressed with them. But I really got to know them in New York. So we're talking now about

the end of 1968, when I was living with a woman and we were going to get married and we eventually did and had children.

But we were looking for a place to go and I was up to the quarterfinals in an interview process with the UE, the United Electrical Workers Union, to direct an organizing project in the South. They were trying to organizing a Westinghouse plant in Tampa, Florida. This plant built turbines, turbines so huge that you couldn't put them on a semi-truck or railroad boxcar, Sarah. You had to put them on a barge and float them into the Gulf of Mexico. I got to the quarterfinals of that, maybe even higher, but I know of the quarterfinals anyhow. And I didn't think I was going to get the job, because number one, I had very bad eyesight. I'm legally blind and I couldn't drive a car and you really needed to drive a car. There were no laws mandating those things then. Even if there were, they wouldn't have been enforced. That was number one. Number two, I didn't know if I had enough union experience. I had a good bit of union experience, not just with district sixty-five, but with other campaigns that I was involved with.

Then Carl and Anne called me up and said, "Would you like to come to Louisville to work for us?" "How much do you pay?" They laughed, "A hundred and ten dollars a month," which even in 1969 was not a lot of money. When I worked for SNCC, I got fifteen dollars a week and we didn't always get that. There were times when I lived a long time on just absolutely zero, absolutely fucking zero. But we grabbed it, my wife and I, and we moved to Louisville. That marriage didn't last. We had children. Then about a year or two—well, I was the SCEF printer. I knew nothing about printing and I was not a very good printer. I did it more as a political activist. People who are printers, they're into it because they're artistic. Me, I wanted to be neat and nice, but I was no artiste. It was a political act. I ran the dark room also, did layout and paste-up and the like.

ST: Were you helping to print the *Southern Patriot*?

IG: No, but I printed all the SCEF leaflets. I did some stuff for the *Patriot*, but no, the *Patriot* was printed separately. It was printed by a commercial printer. I wrote for the *Patriot.* But anyhow, then I think it was a year later, it was around 1970, '71, SCEF couldn't afford to keep so many people on staff. I had been aching to get back involved in the labor movement. What I should also say is that one of the things that enticed me to come to Louisville was not just Carl and Anne, but the fact that Louisville was a huge industrial city at that time. It had probably the largest unionized proletarian workforce in the country for a city its size. I think the only others that had proportionally more were maybe Buffalo, New York and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, I don't know where else. I was not just interested in organizing the unorganized. I was also interested in organizing the organized, because I was very upset with the fact that the labor unions seemed to be becoming fat and lazy and not really organizing people.

So, to get back to how this relates to SCEF, well SCEF couldn't afford to keep so many people on staff and I helped form a thing called the SCEF Louisville Labor Project.[1] There was a Louisville Labor Project here, [which I helped form and so the time was right for me to get a real job]. I left and I worked in a hospital, went to work in a hospital. I was hired on as a colonizer by 1199, Drug and Hospital Workers Union.

ST: Oh yeah.

IG: You're familiar with them?

ST: Right.

IG: They don't have colonizers anymore. The difference between an organizer and a colonizer is an organizer meets people outside of work and you drink a lot of beer with people and you try to get them to sign union cards. A colonizer's a man or a woman who got a job just

[1] Grupper later noted that he could not recall when exactly the Labor Project formed.

like any other worker and then began to organize from inside. So what they told me was to get a job in a situation where I would move around the hospital, not where I would be in just one ward or in one section. They said, "Get a job either in the kitchen or on the janitorial staff, where you would go all different places." So it was funny when they say, "Get a job." You end up where they put you. You don't tell them, "Sir or M'am, I would like to work in a place where I'm going to organize your ass." (laughs)

So I wound up in the respiratory therapy department of University Hospital, which was then called Louisville General Hospital. It was very good, because they called them then not respiratory, they called them inhalation therapists at that time, and I was an aide. I washed out all the tubes and all the other shit. I remember when 1199 hired me, they said, "You must learn to keep your mouth shut. Don't be impetuous. Don't go too fast, because you're going to get your ass fired." So I was a really good boy. I just did my job. Then finally a couple months later, the big boss from the department called me in and he says, "Ira, you seem to be a pretty intelligent fellow. You pick things up very well." I said, "Thank you, sir." He said, "Would you like to be an inhalation therapist?" I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "Okay, you're an inhalation therapist."

Nowadays, you have to go to school for four years and you have to pass a test and you have to be certified. So the first thing that I did, I mean I had high school biology classes, but I was not cognizant of any (laughs) I don't remember exactly how the human body works--I went to the library at the hospital; they had a big library. I borrowed an armful of books on how your lungs work, because you're working these IPPB machines, Intermittent and Positive Pressure Breathing machines. You can put too much pressure in a small spot and you blow

somebody up. People didn't get that when they were well. They got it in when they were sick, the oxygen.

So I did that for awhile. Did I get fired or did I quit from that? I think I got fired from that. I think they found me out real quick and put me out. Then I got a job in a second hospital and that didn't last. I think I quit because I wasn't getting very far. Well actually, there was a demonstration about six months after I left for something and I was involved with that. But that was part of the SCEF Louisville Labor Project. Then we also, the UE, the United Electrical Workers Union, came in [to Louisville] and wanted [me] to organize the LG&E plant, the Louisville Gas and Electric.

ST: I wanted to ask you about that, but one more question about the hospital's union. Did you know anyone else who was involved nationally in that union, because Kay Tillow worked for that union in Pennsylvania, didn't she?

IG: Yeah, yeah I did know. The guy who hired me, what was his name? I can't remember.

ST: That's okay. You didn't know Kay at that time then?

IG: I didn't know Kay. It turns out that I knew Walter, her husband. He worked in the SNCC office [before] I did. He [and Kay] actually came south before I did. We found out years later that we were both—

ST: In SNCC at the same time.

IG: I don't remember [just when it was]--I don't remember.

ST: That's okay. So then you got involved with the effort to organize folks at LG&E.

IG: Yeah, [but I think that was a little bit later]. That was short-lived, because I think it was the Teamsters came in and just, they were not friendly to the UE. They red-baited the UE. But anyhow, I believe it was they who organized the workers at the LG&E.

ST: I see.

IG: I'm sorry, go ahead.

ST: Well, how was this connected with the Black Workers Coalition, because they put a lot of energy into the LG&E organization, didn't they?

IG: Yeah, but that was subsequent. I think that was a little bit later. But I worked with a lot of people in the Black Workers Coalition; I knew a lot of those people. I know Moscoe Rapier and Roosevelt Roberts. Who else?

ST: Bob Cunningham?

IG: Yeah, Bob Cunningham was involved also, not as much as they were, but he was also involved. Bob is one of the sharpest guys. I hope you've interviewed him before.

ST: I personally haven't, but our project has, yes, and I've talked with him. He has quite a memory.

IG: Yeah, he's one of the most developed people politically. He's a very modest guy; we work together still.

ST: What about a guy named Eddie Hill?

IG: Eddie Hill, sure. Yeah, he was involved. Did he work at LG&E? Yeah, he and Roosevelt Roberts were buddies, I think. I don't remember what happened to him. I don't know. Have you found him?

ST: Yeah, he's at a nursing home here in Louisville. I can't remember the name of it now. I briefly spoke with him on the phone.

IG: Is that right? You're going to have to get me his telephone number. Would you please?

ST: Sure, yeah.

IG: Isn't that something, Eddie Hill. I hadn't heard that name in years. But then for me, anyway is this chronology helpful?

ST: Yes, yes.

IG: Then I have to tell you a little bit about me so that you'll understand another aspect of this. The SCEF Louisville Labor Project didn't last a real long time, but I was very interested in labor and then SCEF had a very bitter dispute in 1973. There was a split in the organization. It was very, very unfortunate when it happened. I wrote a big thing about that once, but suffice it to say that people who had been friendly became unfriendly toward one another. Anne and Carl, and I lived with them, [when I first moved here] they were on a different side than I was in that particular dispute. Anne and I talked, so we were sort of estranged for a couple years and then we got back together during the—there was a terrible, vicious antibusing movement in Louisville in 1975. There had been a lawsuit to integrate the schools. We came together around the anti- antibusing movement, I suppose you could call it.

ST: You and Anne came back together because of that?

IG: Yeah, and Carl soon thereafter. Carl and I were actually working together even before that. We worked on a couple of projects together around the death penalty. I wrote an editorial for the *Southern Patriot* on the death penalty putting it into a class perspective. I have that somewhere. I don't know where it is. But anyhow, we got back together. But then I have to give you, it's a seeming aside but it's not exactly an aside. I have a visual problem that I mentioned to you.

ST: Oh, I didn't want to interrupt, but I think your microphone may have fallen off. I just wanted to make sure. I'll just pause that.

IG: I'll sit up straight like my mother told me.

ST: Alright, now it should be.

IG: Did you lose any of it or is it okay?

ST: No, it's fine. So you were mentioning your visual impairment?

IG: The way I used to get jobs was to either go into a factory medical office and memorize the eye chart, because I had a pretty retentive memory—well, then I had a pretty retentive memory. Or I would have somebody of a similar height and weight to me take a test for me. If those things failed, I would bribe somebody in the medical office. Finally, I think it was around 1973 or so, I said, "Shit, I'm fighting for everybody else. I've got to fight for myself. This is ridiculous to humiliate yourself this way. This is ludicrous. It makes no sense." So I bought me a book for two dollars and fifty cents, *How to Do Legal Research*, and I knew nothing about legal research. I know a lot about research. I'm pretty good about research. And I found this law in the University of Louisville library. I found this law called the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. I don't remember if I put that on Tracy K'Meyer's interview with me.

ST: You discussed briefly your effort to get hired at—

IG: Philip Morris. Well, I should tell you because this is an important aspect of the work that I did. I found this law, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Public Law 93112, subdivision 4A and 4B, section 503. I mean, that's how I learned that stuff, not meaning to show off, but you had to do it. It said that any company that did business with the federal government as a contractor or subcontractor couldn't discriminate against someone with a disability, and furthermore had to make what they called "reasonable accommodation" to conform to the

parameters of the disability. So if you're in a wheelchair and you have to go to the restroom, they've got to widen the stall. If you're deaf and you're working around fast-moving equipment where a buzzer goes off to warn you not to put your hand near the drill press, obviously a deaf person can't hear that, so they have to either put a light bulb up or make the machines stop so that you have to do something manual.

Well, so I went to the state employment service and I took what was called a GATB [General Aptitude Test Battery] test. It's a manual dexterity test where you have to put the square pegs in the square holes and the round pegs in the round holes and I passed it. I got a call soon thereafter from Philip Morris and they hired through the state. They said, "Well, we want you to come down and take a physical and you can't have the day shift, because you don't have enough seniority. You'll have a choice of either the second or the third shift or we may not even be able to give you that choice, but right now, we can." So the unspoken assumption was that they had checked out my references and they were okay, they were kosher, and contingent upon passing the physical, I was going to be an employee.

Well, I take the physical and of course, I didn't pass it. That was on a Friday, July twenty-first, 1975. On Monday, I call up the employment office of Philip Morris. No, I call up the medical office and I asked the nurse. I told her my name, I said, "I understand I didn't pass the test. Can you tell me why?" She says, "Just a moment. I'll check with the doctor." She checks with the doctor and she comes back and she says, "The doctor said we can't hire somebody with vision that bad." "Thank you very much." I hung up, except I wasn't on the phone alone. I had an attorney and somebody from a disability rights organization. I might be dumb, but I'm not that dumb. We recorded it.

So I filed a discrimination complaint with the OFCCP, the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs, which is an agency of the DOL, the United States Department of Labor. For six months, they didn't do a fucking thing, nothing. Excuse my language. They didn't do anything. We put a lot of pressure on them. Finally, I'm trying to be as brief as I can, but it's important because it affected the way--. I had by that time fourteen attorneys, no, about eleven attorneys from fourteen organizations. It became a test case. I don't think you'll find it under my name in the book, but I was one of the first people to win. I'll get to that in a moment.

After six months of pressure—the kind of pressure was really interesting. We wrote to Senator [Wendell] Ford, who was a senator from Kentucky at that time. Ford was in the pocket of the tobacco industry. He was their little boy. They used to send him to the whorehouses and to big fancy dinners. He ate filet mignon; he didn't eat salami and baloney. Philip Morris, or the Department of Labor made the mistake of not responding to him in a timely manner, not to him personally, I'm sure he had nothing to do with it, but to one of his assistants. So they put pressure on as well.

Finally, Philip Morris responds to my attorneys and to the Department of Labor, because they wouldn't talk to me. They said I was a hothead, which I suppose I was. I wanted a job and they deprived me. Wouldn't you be a hothead? They said, "We admit having discriminated against Ira Grupper. We should have hired him and we didn't. However, in a routine employment check, we discovered that he had lied on his last job application, what he said about his last job. He had said he was a satisfactory employee and in fact, he was an unsatisfactory employee. So had we hired him, we would have been forced to discharge him for prevaricating. Since we hadn't hired him, it would have taken us about a month to find that out. We'll give him that one month's pay."

Well, my mama didn't raise no fool. I didn't know what they might do, but in anticipation of the various scenarios that might ensue, I had gone to all the places that I worked and gotten [letters of reference]. This particular place in question, it was Fawcett-Hayes Printing Company, a huge company, had thirty-four hundred employees in Louisville. They printed *Women's Day* magazine and *Mechanics Illustrated*. I had gone and gotten a letter of reference that said that I was a satisfactory employee and that the company was moving out [of town] and I didn't have the seniority to move with them. So that set up a scenario, Sarah, where either I was lying or the company was lying. There's no shade of gray; there's no nuance. So Philip Morris about shit when they saw that.

The Department of Labor soon thereafter made a ruling. It was called a Letter of Determination. They said that I had standing to file and blah blah blah and that the reasons that were given for not hiring me, I don't know if they used the word specious, but that they were not valid. They recommended that the two sides get together to work out an amicable settlement. An amicable settlement my ass. The company was keeping me from working all this time. So it took another year. To a person who, I had two young children at the time, I was divorced, and I had very little money. It was like a lifetime. Finally another year passed and my lawyer, and as I said earlier I had a whole bunch of lawyers, but this one guy in Louisville was a really nice fellow, he thought I was crazy. He'd never met a real-live factory worker who knew how to use polysyllabic sesquipedalian words with the proper syntax and morphology and all this other shit that you educators talk about. I was almost like Shakespearian comic relief to this guy, but I don't mean that in a bad way. He was a very decent man.

He finally calls me up and he says, "Ira, I've got some good news for you. They're going to hire you. You start next week." I said, "Any other thing to tell me?" He says, "No." I

said, “I’m not taking the job, not under those circum--.” He says, “What? What do you mean?” Because lawyers are not used to clients dictating the terms of the settlement unless they’re a big corporation and certainly not a handicapped guy like me, who was palpably in need of the services of a big-shot attorney. I said, “Well, what’s to stop those motherfuckers from—I’m sorry—stop those people from working me for two weeks and saying, ‘We really love handicapped people and we would like to have hired Ira, but he just can’t do the job, so we’re going to put him out?’” I said, “No, I want there to be an outside third party intermediary that’s built into the agreement to make the final determination and I want to have a say in who gets picked. I know they won’t let me pick him, but--.” I said, “And they owe me a year and a half back pay. I want a year and a half back seniority. I want a promise that they’re not going to fuck with me when I’m in there. I want a promise that they’re going to adhere to the particularities of this rehabilitation act, that they’re going to provide reasonable [accommodation]--.” (laughs)

So the lawyer was flabbergasted, but the agreement that I got, I would work there thirty days on a trial work period, and they used the term trial work period instead of probationary period to get around the union thirty-day requirement. The union was for this, by the way. The union, at least initially, was in favor of me getting hired there. It was almost like “be sorry for the handicapped.” I didn’t give a damn as long as they were on my side.

ST: Which union?

IG: Bakery, Confectionary, and Tobacco Workers Union, which is the union that I was with for many years. So I went to work. I worked the thirty days and I got hired. I only got partial back pay. It’s a long story, I couldn’t hold out, but I got full seniority, a promise they wouldn’t harass, a promise that they never kept. Soon thereafter, I became active in a rank-and-

file caucus in the union, a caucus that I knew about, I knew its existence prior to my having gone to work at Philip Morris. So the union saw I was not, and the company, that I was not just this skinny—though I was skinny at that time, you wouldn't know it now—near-sighted guy who was palpably in need of social services and just wanted to pull himself up by his own bootstraps, that I was a bad ass with a lot of experience.

In fact, I will tell you, I have never told this to anybody on tape before, but the irony of it all was that when I got hired at Philip Morris, I think the only thing that was legitimate on that application was my tenure at Fawcett Hayes Printing Company, because I had to account for all the time that I was in jail and I was in SNCC. I mean, it was all a tissue of lies. Had they really gone, instead of making this arbitrary decision they're going to go after me on this thing, they might have kept me out. But they didn't. Kafka would have written a good story, there was good irony there.

ST: What did you get hired to do at Philip Morris?

IG: The job title was "miscellaneous," which is labor at the lowest level. Now what you should know is that it was a high-paid job then, that Philip Morris workers were part of the labor aristocracy. So when I left Philip Morris in 1999 when I retired, took a buyout offer and retired, the lowest paid worker at Philip Morris at that time was making twenty-two dollars an hour. I think I had five weeks vacation.

[conversation breaks off as phone rings]

ST: You were talking about your level of pay was pretty good, even though you were—

IG: Oh yeah, right. We were part of labor aristocracy and I remember when I retired, I had almost six weeks vacation. So these were very desirable jobs and they were unionized. The work that I did mostly [was with unionized workers], although I had tried to organize the

unorganized, I also felt and feel that labor unions are not [often enough] living up to the tradition that they should be of organizing people and dealing with things beyond just wages and hours and working conditions. The issues of sexism and racism and homophobia and ageism and people with different accents, etcetera, the labor unions need to deal with these issues, and the issues of class solidarity, of which there is much more in people in other countries that I have visited. I've been to different places in the world and although we think that we're the smartest and the best people, other countries who don't have nearly as many accoutrements as we've got, know a hell of a lot more than do we.

So it was a very desirable place for me to be. The other thing I should tell you if I may, just remember that one of the advantages—the word advantage I use advisedly—of being this disabled guy who went to work at Philip Morris was that--do you know how long it takes to establish a rapport with people in a factory? It takes a long, long time. You've got to drink a lot of beer and go bowling and shoot the shit and all. When I got hired on, everybody knew that this freak was coming to work; I mean, everybody knew. It was wonderful. It was scary, but it was just wonderful. We had a number of different unions in the plant at that time. There were the machinists, the electrical workers, sheet metal workers, in addition to my union, the Bakery, Confectionary, and Tobacco Workers, but they all knew I was coming in. Philip Morris was like a city. There were four thousand two hundred workers when I got hired.

ST: Wow, this was '76, '75?

IG: I went to work in '77, February, but I had seniority dating back to July of '75. So I really consider myself an employee there from '75, because that's when they wouldn't let me work. On the first day of work, I had to work the first thirty days on day shift even though I didn't have the seniority to remain on the day shift, because that's when they could watch me.

All these big shots were there watching me. I mean, I couldn't scratch my behind and rub my nose without somebody writing it down. You can imagine, I was a nervous wreck, I will tell you. You would be as well. Well, people were just so nice to me. One woman I remember came up to me and she says, "Give me your telephone number and write your name down." She was an attractive woman. (laughs) I said, "Sure, but may I ask why?" She said, "Well, you can't be late for the first thirty days. You can't be absent for the first thirty days. I'm going to call you every morning to make sure you're up."

ST: Wow.

IG: I almost cried. I think I did cry, because I'm a big baby anyhow. The next day, again this was soon after I started, the next day—and it was ( ) women more than the guys, but the guys were also very sympathetic—this one woman comes up to me. She says, "After the shift ends, we want to meet you on--." It was a particular floor and a particular area way in the back. She says, "You'll understand when we get up there." So after work, I clocked out. Instead of going home, I went up to this [secluded area]. They had set up sort of a mini-assembly line and they said, "We want to show you what you can do with your hands, but [that] you might not be able to see." I sort of lost it. I hugged them. They did that for half an hour and then they disassembled the thing and we all went home. As it turned out, some of the things that they showed me I probably didn't need, but other things I did. But the point was that it was a very loving relationship. People really had solidarity with me. Unfortunately, I don't know if it were an all-white situation and I was the first black person, if that would have been the same, or if it were an all-male situation and I was the first female. But I don't even want to think that. All I want to say is that these people were very nice to me. So that sort of set the scene, the scenario. That was the milieu within which I operated.

ST: I want to talk more about your years at Philip Morris. I wanted to go back briefly though and ask you a little about what you were doing just prior to being hired there. You mentioned that SCEF was splitting up.

IG: No, I said SCEF had a split, but there was a portion of SCEF that continued. I was with that portion that continued.

ST: Can you tell me a little bit more about the circumstances that led to the division among people there?

IG: Well, I'm going to be very careful how I respond to that, because as it turns out, that split was unfortunate. There were elements of race involved in that, with different ways of organizing. There were a number of radical organizations in SCEF. There was the Communist Party, there [were Maoists,] there was a black nationalist organization, and there were others. It just was a nasty back and forth. I remember speaking with Anne Braden and I said this, when I spoke at her funeral. She had said to me or maybe we both said it, we both agreed, that what really probably happened was the FBI infiltrated the organization. Because at that time, you had the FBI and COINTELPRO, this counter-intelligence, you know about that. There probably was a legitimate difference that these feds exacerbated to the point of contention.

Then we laughed and we said, and I mentioned this as well at the funeral, that if truth be known, we probably, all of us were unable to establish the base in the proletariat, in the working class, that we had wanted. And so sometimes when people can't accomplish what they want to accomplish, they fight amongst themselves and that was an interesting lesson for me from Anne. We both agreed on that. Then the other thing we said was that the FBI could have saved a lot of money. They could have let us cannibalize each other. They might not have had to do so much. [. . .] So I'm being careful the way I respond to you. It's not because I'm not

willing to discuss the particularities of that split, but the larger picture is that the left then and the left now doesn't have the base in the working class that it needs to really build a cohesive, unified, large movement that will really effect change. That's what happened in SCEF.

ST: What were some of the frustrations that you were running up against that were prompting people to fight amongst themselves?

IG: Well, racism was—you know, this was the time of Richard Nixon. The civil rights laws were not being enforced. Racism was increasing. Unemployment was increasing by a good bit there. The Vietnam War was getting ready to come to an end, but we didn't know it at that point. It had really taken a toll on people. The labor movement really was not organizing the unorganized. The labor movement was becoming more polarized in terms of race and other divisions. So you really didn't have the kind of undertow to pull this movement out to sea where it could float. That's my view of it.

ST: And if you had to describe the ideological line along which folks were split in SCEF, how would you characterize that?

IG: (pause) I'm willing to say it, but you're forcing me to say and maybe I shouldn't say it. The people who left SCEF, some of them were in the Communist Party and other people who defended the right of the Communist Party to function within there, which I defended their right and it was important for them to have that right. The ones who stayed were a mixture of independent radical folks like me and Maoists who really had an animus toward the Communist Party and some black nationalists who did as well. I think that that would be the easiest way to categorize. I should also say that amongst the people who left, it was not just the CP. There were many people who were civil libertarians and very good folk who didn't like what was happening in SCEF. But those were the ballplayers; that was the scorecard.

ST: Were any of the ones who left good friends of yours?

IG: Yes, Carl and Anne Braden. Well, Carl and Anne, we were not personal friends in the sense that we didn't go out to dinner together, although I once lived in their house for six months. But yes, there were many good friends of mine. It was a tragic circumstance. It was awful.

ST: How many years was it before you sort of reestablished a friendship with Anne Braden?

IG: As I said earlier, about a year and a half or two years. That was during the antibusing movement. There was a suit to integrate the school system in 1975. That suit was successful and a very nasty antibusing movement evolved and it was perhaps more potentially dangerous than say in Boston, to use a comparison. Boston was where all that trouble happened over busing. But it was potentially more dangerous here [in Louisville] because it was led by people who were experienced labor organizers. The sheet metal workers and other organized skilled trades were among the leaders of the antibusing movement. So Bob Cunningham and I became very good friends at that point. I don't know if that's when we first met. We may have met earlier. But we were very, very active, particularly in the white communities. He and I went to various white communities to try to calm things down. We were so unsuccessful that ten thousand national guardsmen were put in the streets to maintain order, but we tried. We spoke at all kinds of churches in all kinds of out of the way places. He's a wonderful person.

ST: So the fight against the opponents of school integration kind of reunited you with Anne?

IG: Yes.

ST: Looking back on it now and I realize this is a controversial issue that historians are debating right now, do you think Anne and Carl Braden handled effectively the scrutiny about communist infiltration of the various groups in Louisville?

IG: It is very controversial indeed. I can't give you a full answer. I can just give you what my thoughts are on that. Carl and Anne were very strong civil libertarians. Carl, when he was testifying before the US Senate Committee, he made a statement: "My beliefs and my associations are none of the business of this committee." And he went to jail for that. So there view was a strong view that it's nobody's business what was your politics are and they were religious people too, Carl and Anne, although I don't know if they went to church regularly at that point. It says in the Bible, "By their fruits ye shall know them," and that's what they wanted. They wanted to deal with people on what they did to make the world a better place.

But I would say, if I may in my own literary-related way, there was a wonderful quote I remember from Bobby Burns, Robert Burns, the Scottish--. He said at one point, when he was being restricted to Edinburgh by the British, because he was ( ) and all this other crap that you learn. It's not crap, but all that other stuff that you learn in school that doesn't deal with politics. He was restricted, he couldn't travel about, and there was a big meeting in Edinburgh and Bobby Burns was asked to say something, because he was this distinguished poet and writer. He got up and he knew that they were watching them, that if he opened his mouth--. So he says, and this is the English that I learned, it's not the original Scottish way of English, "Here's freedom to them that would read. Here's freedom to them that would write. There's none ever feared that the truth should be heard but they whom the truth would indict." Then he just sat down. That's much nicer than talking about somebody's mama, right? You don't have

to say much more than that. I would say that that quote would apply to Carl and Anne Braden very well. It's a good fit.

So to get back to your question, that's the preface to this. Their view was that they'd been through so much that they were not going to talk about their beliefs and associations. Cate Fosl is a friend of mine, but one of the weaknesses of her book was that she never really explored that issue with them. I would suppose she would say she tried, they—not they, because Carl was dead, died in '75—but that Anne probably wouldn't want to talk about it. But there are ways to get people to talk about things if you want. In fact, Diane McWhorter, who wrote a very famous—

ST: Oh yeah.

IG: She wrote a review of Cate's book in the *New York Times*. Did you see that?

ST: I did, yeah.

IG: She criticized, I don't know Cate or Anne, I think it was Cate for not getting in--. My memory is not clear, but you know what I'm saying.

ST: Right.

IG: I think that Diane McWhorter, although I didn't like the context, the way she was raising that criticism, I thought it was a little nasty actually, which surprised me--. So many years later, I think there should have been some discussion of it, yes. I mean, I'm a socialist. I don't choose to go into all the details of it, because the socialist movement is a negligible force now and the government is cracking down on people, so it's very difficult to talk about things now. But I think that the answer to your question is the Bradens should have really been a little bit more forthright than they were. Anne was a socialist, she said on a few occasions. In fact, she spoke at a meeting of a socialist organization called the Committees of Correspondence for

Democracy and Socialism, which is a national socialist organization. I went to hear her speech in Louisville.

ST: When was that?

IG: A couple of years ago. Again, the answer to your question is I do think they should have been forthcoming and that biographers had an obligation to look into it. Not: "Are you now or have you ever been?," but, "What is the nature of the thought behind it?" I mean, it's a historical obligation. But Cate's book is a very good book, don't get me wrong. That's not said as a sop. It's a very important book. She'll never make a lot of money off it, but it's a very important book. It should be required reading.

ST: Just to push you a little further on that—

IG: Sure.

ST: Why do you think it's an important question to deal with now?

IG: Because I think that capitalism is going to implode at some point. But if you don't deal with it and you don't talk about alternatives in their specifics, if you just deal with the universality of the contradiction and not the particularity of it, I don't know how else. Well alright, another quote. Santayana said that, "Those who refuse to learn from history are condemned to repeat it," and you need to learn from this history. You need to learn from the history.

I don't think that socialism is dead by any means and if anyone thinks that it is, look at Condoleezza Rice, the first secretary of state in the history of this country who went to South America to a meeting of the Organization of American States. Why? Because it scared the shit out of her. Lula is in Brazil and what's his name is in Bolivia and somebody's in Peru now and Chavez is in Venezuela. And of course, you've got Fidel. Even in right-wing countries like the

Dominican Republic, Santa Domingo, Fernandez I think his name is, Chavez contacted him not too long ago and says, "We're going to sell you oil if you'd like at below cost or cost." Fernandez, who was a CIA puppet much like Noriega was in Panama, he says, "We don't have any money." Chavez says, "Well, what can you sell? What do you grow?" He says, "We grow beans." So Chavez says, "We'll take payment in beans." So here's this right-wing guy who's trading with Hugo Chavez and the United States is very concerned about that.

Now I'm not a fool. I know what the CIA has done, what they did in Guatemala in 1954 and then Lebanon and all these governments, what they did in Chile with Allende. So it may be that we start overthrowing some more governments. But there is a socialist movement and it is alive and it is well. There will be solidarity, because people in this country don't know where to, they don't know what to do. People in colleges, people on tenure track think they died and went to heaven. They're not going to be dying and going to heaven when they lose their jobs or when something gets cut back. And they're taught that they're professionals, they're not workers, and so they have very little consciousness. So the movement to build a socialist consciousness is very important and I think it's in that context and in that framework that the questions needed to have been asked and I think answered. It's not just the civil libertarian thing: "I have the right to my beliefs and my associations." It was important during the McCarthy period to stand up for that, but it's a little bit of a different time now. So that's the best way I can answer you.

ST: Was it your impression in the mid-70s in Louisville that the new communist movement was having a real impact here in terms of the activist community?

IG: It was my impression that they thought they were having a real impact, but they weren't, not at all. You had the RU, Revolutionary Union, the October League, the CP, and

then you had several Trotskyite groups, the SWP and the IS. But none of them really had any impact, no. There were several independent groups of socialists too. I was a part of one.

ST: Which group was that?

IG: It doesn't matter. There were a lot of different groups that tried to establish a base. They couldn't do it, so they fought amongst themselves. Again, that was what caused part of the problem with SCEF and not just in SCEF. It was across the country and in the United States there were a lot of different—you probably know that better than I as an historian. I have not studied that in the way that I'm sure you must have. But there were many organizations that were facing difficulties and the labor movement also in particular.

ST: To get back to your time at Philip Morris, I wanted to just ask you a little bit more too about why Philip Morris--why did you decide to try to get a job there? Was there something about that particular plant that you thought might be a good place to work and/or organize?

IG: Well, I needed a job that paid good money and it was not possible to choose the job that you could get. That was one of the places I wanted to work for several reasons. Number one, it paid good money, but I didn't go for a job just for money, but I needed money, I didn't have much money. There was a rank-and-file caucus within the union at that time and I knew the people who led that. And I knew a little bit about the history of the union. The Bakery, Confectionary, and Tobacco Workers Union was a shotgun marriage between two unions. And if I can kill an analogy, the bastard that was produced was not very healthy. The Bakery Workers was an old left union from the 1930s. They were based in the East, maybe in New York or Pennsylvania; I don't know where. And the Tobacco Workers International Union was an old right-wing AFL union. There had been a left-wing union called the Food, Tobacco, and

Allied Workers Union, FTA. That was a radical union that in the 1920s had organized I think in Raleigh, North Carolina and elsewhere. There were big strikes that they helped organized.

In 1948, when the Taft-Hartley Act was passed and they threw out the so-called radicals, the communists from the unions, that was one of the unions that was thrown out. So the AFL drug up—is there such a term as drug up—in its place this old AFL union to take the place of the radical union. So the Tobacco Workers International Union merged with the Bakery Workers, I don't remember what year, and it was never very healthy after that. In fact, I knew somebody who was a very progressive person who worked for the international in Washington or in Maryland, wherever they were located, who was so afraid to take stands on anything because she were afraid of getting terminated. That should not be if you're a union fighting for rights of people. So it was a very important place for me to want to be. It was good money. It was people who were doing political work. It was a unionized workshop, which is what I was looking for, and there was activity going on. So you couldn't beat that.

ST: What was the racial breakdown of the workforce there at Philip Morris when you started?

IG: Maybe a third black, maybe a little less than a third black, a large number. I would say it was not much different demographically from the ( ) statistics in this area. Philip Morris was a liberal company. They used to say in the sixties that a liberal is somebody who will hang you from a low tree. I mean, you're just as dead. But they were, Philip Morris was a liberal company. They believed in hiring minorities. They didn't believe in hiring people who forced their way in like me, but they believed in being nice to people. They changed the word foreman to supervisor so that it would be gender neutral. You still got fucked over whether you were a man or a woman, but the phraseology was there. And they taught their supervisors to be

efficient and ruthless, but not to be nasty and demeaning. So if you're my boss and you want me to move that fifty-pound box from over here to over there, you'd say, "When you get a chance, Ira, would you mind moving it over there?," which is much nicer than saying, "Move that motherfucking thing over there or we'll fire your ass." And the effect was the same. They taught supervisors to do that.

They would summarily fire a supervisor who would use racist or sexist language. They would discipline workers. They believed in hiring minority supervisors and workers. They would ensure that a certain number of minorities and women would be in apprentice training programs, which is the name of the game. But they still maintained control and it didn't mean that they weren't racist or sexist, I don't mean to say or imply that; they were. But they didn't make their money being stupid. They made their money being smart. They did that and that was another reason why I wanted to work for them, because Philip Morris was much more than a cigarette company. It was a Fortune 500 company. It was a transnational corporation. If you drink Maxwell House coffee, that was Philip Morris. Post Cereals, Philip Morris.

ST: Kraft is too.

IG: Kraft and General Foods. Kraft was a voluntary merger. General Foods, they forced them to sell. In fact, I lived in the Middle East for six months and I remember coming home via Switzerland and I wanted to buy some chocolate in the airport in Zurich. I go into the Zurich duty-free shop, which turned out to be more expensive than had I gone to a regular shop. I didn't know that then. I buy this Toblerone chocolate, very good chocolate, right. It's manufactured by Jacques [Suchard]. Jacques [Suchard] is the largest chocolatier in Europe and it's owned by [Kraft, which is owned by] Philip Morris. So I had traveled a thousand miles to

buy some Philip Morris. The same thing happened, I was in Greece at an international labor meeting about six months ago. I'd never been in Greece. You ever been to Greece?

ST: No.

IG: I was in Athens and I also bought some chocolate. I'm a chocolate freak. It had the little logo of Kraft.

ST: Can't escape it.

IG: You can't escape it, no. So that was why I wanted to work at Philip Morris.

ST: So what were your primary goals in terms of labor organization when you started there?

IG: There was a caucus, as I had mentioned, and I think what they really wanted and I went along with that, they wanted to deal with the things that a union deals with: better wages, better hours, better working conditions, not being messed over by the boss man or boss woman. But I also wanted to try to imbue a little bit of class consciousness, solidarity around liberation struggles in Asia and Africa and Latin America. What was happening with the Sandinistas in Nicaragua was important to me. The outflow of capital from the United States elsewhere to invest in third world countries to screw them over, these are things that workers should really have an understanding of. They shouldn't just—there is a stereotype of a lot of workers, particularly white workers, but not just white workers. All they're looking at is to get a good piece of ass and drink a good glass of beer. That's not what most people are interested in. Most people are interested, men and women, in earning a living and going home to their families. But if you talk to people with respect and decency, they will begin to try to understand other issues, issues of class and sex and other kinds of discrimination—gender, I should say. So those were the things that I was most interested in.

ST: Were racial divisions within the workforce a problem when you started there?

IG: Yes, they were a problem when I started and a problem when I ended. The African-Americans, I can't say all, there were stupid white guys and there were stupid black guys, there were stupid black women and stupid white women, but there seemed to be more of an understanding of class by African-Americans than whites, women and men.

ST: Why do you think that?

IG: Because when you're screwed over so much, sometimes you have a chance to look at the whole system. I remember I had a friend who was Puerto Rican. He said, "When a Puerto Rican sees the light, he sees the whole damn spectrum," and I've never forgotten that. When people start seeing the light unto them, they see the spectrum as it applies to other people and other issues, yes. That's not to say that there weren't any advanced white workers. There were many white workers of advanced understanding and it wasn't to say that there weren't black workers who didn't understand shit; there were many who didn't. But proportionately, there were more African-Americans who understood the systemic nature of oppression as opposed to simply that they weren't getting paid enough and they were being exploited in other ways.

ST: I'm going to pause this for just a minute.

[break in conversation]

ST: Okay, I believe when we left off, we were talking about your Philip Morris years and I realized it's probably hard to digest twenty some years of involvement there into a short amount of time, but I was wondering if you could maybe think back and share a few stories of accomplishments with your organizing there that you're particularly proud of.

IG: Well, let me tell you what I did in the union and what I did that was not directly involved with Philip Morris, but did have an impact on it. Maybe that would be helpful to you.

I was a shop steward for about twenty-one years of the time that I worked there. So I worked there twenty-four years minus a year and half that I had to fight to get my job, so it's twenty-two and half. So almost the entire tenure at Philip Morris I was a shop steward on a number of different floors. I was also a delegate to the Greater Louisville Central Labor Council for eight years of those twenty-one years.

ST: And what's the function of that council exactly?

IG: A central labor council in any city in the United States is an organization of all the unions in the city and they meet to discuss [mostly local issues]. In the 1930s, [in a couple of central labor councils], they would meet to discuss general strikes in the city, or during the time of the Wobblies. But [most CLCs met] to discuss matters of mutual concern: who to endorse for mayor, who to endorse for US senator, what kind of campaign, how can we assist organizing the unorganized in a particular area, how can we try to get more jobs to come into the city, how can we be involved in civic projects. Let's say I know a project where ramps are built for the disabled and the Carpenters Union does a lot of pro bono, free work in that regard. That's what a central labor council does and I was a delegate for eight years. So that's one aspect.

I should also say, and this is indirect, but also an impact, in 1980 I got a call from the mayor's office in Louisville, not the mayor himself but the mayor's office, and asked if I wanted to be a commissioner of the local Louisville and Jefferson County Human Relations Commission, an unpaid position but prestigious. So I thanked them and I said I would get back. I talked to a bunch of my friends on the left and they all said, "You're such a pompous ass, Ira. This is not a mark on your CV like it is for these bourgeois business folk. You just want to feel

self-important. What do you want to waste all your time on that? You've got to change the world."

And Anne Braden called me. She says, "I want to see you. You're a damn fool." She says, "Why do you care why they appoint you?" And the reason they appointed me was because it's nice to be nice to somebody who has a disability, [as the stereotype goes], because we don't burn our bras like you women, we don't riot like the blacks. We're just not palpably in need of social services and yes, maybe I'm being facetious and maybe even not nice about it, but that's the way they looked at things. So she talked to me. Well, there was somebody else who talked to me also, but [Anne] was the main one. So she says, "Okay, I've convinced you to take this position, right?" Because I wasn't getting paid for that position. She says, "But there's one other thing you have to do." I say, "What's that?" She says, "Keep your big mouth shut for a long time and listen." She says, "You don't do that well enough." (laughs)

ST: Why did she want you to do that?

IG: I was going to say to her, "You don't do that well enough either," but I didn't. Because if you want to be effective as an organizer, you have to understand the terrain within which you operate. If you just open up and say things are bad here or there, you don't have any credibility. She wanted me to entrench myself and get positions of importance. I listened to Anne and for about nine months, and it was one of the most interesting things. Tobacco workers, well at least in Louisville and I'm assuming it's elsewhere as well, you're wearing a tan uniform and I had these earplugs, because it was like ninety decibels worth of noise, around my neck, and I stank to the high heavens, particularly in the summer, because I would go to a meeting, because I don't drive a car, I had no time to go home and change into a suit and tie, and I believe I had a suit an tie, and come to the meeting properly attired or ( ). So I came in

and I stank; I stank like shit from all this. Here were these women with their Pierre Cardin blouses and the guys with their Armani suits. Well, I don't know if they wore Armani suits back then, but whatever the fancy suits were at that time, Brooks Brothers. And I came in there.

But when I spoke, if I may say this without sounding immodest, I was well-prepared, I was articulate, I spoke from knowledge, and they could do nothing but respect that. So the fact that I was cockeyed, plus the fact that I was this Shakespearian comic relief, a real-live factory worker, I was an oddity and an anomaly, a phenomenon to these folk. I was appointed as the chair of the anti-discrimination panel, which was a panel that ruled on discrimination cases or rather determined probable cause or no probable cause in allegations of discrimination based on race, sex, age, and disability in the area of public accommodations, housing, and employment. There ain't too many pinkos who you know had the power to levy fines and subpoena. I had the power. I was elected by the commission for that.

Then I was appointed by the executive board of the commission as the vice-chair of the commission proper. So that took about a year or so. At that time, Ronald Reagan was in his presidency about a year, a year into his tenure. He had appointed this super Uncle Tom, Clarence Thomas, to head the EEOC. And Mr. Thomas by that time was gaining his reputation for systematically dismantling all the enforcement provisions that made real the civil rights laws. The local commission, and this directly relates again to Philip Morris, because you were asking about Philip Morris, but I have to give you this background. The laws were being dismantled, the gains in the civil rights movement were being vitiated, creamed.

So after this year that I was there, the year that I told Anne I was going to be a good boy, I finally had to speak out and I did and I began. I can share with you at some point. I have to gather them together. I have a whole slew of articles from the *Louisville Times*, which was

then the afternoon newspaper, and the *Courier-Journal*, of me raising all this sand. They threw me off the commission twice. No, that's not true. I served at the pleasure of the appointing authorities and they were none too pleased. So when my tenure expired, they refused to reappoint me.

So the first time around, a coalition of every women's group, every civil rights group, every disability rights group, gay rights group, they got together and they forced my reappointment. It was a big victory. They had a big party. The second time around, like I was up for my third term, the city was very smart. They went to my union and at that time I had been raising so much hell that the union didn't like me very much, which is why ( ). They got an African-American chief shop steward to agree to be appointed in my place. So while race was directly involved in all of this, it was not so easy to demonstrate, as they call it, a prima facie case of this, and they put me out.

So the work that I did, I was not a high union official. I don't want to say or imply that. No, I was not the president of the union, but I did sit on the Central Labor Council. I was probably the best or one of the best shop stewards, if I can say that without sounding immodest. I was told that even by union officials, because I really fought for people. I remember there had been a suit which forced women to be hired. Women couldn't be hired unless they were a particular height at Philip Morris, because you had to lift heavy things overhead. There was, in the context of their understanding, I don't agree with their understanding, a good reason for that, because when you're short, you have to lift much higher and it negatively affects your back with deleterious consequences. But of course, you can make the machines a little lower. I mean, there are a lot of ways—

ST: Around that.

IG: Around that if they wanted to. But I dealt with all these issues. I really fought for people the best that I could. You're asking what kind of activities I did. Well, I'll give you an example. Are you familiar with the shop steward system?

ST: Vaguely, yeah.

IG: You have a union contract and it specifies wages, hours, and working conditions. Then there are rules that you have to do this. Some contracts are very specific and some are a little less specific or amorphous about how many times you have to be absent before they give you a warning. There are advantages and disadvantages to both of them. The advantage of having a specific system is that a shop steward, a supervisor who let's say makes an unwanted sexual advance toward you and you repel that, the next time you're absent, he fires you. He can't do that because there's a specific number. However, with a specific number, it means that you're out; there's no appeal.

But in any event, I had to fight like the dickens for people and I did a good job, if I can say that without sounding immodest. I did the best that I knew how. They knew that the workers, when they went into the office with me, that I was really going to fight for them. The supervision knew that they had a—may I say this?—formidable opponent, that I was not going to kiss anybody's behind. The way I did it was a way that oftentimes went counter to the union's view. The union too often made deals and they made deals because there were perks that were afforded to union officials which should never have happened. They didn't have to work as hard. Some of them were off the job most of the time.

I remember I was running for union—well, I ran for president of the union unsuccessfully at one point—and somebody asked me if I thought that the then current president of the union local was being paid off. I wanted to say yes, because I pretty much

knew, but unless you have specific proof they'll sue you for libel or slander. So I said, "Well, I can't say—his name was Junior ( )—that Junior was being paid off, but if somebody fixed my roof or I fixed somebody's roof, you're going to pay me to fix that roof. And the union officials' roofs are pretty water-tight." So that was the attitude that I had. I didn't go in every day with an attitude toward eating bear, because you have to survive and you get ulcers. I was getting myself pretty sick in trying, unsuccessfully sometimes, to help people. But I really fought for them and so when I raised issues beyond just wages and hours and working conditions, talking about the Vietnam War or other things, people would listen to me. Even those who disagreed would respect me to an extent. There were some who wanted to kick my behind, but respected me.

I tried to find ways of dealing with the larger issues such that they would be palatable to ordinary people. When I say ordinary people, I don't mean that because I had a consciousness that I was better. No, what I meant were people who had sometimes a rudimentary education. This factory was like a school—no, not a school, like a city. You had people in there who were ex-murderers, literally, not figuratively, got out of the pen. There were people who were PhDs who were working on the assembly line for whatever reason. I never understood that, but Pam is an ABD, you know, all but dissertation. She was Phi Beta Kappa, summa cum laude from Vanderbilt. She says eleven years ago, she said, "It's not for me," and she just did something else. But anyhow, I understand I got off the topic. She's Phi Beta Kappa, can you believe that? It's disgusting. I hate people like that. Summa cum laude. What was I saying?

ST: You were saying that it was a very diverse workforce.

IG: Yeah, a very diverse workforce. It was just like a city. Well, you had to deal with people who were Klansmen. You had to deal with bookies. If you wanted to bet on a horse—

ST: You're in good luck.

IG: Oh, you could go anywhere you wanted ( ). If you wanted to buy booze in bulk, you could buy it. If you wanted to buy grass, hashish you could get. You could get anything that you wanted. If you wanted a new TV that may not have come out of the front of the store, you could get it. It was a city. But I represented those people and I tried to deal with the larger issues. We had a caucus that I had mentioned to you and I did not form that caucus. I joined the workforce after that thing had been formed. A lot of the work that we did or that I did, I can say that because I wrote a lot of the literature, was to say that the wages that we were paid, we were part of the labor aristocracy, would not guarantee our jobs there.

In fact, Philip Morris would move out unless we could show them how to build something cheap here, because it was an old building, the main building. I said it was a city, I mean it. That was not hyperbole. It was seven stories tall, two blocks long, one block wide. That was just one building. There were many, many other buildings, but that was the largest one. That was the one I happened to work in, the main building. We said this company will move out of here. It's a building. They'd rather have a building that's one story than seven stories, because the amount of work to get heavy stuff up and down elevators, they're losing hundreds of millions of dollars. As it turned out, that's what happened. They moved out elsewhere. It had nothing to do with the fact that cigarettes were going down in sales. The company is very wealthy. So we dealt with that.

We tried to get decent people elected and we were successful in some cases. None of the top posts we ever were successful with, but with some of the smaller posts, yes. And we educated a lot of people and we dealt with a lot of issues. I remember at one point, there's a wonderful book on the labor movement called *Labor's Untold Story*. I don't know if you've

ever seen it. It's put out by the UE, the United Electrical Workers Union. I would sell those books to people. I would not give it to anybody, because those guys and women had enough money to buy. The one guy said, "I don't have any money." He said, "Can you give me it?" I said, "If I gave it to you, I couldn't be sure that you'd read it. But if I sold it to you, you'd probably read it." We sold hundreds of copies of that to people. Well, I gave a few copies, but most of them were sold, ninety-five percent. So that's some of the things that I did.

Then the fact that I was this human relations commissioner and I had all this trouble really had a direct impact at work, because people would come up to me with problems. I mean, this one woman was getting a divorce and her husband was battering her and she wanted to know, "Can you help me?" And I, of course, couldn't help her, but I could tell her where to go. As a result of all these things, I was able to take advantage—God, is that the right way to say it? I was able to take advantage of a disability, use it for my own benefit. Does that make sense?

ST: Right.

IG: So those are the things that I did. For example, I went to Nicaragua. I've been there twice and the first time was in, I think, 1983. I told the commission I was going there and that I'd like to give a report back and they said I could do that. How many leftists do you know could report to a city agency about a trip to Nicaragua when the Sandinistas were in power? And I told the workers at Philip Morris that's where I was going. Some guys wanted to beat the shit out of me, being a fucking commie, and other people were very interested, and other people were supportive. So I always did that. I didn't just hang out with the left. I tried to hang out with a lot of different people. Because I was so, I don't know ( ). Do I look like a killer to

you? ( ) I wasn't overweight then--. I had entrée and so we were able to deal with a lot of issues.

The issue of sexism was a very difficult thing to deal with. Guys were very entrenched, and women were entrenched actually in their views as well. The first thing, I remember criticizing some guy. I was helping him with a grievance and he was talking about, "I'm going to go out and get a nice piece of ass," just after I settled his grievance. There were women right around him. I said, "You know, I like to sleep with women too." I said, "There's nothing wrong with sex, but there's something wrong with your focus upon that. Don't you see how it's degrading to other people?" He says, "What are you, a fag or something?" So I had to deal with that issue.

I was able to deal with a lot of different issues and I tried to do it in creative ways, not always. But I can give you an example of a creative way. I was running for a union office, don't remember what, if I was running for president at that time, but I ran for several offices, all unsuccessfully. I was in the breakroom. I came in early because I wanted to campaign. The shift starts at seven AM. I was on day shift at the time and I got in maybe at five o'clock or five thirty in the morning. I'm putting my lunch pail up and I was getting my gloves out of the locker and I'm hearing this guy, Smokey, who was a real right-wing fixer, a member of the Machinists Union, a repairman. He says, "You know, the niggers are getting everything."

And he did that for my benefit, because he wanted to see what I would say. This was a men's breakroom, so you had a place where people just sat and drank coffee and smoked, and then there were the lockers. I was standing in the lockers and he was having a cup of coffee. So I shouted back, I said, "You know, black folks have stuck together in this factory and elsewhere and that's why they've gotten stuff. How about some peckerwoods in the Machinists Union

sticking together?" So I defused it. I wasn't trying to be a total wise guy. I was trying to make a point. But people started to laugh and laugh nervously and then I heard that the guys were using the word colored or black and they weren't using the word nigger the next day, because of what I had said to this guy. And he didn't say anything more. I mean, did he like me any better? No, but those were some of the things that I tried to do in terms of consciousness.

There were also things about older workers and there were some younger workers who resented the older workers who had seniority and had some of the relatively easier jobs. I had to deal with that as well. I also tried to build solidarity in ways that were not radical. I should think that anybody, you don't have to be a socialist to do this. But I remember a fellow came in. He was an alcoholic and he would come into work really fucked up; forgive me, he was inebriated. I remember one morning, so I walk in and it's an assembly line, and I often asked people near me to watch my section of the line while I took care of some union business. The procedure was that you had to go to the supervisor and tell him or her that you needed a replacement to take care of business, but they could take hours for that.

So I had them watch my line and I took this guy, he was drunk, he wasn't fall down drunk, but he was drunk, I took him into the breakroom. He was a big guy. And I said, "Please wash your face with some cold water and go out there and do your job," because people are watching your line and my line right now and you're going to get fired. He says, "Oh man, I'm okay." So I grabbed him by his—he was bigger than me—but I grabbed him and I put his head under the water and he went [back to work]. Unfortunately, he got fired a couple days later. He did it again and I was not able to [save his job]. But those were the things, you're asking what did I do, these were some of the things that I tried to do in addition to enforcing the contract to the best of my knowledge. I wanted to deal with issues of self-interest, but also of class

interest and also to bring in an international perspective. I didn't go home and say, "Well, how am I going to deal with racism, sexism, ageism, blah blah blah." But as it turned out, that's what I tried to do to the best that I knew. I made a lot of mistakes too, and that's not said just as a sop; I did. There were a lot of times I didn't know what to do. How do you deal with this stuff? But I was proud of what I did to a large extent. So that's the long answer to your short question: what did I do? So those were some of the things that I tried to do and I tried to use whatever positions that I had and whatever knowledge I gained, limited knowledge from the different things that I did, to benefit the workers.

ST: Apart from Philip Morris, how would you describe the overall mood among the activist community in Louisville during the 80s? Obviously, very active during the 70s. What about in the decade that followed?

IG: Well, Louisville was becoming a rust belt in the 80s. I don't remember what year it started. But I'll give you an example. I can't give you an exact time frame, but let me do general and then start honing in. When I came to Louisville, there were twenty-six thousand workers at General Electric. It was the second largest GE plant in the world. The largest one was, I think, in Schenectady, New York. Ronald Reagan used to be an actor—well, he was always an actor, even when he was president—and he used to do these ads for General Electric. They had a thing called General Electric Theater: "At GE, progress is our most important product." That was done out here in Louisville, because they manufactured the washing machine. It went from, I guess, twenty-three thousand union workers, maybe that's what it was, and three thousand salaried, to about five thousand workers, huge layoffs.

International Harvester had seventy-five hundred people. They closed. Brown and Williamson had five thousand workers. They began layoffs and then they moved out, five

thousand gone. ( ) had about twelve hundred workers, gone, not all gone in the 80s, but that's when the rusting began. Philip Morris began automating its plant at that time. There were a lot of chemical plants, DuPont and Roman Haas and Celanese Corporation; they began to downsize at that point. Louisville, which was a city that was of relatively low unemployment when I came here in the late 60s and in the 70s--. You get a job at General Electric and then let's say you got drunk or you beat up your old lady, to be stereotypic about it, and you got fired. You could always go get hired on at Roman Haas or Celanese. Or if you got fired there, you'd go to Fawcett Printing Company. Well, you couldn't do that in the 80s, because these jobs were lost.

So a semi-skilled and unskilled workforce, which was most of the jobs here, was being lost. People were living the American dream, a little house with a tree in the back and maybe a French poodle and maybe a Winnebago trailer, and I hate to be stereotypic, and maybe a set of golf clubs, those people who thought that they had it didn't have it. And when they got laid off, many of them were in their 40s and 50s and I won't say they were too old to be trained, but they felt that their lives were over and the unions didn't do enough to help these people. They were out of union dues and so these people were gone. That had a devastating effect upon the unions in the city at that time. I would guess it was probably the mid-80s on, but you would probably be more knowledgeable than I would at when it started.

What else? People became scared and so the degree of militancy was affected. The companies were able to do incredible things. For example, at Philip Morris, they had a committee on, it was not called the right to smoke, but that's what it was, a right to smoke committee. Philip Morris started it and they enlisted the union. A lot of workers would want to join because you get time off from the assembly line. Philip Morris was a very smart company.

They never said cigarettes are going to make you big and strong. What they said was there's a dispute about cigarettes. Some people think it's no good for you. Others think it may not be good for you, but it's not going to hurt you. Let's have a civil libertarian approach to it. Live and let live. There are some gadgets that you can put in there to suck the smoke out of restaurants and all. So you had these workers joining a committee like this and I wrote a song and I don't think I ever sang it at a union meeting, but I sang it to some workers. It goes like, part of it is, "The factory I work in manufactures cigarettes. To us workers, it's our living, yet to smokers, it spells death, and therein lies the problem I have wrestled with so long. Self-interest says make cancer sticks, but class interest says it's wrong." But workers wouldn't abide by that. They wouldn't even when I--. As soon as Philip Morris would close down, you didn't see any of those workers going to those right to smoke committees anymore. It had only to do with protecting their jobs. They had no consciousness beyond that. Even then, they were cognizant of the fact that it wasn't going to protect them, but they would try. So you had this rust belt that set in and the city fathers and mothers, mostly mothers--. (laughs) Forgive me. That's a triple entendre.

ST: I see.

IG: Forgive the triple entendre. They were not stupid. They saw this coming. As opposed to other cities like Dayton, Ohio, which became just a graveyard, or Birmingham, Alabama, when they lost the steel mills, became a graveyard, the city fathers here were smart. They set about to attract regional divisions of insurance companies and big companies too, and they were successful. They attracted Humana, came to Louisville. Humana's the biggest vulture that you'll want to know, but they came here and people said, "Thank you, Lord, that

they're here." Well, KFC was always in Kentucky, but they attracted the big conglomerate that owns Kentucky Fried Chicken.

ST: Is that Yum?

IG: Yeah, it's now called Yum Brands. Before that, it was Tricon, then it was something else. They own Kentucky Fried Chicken and A&W Root Beer, I think it's A&W Root Beer, and Pizza Hut, Long John Silver's. It's not a little mom and pop hot dog stand. So they attracted them to come here, as well as other big companies. Then there was Columbia HCA was here for awhile. They moved to Nashville, but they were here. And they've attracted other places to come here. But as far as the labor movement was concerned—this is what you're alluding to—it was a carcass. They didn't know what the fuck to do. Forgive me. I was in a church service on Sunday at a missionary Baptist church in this little town in Mississippi that I'd lived in. I said a cuss word in the car. I just wanted to die. I didn't use the f-word, but it was a word in between. Anyhow, that's neither here nor there. The union was almost decimated. I would say that the Central Labor Council on which I served was not very good to begin with. In my entire tenure, it didn't do very much. But it became impotent. Whatever potency it had was expended on dissatisfaction.

ST: And is the main reason behind that just the obvious post-industrial structural changes that were beyond the control of anyone? Or were lingering racial divisions a part of that as well?

IG: All of the above, yes. Well, post-industrialism was obviously a factor, but it would have been a factor even if this were just a service economy that were laying off. I mean, we're being hypothetical now because it was not a service economy at that time. But the racial divisions were just awful. There were a few labor leaders, African-American, some of them

were decent, but few and far between. It was just awful. There were times I just got very depressed, very disillusioned. I remember I once said I wanted to go—I used to go to this little island in South Carolina, Edisto Island. It's about forty-five miles below Charleston. You know where that is?

ST: Yeah, my mom's from South Carolina.

IG: Is that right?

ST: So I'm familiar with the state.

IG: I used to go with the kids. The kids would say, "Why are we going here, Mom and Dad? There's nothing happening here." "That's why I'm going there, because there's nothing happening there." I take my clothes off, put a bathing suit on. They used to have the shrimp boats come down. I bought the shrimp off the dock and you'd cook it and I sat in my bathing suit for a week. That's what I wanted to do at times, but of course I couldn't, because I have a consciousness and I would like to think that I have a skill as an organizer. But yeah, it was pretty demoralizing at times, yes.

ST: Do you see a resurgence in labor activity here in Louisville since the 90s?

IG: Yes and no. There has been an attempt to organize service workers. The SEIU came in for awhile. I don't think they did very well. They came here for awhile. There's been an attempt to organize the hospital workers for a number of years and unfortunately, in my opinion and I would say this if Kay were here, they haven't gotten very far, they really haven't. They haven't organized the first hospital. Now that the California Nurses Association is going to put some money behind that, you probably know that, so there may be a chance that that will happen; but it hasn't thus far. But I'm optimistic. You're asking about where is the labor movement, is that what you're—

ST: Mmm hmm.

IG: I made a mistake. I'm sure you find that hard to believe. I made a lot of mistakes. One of them, when I retired from Philip Morris in 1999, I just distanced myself from the Central Labor Council and all these people, because they were a bunch of good old boys. There were some good old gals, but mostly they were good old boys. I just didn't see much happening. That's a mistake, because I think that there will be a resurgence in the labor movement in the next few years, the split between the AFL-CIO, Change to Win. There will be a lot of organizing going on now, I believe. I don't think it will be the industrial sector that will lead. It will be the service sector and the technology sector that will lead, more so the service sector. That will also have a ripple effect on organizing industrial workers because, you might think this is crazy, but I think at some point that industrial work will have to come back to the United States in some form. A nation cannot survive without industry. Now if the United States and Japan were part of the same country, maybe. But you don't want to have your industrial base in Japan or elsewhere, where if there was ever a dispute, they would just not allow you to do what you want to do. And we see that in the oil sector now, where the United States is very afraid that some of these countries are going to not allow us to do whatever we want to do with their oil. It's their oil, not ours. So I see the possibility of a resurgence. Tell me your question again. I'm rambling on and I forgot your question.

ST: No, you're answering it. I was just curious where you see things headed.

IG: Okay, yeah. Well, I will tell you that and I've never written this in my column, because I have friends who are both in Change to Win and in the AFL and I've done consulting work for them and I hope to have a better relationship with them, but that split was not based upon organizational principles, how are you going to best organize the working class. It was

based on personalities. It was based on stupidity. There was not a need for that. It was unnecessary. There are times when splits are necessary. If you and I are married and we're not getting along and you're staying together for the sake of the children, well you might as well split up. But it was not necessary. Change to Win broke off for stupid reasons, reasons of ego. Having said that, I will also say that the AFL-CIO had not organized shit for so many years that they deserved to get kicked in the teeth like they did. And the AFL-CIO is running scared, because although they're still three-quarters of the organized workforce, it was only about one quarter to one third broke away with Change to Win, the AFL represents the old unions, my kind of unions, old industrial unions. And that's not what's growing.

What's growing are more than ever in the service sector and the technology sector and Andy Stern and the others in Change to Win. And here you have the United Food and Commercial Workers in Louisville that, if anybody's going to organize the unorganized, it's them. They're going after the Latino workers. I speak a little Spanish and I've talked to some of the workers. It's unfortunate, but the thing is that reality pertains. That's where it's at. That's the concrete condition, so you have to work with it. But yes, I think that the labor movement will grow. How this growth will manifest itself, I'm not sure. I wish I was sure. I wish you could say to me, "Oh come on, Ira, you really know," and then you drag it out of me. But I don't know, I really don't know for sure. I have a son. I have four children, but one of my sons is an engineer and he tells me, he says, "Daddy, the jobs are not secure, even in engineering. They're being outsourced." I said, "How in the hell can you outsource?" He says, "You don't know, Daddy." He's a civil engineer and he taps stuff into a computer either on the worksite or when he goes back to his office. He says, "It could all be done from India or Venezuela just as

soon as from the United States." I see Pam's job is being automated out. You ever watch the NewsHour with Jim Lehrer?

ST: Yes.

IG: Okay, well they had a special on outsourcing about a year ago and they focused upon medical transcription. They predicted that in five years, it will be gone. She doesn't think so, but I think so. Already though in India, there are Indian workers who are doing stuff for her. Because when it used to be when it started out, alright you're a doctor and I'm the secretary, which is rare. It's usually the other way around. But now it's changing. You're the doctor. You examine the patient and then you dictate. And I'm the transcriptionist or the secretary. I type up your stuff and I have it for you on your desk the next day or the day after that. Then it changed. Instead of you giving it to your secretary, you dictate it and it goes into a telephone and it goes to a central headquarters and they assign it out to Pam. That's what she does now. Then they decided that there's a sixteen-hour time difference between here and India. So at three o'clock in the afternoon when the doctor gets through and she or he is transcribed into the machine, it goes to India and they have the thing on the desk the next morning at nine AM when you walk into your doctor's office. So what's going to happen with these jobs? They're all going to be gone. Am I crazy?

ST: It seems to be headed in that direction. Yeah, the computer technology makes it inevitable in some ways.

IG: So where I think it's going, I don't know what is going to happen. I still think that there are many issues and I write about these in my newspaper column and I'll show you some of mine, or email them to you better.

ST: Yeah, I'd like to see those.

IG: I don't know what's going to happen. The labor movement is still stuck in the past in many ways. So for example, I had great hopes from John Sweeney, because he was a good organizer and he organized the SEIU, the service employees in New York, and he did a damn good job from what I could tell. He got them good wages and benefits and job security. Well, one of the good things that he did was to distance himself when he became president of the AFL-CIO in the beginning. He either distanced himself or he dismantled AIFLD. Do you know what AIFLD is? AIFLD is the American Institute for Free Labor Development. It was a joint project between the AFL-CIO and the CIA, a joint project.

ST: CIA?

IG: As in Central Intelligence Agency. I don't know whether the CIA had their CIA emblem emblazoned on this thing, but that's what it was. Whereas the CIA itself will go into a country and they'll pay somebody to murder the labor leaders, like in Guatemala for example, literally, not figuratively, what AIFLD did was if you and I are running for office and we're in Paraguay or Chile, wherever, and I'm more liberal than you, AIFLD would fund your campaign so that you could beat me. Even if you were a leftist, but you were less a leftist than I, they would fund the campaign. So the AFL-CIO to its everlasting credit said, "We don't want anything more to do with that." However, there's another government agency called the NED, the National Endowment for Democracy, which is a right-wing piece of crap. Not a very good description of the particularities, but that's what it is. You look it up. The AFL-CIO is in bed with them. They're making love to them passionately. So we have to deal with a lot of that anti-communism. There's such a concentration upon self-interest and not about class interest.

Again, this speaks to your thing about where it's going, to the credit of the AFL-CIO and Change to Win, both have strongly endorsed the movement for immigrant rights. In times

past, that was not the case. They wanted the borders closed and they wanted the illegals thrown the hell out of here. As a dialectician, I have to parse this. I have to look at the particularities of the problem. Totally free immigration or entry makes it difficult to organize the unorganized. If you're organizing a factory or warehouse or whatever in the United States and a bunch of people come in to take the jobs of people on strike, you don't want that. So you don't want unlimited.

On the other hand, the AFL-CIO and Change to Win need to understand that these are working people. And we have the audacity, the absolute chutzpah, the hubris to tell these people—we stole their fucking land. It was not California, it was [said in Spanish accent] California. It was not Los Angeles, it was [said in Spanish accent] Los Angeles. It was [said in Spanish accent] Arizona. It was [said in Spanish accent] Colorado, not Colorado. We took their land in the Mexican-American War. We stole all that shit and conquered, never gave it back. Then in what was it, 1826, there was the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which sort of codified or made final a lot of this stuff. Then we tell these folk, these immigrants that they are illegal, they should speak our language, and they should get with the program and they should not come into our country without going through the proper procedures. ( )

Now where does the labor movement fit in in this? The labor movement for years never paid any attention to organizing these workers. They never did until recently. And to the credit of the AFL-CIO and Change to Win, they've both taken very good positions. The recent march, this "Day without Immigrants," May Day, both the AFL-CIO and Change to Win made excellent statements. Sweeney made a beautiful speech. Change to Win filed a grievance with the NLRB to support workers who were disciplined who had taken the day off. Now the plot thickens and again you have to look at the contradiction in its particularities. Most of the trade

unionists who supported the workers here in Louisville—there was a big march in Louisville, had about five hundred or a thousand people came to that thing here—most of the trade unionists who were there were people who were trying to organize immigrant workers. I didn't see very many unionists from unions other than that. So it may be that they supported the struggle of the immigrants, but it may have been that they did it for self-interest, because they want to organize these people into their union. I'm not trying to attribute a nefarious scheme or sinister motives, I don't know. But what I do know is what I saw and this is what I saw. But the fact that they're willing to deal with that now--. And Sergio Badino, who was a Latino organizer of workers for many years has been given some prominence now with the SEIU. So they're doing that. That's a very good sign to me.

ST: If you were talking to a younger labor activist today who's working within the changing conditions you're talking about, what's one piece of advice you would give him or her that's sort of grounded in lessons you've learned from your years?

IG: I couldn't just give one, so I'll give you a few. Maybe the most important is they have to learn, and they have to learn to teach people who they're trying to organize, you never get anything without a fight and you never keep anything without a fight. So for example, my grandmother was an immigrant from the old country and she used to do what was called home work. She did piecework at home. And there used to be a sign in the factory that said, "If you don't come in on Sunday, don't come in on Monday," meaning if you don't work that seventh day, you're out. That was how the fight for the ten-hour day and then the eight-hour day began.

Well, once the fight for the eight-hour day was won, unions got a little fat and lazy. Well, they also became a little bit corrupt, maybe more than a little bit corrupt, and anti-communist and racist. They didn't pay attention. So what the companies did, they didn't

illegally work people more than the hours that they should, but they put in different clauses: we will pay people overtime and we will force people to work overtime. So you had the situation at Ford and General Motors and Chrysler, for example, where auto workers, some of them were making big money, but they were killing themselves. They were working forced overtime, which was supposed to be against the law. But because they were making time and a half and then double time, they didn't complain as much. The companies certainly didn't complain because it was cheaper for them to keep you, a regular worker, working time and a half or double time, than to hire me, a new worker, and have to pay benefits, the benefits being the largest percentage of cost. Would you excuse me just a moment?

[conversation breaks off as phone rings]

IG: Pam says no, it's just a function of me knowing so many people.

ST: That might be.

IG: I hope she's right. Alright, where were we last?

ST: I was asking you about lessons that you had learned from your years in organizing.

IG: I said that you don't get anything without a fight; you don't keep anything without a fight. So they were forcing people to work all this overtime and so they thought they were making it, but then when competition appeared elsewhere from Japan and from Germany, and Hyundai and Toyota and Honda and etcetera were taking jobs from here, workers were not used to fighting. So they throw up their hands, "Oh my God. What the hell's going on here?" They're losing their jobs. They don't know how to fight. So that's what I meant when I said you don't get anything without a fight, which was the fight for the eight-hour day, and you don't keep it unless you continue to fight. It's the same with all the other benefits that were won. So that's one lesson. A second lesson for me would be that we who live in the United

States think that we know everything, that we're smarter than everybody else, we know more. I don't know, have you traveled internationally?

ST: A little, yeah.

IG: Where have you gone?

ST: Europe, just recently went to Mexico actually.

IG: I traveled to Europe and I've been to Mexico and I've been in Cuba and Nicaragua. Anyhow, the average person knows so much more about history than we do. I shouldn't say average. A person who's totally illiterate and maybe destitute doesn't. But the average person who has gone to school can speak two or three languages. They're cognizant of world affairs, or history. We don't know shit in this country.

So that's the other lesson, that we need to learn from other people and not think that we're the greatest on earth and nobody else is worth anything, that people should be like us. That we're part of a worldwide struggle between capital and labor, that would be a second lesson. The third is the lesson that the Wobblies used to say: If you don't hang together, you'll hang separately. And we're hanging separately right now.

ST: To bring it a little closer to home, do you think there were things that could have been done in the mid-70s here so that the activist community here had hung together a little bit more tightly? Or do you think some of the divisions were inevitable?

IG: Well, I think that the problems that existed were systemic, systemic meaning they were not peculiar to Louisville but that they were nationwide and worldwide. It was a problem in the nature of capitalist development, the move to oligopolies and various other things, the contention with the Soviet Union. But having said that, had there been a more cohesive unified movement, had that existed in Louisville amongst labor people and others, we could have at

least begun the educational process. If we couldn't stop a company from moving out, at least workers would understand why this happened and that degree of consciousness might have melded or yielded an organizational form to combat it.

Now the left is very, very small in this country as you know. The issue of socialism is not on the agenda. I'm not stupid. I might still be a socialist, but I know where it's at. I just wrote a piece [for my newspaper column] about the Democratic Party. Never before, never since the failed presidency of Richard Nixon, have people been so dissatisfied with the way the ruling class rules. And with all these scandals, this Duke Cunningham and prostitutes for votes scandal and all these other things, the Abramoff scandal, has there been a chance to change? If the Democrats are the party of the people, ha ha, but if they are, then why can't they take advantage of that and point out the corruption? Instead, what Nancy Pelosi and the Democratic Leadership Council do is they try to appeal to the center and they forget their base. This will directly answer you, but I have to give you the background. What they have felt in times past, and I think now, is that the progressive women's movement has nowhere to go except for the Democratic Party, people of color have nowhere to go except for the Democratic Party, the labor movement has nowhere to go except for the Democratic Party. So instead of appealing to—

[conversation breaks off as mailman arrives]

IG: For example, two generations have grown up that know almost nothing about the civil rights movement, almost nothing, and I saw it recently, let alone other movements. If we can carry on the knowledge, as trite as that sounds, that is significant. I'll give you a specific example. I've been going to various civil rights reunions over the last few years and I didn't go to them in the beginning, because I was not a big leader. Again as I said to you earlier, this is

not being falsely modest. I was a foot soldier. I was very proud of that work that I'd done and I nearly lost my life on more than one occasion. But I go because I want to be able to show young people, to teach people what's going on. I went to a meeting at Jackson State University in Jackson, Mississippi about four months ago and there were students there from Oberlin and Antioch and Jackson State and the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg. So obviously, these were engaged students, students with some degree of perspective on progressivism. I asked the students, I said, "Can you tell me about the Spanish Civil War?" Not one student could tell me. I asked them then who Francisco Franco was. Only one or two of them knew. I said to them, "Do you know that the opinion of some, the opinion of this fellow anyhow, is that if the good guys and gals had won that war, maybe we wouldn't have had World War II, because Hitler was testing his Junkers, his ( ), and all these other ( ) in Spain? You don't even know what this war was." So now we've got to understand that you have to learn history. So for me, it's very important to do these oral histories of people, even a small person like myself. So that's why I'm happy to do it.

ST: Well, I'm happy you're participating. On that theme of memory, you have children and grandchildren. What would you most like for them to remember about your work in Louisville or even prior to your coming to Louisville?

IG: That's a good question. You're asking me to wax eloquent about myself. I would say that I would want them to think that I heard a different drummer, as they say, and that I stood up for what I believed in. And whether they agreed or disagreed with my politics, that I stood up for what I felt was right. There's an old expression that says, "It's better to die on your feet than to live on your knees," and that I didn't live on my knees, that I stood up for whatever that I did, that I did not accept the societal limitations based upon handicap or anything else.

I'm always quoting these little ditties because I like concrete examples, I'll quote something. That wealth and power don't mean shit in the long run. Do you know Harburg? He says, "No matter how high or great the throne, what sits on it is the same as your own." (laughs) I would say that's part of a lesson.

Other lessons for me that I would like to convey to people about my life are that I would like to think that money and power, I never had a lot of money; I certainly never had money. And I may have had a little bit of power in the union and a little bit more on the human relations commission. And had I kissed enough you-know-what, I could have moved up on commission, but that I would not compromise my principles for anything like that. It's not because I'm a martyr or a masochist, but it's because I would like to think that I have certain principles that I value: that I try to respect women, that I try to respect older people, people with disabilities, people of color, people in different countries. I'm not saying it put down the United States. This is my country. In almost every country that I visited, I always wanted to live there. I wanted to live in Cuba, oh my God. But this is my country. Now maybe I've gotten too used to the petty bourgeois restaurants and so I'm rationalizing a commitment to social justice in this country. Because if you go to resorts in Mexico, you can get nice restaurants, but if you go to some of the little towns, you're not going to get any.

So maybe I'm a little bit too comfortable, but I would like to think that because I love this country, I want to make a change and that's what I would want my children and their children to do, to see that a change is possible and that there's a better world and it's not just making money. In fairness to that, I think that I can say I've succeeded some with my children. All of them want to try to make the world a little bit better and are not just interested in money. Now, they would like to live in condos and they do like to travel and they would like more

frequent flyer miles than they get. I have been questioned more than once about, "You're going to all these meetings and where's the big social change you're talking about, Daddy?" And, "You're always going to meetings. Do you like meetings?" And I say, "No, I hate meetings, but they're a necessary evil." That's what I would like to see people say, "There was a guy who lived by his principles." But more than that, I don't want on my tombstone, "There lies Ira Grupper. He fought the good fight." No, I want, "There lies Ira Grupper. He kicked some ass in his day." That he was effective. Because having a good heart and being on the side of right, I don't want you on my baseball team unless you can hit that home run. I don't care how nice a lady you are. I want to be able to win.

And the other thing I would want people to say is that Ira may have been an intellectual, but he was also a worker and he had a consciousness of working people, he had a respect, that he wanted the so-called least amongst us to be treated as a human being. Sociologists talk about self-actualization, maximizing your potential as a human being, and that phraseology is a bunch of crap frankly, but the sentiment behind it is true. You want people to achieve, be all they can be. You don't want it to be corrupted. That slogan, "Be all you can be," was co-opted by the US Army. There were slogans, "Be all you can be. Join the Army." No, I want people to join the people's army. (laughs) How's that?

ST: That's pretty good. One thing that this project is particularly interested in is talking with folks about how they sort of imagine the chronology of the movement. I'm just curious whether for you, you feel like there was a moment where you felt that the spirit of the 60s had really ended, or did you see the movement having sort of a continuous trajectory since then.

IG: This is how I'll answer you. There were people in the civil rights movement who didn't have a long view. They thought that if there was, and I'm going to be a little crass, if

there was a black behind next to a white behind at a lunch counter, that achieved a tremendous amount and other stuff would follow. I never felt that way exactly. I wanted the black behind next to the white behind, but I knew that if you couldn't buy that hamburger, there was obviously a need for an economic aspect to the social justice struggle and that's not me alone. There were some leaders in the civil rights movement who saw that as well. After all, Martin Luther King was murdered not because he was a civil rights leader, but because he connected the dots. He opposed the war in Vietnam and that's when they went after him. Then he was killed not in a civil rights struggle. He was killed in a labor struggle in Memphis. Now it happened that the workers were either all black or ninety-nine percent black, but he connected those issues. Similarly, someone like Malcolm X, when he talked about the blue-eyed devils meaning white people, it was okay. When he made his hajj to Mecca and he saw that some of these blue-eyed devils were Muslims themselves, he gained a different perspective and he opposed Elijah Muhammad and he became radical. He began to build a movement. He became dangerous to the system and so he was killed.

So I think that that perspective needs to be there. There were those who had that perspective and those who didn't. There were the Roy Wilkinses of the world, the head of the NAACP for many years, who could see fighting discrimination, but could not see a link or did not want to countenance any kind of association between race and anything else. You had someone like Thurgood Marshall, who was touted as a great jurist and a great lawyer and yes, he was a great lawyer. He was also a vicious anti-communist. He was a red-baiter. He was awful and that needs to be made known to people. So I guess that that would be part of what I would want. I would want people to understand that the 60s was only one aspect of a struggle. It was only one part of a continuum. As I said earlier, there have been civil fights for civil

rights ever since there have been commissions of civil wrongs and ever it will be. Do I think it will ever end? Will there ever be an Elysium, a heaven on earth? I would like to think so, but I don't know. I don't know.

I do think that something else I would like to convey to people, to get them to understand that we have the technology in the year 2006 to feed every man, woman, and child on the face of this earth. We just don't distribute it equitably and there's something wrong with that. That's how dumb I am. There's something wrong with that. If everybody can eat, why isn't everybody eating? Don't give me any kind of fancy polysyllabic reason for it. People need to eat. There's no reason. There's no reason for me to diss you because you're a woman. It's stupid. It doesn't make—but we do it and we continue to do it. Unless that understanding happens, we will repeat our mistakes and there were those in the civil rights movement who had a narrow perspective and others, many many others who had a wider perspective. I would dare say that the civil rights movement afforded people the opportunity to learn that there was a bigger picture.

A group like SNCC, which I was a small part of, began to take positions on international issues. I remember when we took the position that we did on the Middle East and here I was a Jew, raised as a Jew and was bar mitzvahed, all this stuff, and I didn't know anything about—I knew about Arabs, but I'd never heard of a Palestinian until I was thirteen, fourteen years old. I knew nothing and it forced me, they forced me, I don't mean somebody sat down with a gun on me, but the circumstances forced me to try to study and to make the connection.

I was the head of a national Jewish organization that called for a state of Palestine next to a state of Israel as early as 1982.[2]

ST: Was that just based here in Louisville?

IG: No, it was an international organization. It was called the New Jewish Agenda. In the New Jewish Agenda, we had fifty chapters in the United States and Canada with very good ties to progressive movements all over the world, in Mexico, particularly in Vietnam, and elsewhere in the Middle East. But the civil rights movement gave me, forced me to try to learn about other peoples in the world. The civil rights movement gave me an understanding of society.

I became, if I can say this without sounding immodest, an expert in the area of affirmative action. Professor Arthur Kinoy, who's no longer living, who was one of the most prominent progressive attorneys in the United States, out of Rutgers University, he and I were asked to lecture to the National Lawyers Guild on affirmative action. I never would have had that understanding had I--. I mean that's a whole other thing. I was able to relate the issues of discrimination that I saw in the civil rights movement and I saw in the lack of enforcement of the law with this whole thing of discrimination.

I'm rambling now, but I gave a talk to the EEOC. They had a thirty-fifth anniversary celebration of the EEOC and the EEOC itself was a victory. It was a limited concession by the ruling class to the power of the civil rights movement. And they weren't doing shit to enforce the laws and they made the mistake of asking me to be on this panel. So I was on a panel with Ben Richmond, who was the head of the Urban League, and several other people. So I gave my speech and I said that there's a sophisticated juridical rationale for the abrogation of all the

[2] Grupper later wanted to add here: "I thank SNCC for getting me to study the history of my people and the Arab people."

enforcement revisions of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments to the United States Constitution, and that if you make the mistake of being born a person of color or a woman or older or disabled or lesbian, you are going to be victimized and the EEOC is doing nothing about this. They got so upset with me. (laughs) I'm sure you find that hard to believe. Anyway, they got upset with me and I never got invited back. I'll send you that speech, I will. You'll have to read it.

So those are some of the lessons, the things that I would want my kids or grandchildren or other people to know. And people don't know, they don't know. You know that old thing about, "Men lead lives of quiet desperation?" Well, that's quiet desperation; it really is. On this block, I see it. This used to be a working class part of the Highlands; this is the Highlands section. As you go farther this way south and as you go toward Cherokee Park, the prices go way up, but these houses here used to be the houses of ordinary working class people. The guy on my right used to work for a big building contractor. Now he has his own little business. And you had plumbers and pipe fitters here, who were skilled and semi-skilled workers who would buy a house. It's changing now. My neighbor next door is a professor of English and there's a lawyer across the street and it's being gentrified and the prices are going up. Where are these people going to move to?

So you have in this situation, on this block, just across the street, a few houses down, there's an older couple that you hardly ever see. They are what I feel is house-poor, meaning they're paying on their mortgage or maybe they've paid the mortgage, but they don't go to the movies, they don't go anywhere, because they don't have any money. They save their money for their medicines. And maybe I'm stereotyping, but that's what has to be learned by this next generation, that you don't have money, that people go out to Applebee's or Copeland's or

wherever they go, that's not the be all and end all of life. Now how does that relate? I just want people and my kids to not accept this culture. Besides which, Applebee's is not the best restaurant to go to. There are local restaurants that one can go to, I'll bet in North Carolina and here, that are much better.

ST: Oh definitely.

IG: We have a place called Ramsi's here and there are many others, I'm a restaurant freak, that are so much better. That's what I would want to teach. I also want to teach kids that change can be accomplished. People don't think it can be accomplished. It's this thing about "lives of quiet desperation," Sarah, it's really true. It's really true. You listen to the words of some of these rap songs, these misogynist songs, or the phraseology, the language that people use: "Hey man, what's happening?" "Ain't nothing happening." "You ain't shit." "I know." I'm not a Freudian and I don't want to parse every word, but "you ain't shit" means that your life as a human being isn't worth very much. "I know": I recognize that. "What's happening?" "Nothing's happening." There is something happening. Your life is going on. You should feel good about your life. You should want to do this, but people don't talk about that.

That's what I want to teach people. I want to teach the next generation that there are things beyond small talk. There's nothing wrong with small talk. You have to establish a repoire with people, but most people on this block—and again I'm not saying we're any better than anybody else. We're different maybe, but not better—what are they talking about? They've just come home from work. They're dealing with the kids, talking about fixing supper. Maybe somebody's ill. Maybe going out to dinner if it's a couple that just got home and they don't have food. Maybe they want to get laid, excuse my French. But are they talking about the

war in Iraq? Or the deleterious effects of smog? Or the fact that Kentucky Fried Chicken now is being sued because they are pushing partially hydrogenated oil being put into their chicken? Or that the chicken that they make isn't good in the first place and how they kill those chickens? Are they talking about that? No. And is that because they're evil people? No, they're not evil people. They just want to survive. But they have not made that transition between simple vested self-interest and the larger picture. So that's what I want to teach people. Is that enough to try to want to get to people?

ST: I think that is a pretty big agenda, yes, and an important one too. Were there any things that you had wanted to talk about that I haven't brought up?

IG: Well, some of the work that I'm doing currently, I'm trying to help the Kentucky Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression survive. We've faced some difficulties recently. But also, my concern is with the rising amount of discrimination and the fact that people don't know how to deal with it, what to do. I was saying earlier that I have a good bit of knowledge, if I say so myself, in the area of affirmative action. I've studied it and I've ruled on cases. People don't know, they don't know about equal opportunity, let alone affirmative action. Children are not taught in high school that if you are Latino or black or Asian or female or gay or disabled, that the likelihood is that something is going to happen to you that you don't like in your lifetime, whether it be an unwanted sexual advance or a refusal to hire you because you have a disability or what have you. And that you have to know how to deal with it.

You're not taught that in high school. You're not taught that in college. UNC and Duke don't teach that. Tell me the course. Where is the civics course that says to you, "If you're a woman, some guy is going to try to put his hands where they don't belong?" You or your daughter or son are going to face that and how do you cope with that? They're not taught life

skills. I'm very distressed about that. I don't mean distressed in that I'm going to lose sleep right now, but it bothers me. And that's part of the reason that there's such a lack of consciousness--. It's the system's fault, but it's also our own fault.

Somebody once told me, wiser than me, "If you let somebody hit you upside the head, you deserve to be hit upside the head." I first thought it was very crude. Does that mean that Jews deserved the Holocaust? That the Khmer Rouge should have been allowed to kill all those Cambodians? No, but that's not the point that this person was raising. He was saying that if you permit atrocities to be visited upon you without formulating a way to get out of that situation, then you're looking for it. Is that blaming the victim? No, it's talking about a reality. So someday, we'll talk about how you prove discrimination. If I'm your boss and you're a subordinate of mine and I make an unwanted sexual advance and you repel that advance—I was talking to Pam about this the other day—in the old days, I'd say, "Bitch, you're fired." I won't say that now. I say, "Ms. Thuesen," is that how you pronounce your last name?

ST: Thuesen.

IG: "Ms. Thuesen, we'd really like to retain you in employment, but you've not met our criteria for advancement." Instead of me saying that to you, I'd get a female supervisor to say that to you. Now how do you prove discrimination? You think this is just an esoteric made-up example? It goes on all the time. I'm not saying discrimination hasn't become more subtle. It's not always subtle, but for the most part it is. And I did it. I was making headway on that commission. That's why they pulled me off, because my view was—there's an old saying, which I cleaned up and I made gender neutral: "If you grab them around the neck, their hearts and minds will follow."

So I may not have been able to prove a case of sexual discrimination, the kind that I just described to you, but let's assume I proved another kind of discrimination. So I grab them around the neck and I fine them and I put so many demographical statistical requires upon these bastards that they have to hire a private CPA firm to do it. They're all in bed with one another. They belong to the same golf clubs and social clubs and they say, "That jerk, Ira, on the human relations commission has got a spoke up his you-know-what." So they would stop doing that. Now did that change their minds? No, but it would change their behavior. And that's the only way you're going to change their behavior. That's what I would want.

That's what bothers me. I deal with hundreds of cases of discrimination. I'm not a lawyer, I can't practice law, but ( ) they come to me: "Ira" or "Mr. Grupper, you're considered an expert in this area. Help me." I can't help half of them. I'd get my teeth knocked in, because victims were never taught how you keep records. I have a guy that got fired about two weeks ago. He says, "Somebody recommended," blah blah blah. "So tell me what happened." "Well, this happened. The supervisor called me the n-word." I said, "Well, who saw that happen or who heard it happen?" He says, "Joe did." I said, "Joe who?" He says, "I don't have his last name, but you could get it from the employment office." I said, "Do you think the human resources department of your company is going to give you the name of somebody and phone number so that you can call him and have him sign an affidavit attesting that they're discriminating?" Now, I would have had to dismiss this case because a prima facie case of discrimination wasn't demonstrated. But it occurred and how do you deal with it? So that's what I would want. I would want there to be knowledge imparted. I would hope that that would happen and I hope that your oral histories of people go the way of not just being in a library

that you look up, but that they can be used. Let them be used by high school students, by junior high school students, to know what's going on.

ST: Well, we hope that will be a use of them as well. I realize we're getting close on time, so maybe that's a good note to end on.

IG: That's fine.

ST: Thank you so much for being generous with your time. I really enjoyed it.

IG: I'm honored that you would ask me and I thank you.

ST: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Emily Baran. July 2006.