

Interview with Claude Ramsey, president of Mississippi AFL-CIO, March 28, 1974, conducted by Jack Bass and Walter de Vries, transcribed by Linda Killen.

Jack Bass: You remember in 1948 when George Wallace stayed at the convention when the Alabama delegation walked out.

Ramsey: Yeah, when all the southern states did. Mississippi included, you know. That would be an interesting thing for you to investigate when you get in to Alabama. Wallace began his political career, really, as a southern liberal or a populist, however you want to define it. He was very liberal on economic issues. *He* made his first race for governor. Patterson over there defeated him. He was attorney general at that time and he defeated him by using the race question. Wallace said, at that time, that's the last time he would be outniggered in a campaign. ~~So he embarked on his~~

[Interruption.]

~~1961~~. Let's see. I was elected president of this organization in 1959 for the first time.

J.B.: And you've been serving continuously since then?

Ramsey: Right. In 1960 we sat down and decided what it was going to take to put a program together to turn Mississippi around. The end result of all that was we took a look at all the states' operations, what they were doing politically. And spent some time in Alabama, Louisiana. I think I went to Arkansas. But after looking over the

Louisiana operation, I decided that they had the best blue print for success of any of the state organizations. So in '61, in a special convention, we adopted a program of progress, we called it, and began to build a program similar to Louisiana. Basically provided the money to do necessary things. You know, mailing to membership, set up a complete mailing system. The whole works. I'll run you by the office in a while and let you see how it is set up over there. The key to success in politics is a couple of distinguished members of the Senate there is communication, is getting the message out to the membership. And the cheapest way and the only way to do it is by mail.

Walter de Vries: In the thirteen years that you've had that program, did you meet your goals? How successful were you?

Ramsey: We've been fairly successful. Much more than a lot of people would think. Of course we've had a number of things happen in Mississippi that ~~on some of these~~ <sup>are</sup> successes. I'd say you've got about three prominent factors, I think. Several things that's happened. Some that we had control over and some that we didn't. Reapportionment of the legislature has had a very definite *leaving*.

[Interruption] *Cautioner Walker* —

--one day do something of real brilliance, and the next goddamn day he screws the whole thing. I tell you the damn truth, he's been in office this long but I haven't fully made up my mind what the hell we do have in him. And I think just about everybody else feels the same damn way about him. You don't have that thing on, do you? You're not taping all this.

J.B.: You find Waller an enigma?

Ramsey: Well, the guy had promises of making the state a real great governor. He had everything going for him. A lot of people want to see him succeed. I frankly *did*, *but* - - I swear he's done some stupid things. Went out of his way to offend key members of the legislature. Just so many things that make no damn sense at all from my point of view. But he's a damn breath of fresh air compared to some of these bastards we've had in the past. Starting with Ross Barnett in 1960, when I was first on the scene here. I was elected president in '59. One of the first jobs I was faced with as president of the organization was *to set up* a committee to interview candidates for governor. I had the pleasure of meeting him and interviewing him at that time. Ross Barnett. That was the beginning of my career in the labor movement at state level. Mr. Ross Barnett.

W.D.V.: How did that interview go?

Ramsey: I still remember parts of it now. I was amazed at the lack of knowledge this guy had of state government. Really amazed. I didn't consider myself ~~being~~ a student of state government. But I'll be damned if I didn't have more knowledge about the affairs of state government than he did and he was a candidate for governor. I remember one distinct bit of conversation we had. He had a state senator with him and he's still over there. Tony Brooks is still in the senate. We had one question. We asked him about compulsory school attendance. Would he be in favor of re-enacting a compulsory school attendance law. He looked at me and says "Why,

do we have such a law on the books already?" No we don't governor, that was repealed in 1958. That was part of the segregation package • ~~under~~ . Just two years before. That meant repealed over a year when we had that interview. Here's a candidate for governor that doesn't know that the compulsory school attendance law got repealed.

J.B.: Have they reinstated it yet?

Ramsey: Not yet.

W.D.V.: Did you ask him about race in that interview?

Ramsey: No, race wasn't discussed. Mostly economic issues. Of course you remember at that time, 1959, very few blacks were registered. If I remember right, about 25,000 blacks on the books. So the role that the black played in politics at that point and up until this last election I guess was on a negative basis. The Negro was a scapegoat, whipping boy. The guy that can holler nigger the loudest was the guy that usually won the election. That's the kind of politics we had, you know.

W.D.V.: Do you think that's changed now?

Ramsey: Oh yes. No question about it. Mississippi has probably undergone more change in the last. . . well, the voting rights act was passed in '65. . . that's nine years now, right? I think the election before this last one, when John Bell Williams defeated William Winter, the present lieutenant governor. . . I think that was probably the last racist type campaign we'll have. This last one was a completely different kind of a situation. You have something like 300,000 blacks on the books now and that does make a difference in the state political



campaign. A lot of people just damn well don't believe there's been as much change in this state as there has been. Everett does a column in the Washington Post that was reprinted in the Democrat Times just this past week about that. Did you read it?

W.D.V.: Yeah. Do you think the issue is gone, or is it just below the surface? If somebody pushes the button are we going to have it again?

Ramsey: No. I don't see that it's gone. Hell, we still got racist type politicians. We've got a number of them in the legislature and we see undertones of it every now and then. It's nothing like it used to be. It's not the overriding issue it once was.

J.B.: How many members in the AFL-CIO in Mississippi?

Ramsey: We've got somewhere in the neighborhood of between 85 and 90,000 members in Mississippi.

W.D.V.: As a percent of the work force, is it increasing or decreasing?

Ramsey: Oh yeah. That's one thing. We're not at the bottom of the totem pole here in Mississippi as on the percent of the work force organized. We are ahead of a number of states percentage wise. We're ahead of both the Carolinas on a percentage basis. We've had a lot of growth. That's what I was telling you, about some of the things that happened. Started off to tell you about the reapportionment of the legislature had a definite bearing on the situation. Increased black registration. And the progress we've made in organizing. In '59, when

I was elected the first time we had something like 40,000 organized workers. We have more than doubled that during this period of time. This growth has come about in many of the tough areas of this state, you see. Many, many areas. What we've been attempting to do, and I guess this is what you really want to get into, the political alliance that we're trying to develop is a political alignment of sorts with organized labor and blacks as being the basis of the coalition. We've been fairly successful in some areas. Not as successful as I'd like to see, you know. In this last election, to give an example, the result of a lot of our activities. . . and it all ties together. . . we now have a majority in both houses of the legislature we have put over there. I had dinner last night with some of the young turks over there, young progressive minded house members, you know. And this was one of the things we were talking about last night. None of them had been around the place, of course, very long. Two of them serving their second term and three that were in their first term. I was talking with them about the big change in the legislature since 1960. Comparing the legislature in 1960 with the present legislature, you see. They couldn't believe some things that happened I told them happened over there. I was here when the Meredith thing occurred. That was in '62. That was something, really, to behold at that time. The state just went ape shit at that point. Political leadership, you know. They adopted all kind of bills and resolutions over there over it. With Barnett as governor. Going up and down the capital. And you'd think they was getting ready to secede any minute. All that's changed now.

Of course it's true we've only got one black face in the legislature right now. But that one black face has made one hell of a difference in the atmosphere and the way people conduct themselves and the whole thing over there. It might be a good idea to meet that guy while you are in the state.

W.D.V.: We spent two and a half hours with him today.

Ramsey: He's a good man. I don't think we could have found a better black person to. . . you know, broke the ice on this situation. He's very intelligent. He handles himself real well. He's not an Uncle Tom, but he's not overly pushy. He knows how to work with the people. He's well respected. You'll find this, I think. By most of the members of the house over there. Have you talked to many members of the legislature yet? Have you found this to be true? Because we helped put him in there. We helped put the organization together and financed his campaign. The whole thing. We've got a majority in both houses we helped elect, yeah.

W.D.V.: You helped in their campaigns, with money and organization?

Ramsey: With support, right.

J.B.: Do you make actual campaign contributions to legislative candidates? What would it average out at?

Ramsey: Oh yeah, sure. Oh, I don't know. It of course varies from district to district. The needs might be greater in one district than it is in another. And the candidate might need more help in one district than another. But I would say that years in the past it would

run four or five hundred dollars. Something like that. You know, actual contributions to the candidate. Then of course. . . I don't count the organization and helping to get the vote out, stuff like that. I'm talking about the actual money put in the hands of the legislator.

J.B.: How about legislators from the areas where there is really very little in the way of organized labor?

Ramsey: Well, Bob Clark would fit that category. He's one out of a rural type county. Farming mostly. Large majority black population. We spent a lot of time and money in helping to get those people elected and then help them put their organization together to get the vote out. Very few labor union members in his county. This is what I'm talking about, you see.

J.B.: How about white members in rural areas?

Ramsey: White members? Well, we've got, in some counties, a strange situation here. You familiar with the state at all? You know where Sparksville is? The site of Mississippi State. Just north of there  
Point.  
town of West/ Give you an example. That's just one. Of course you've got further over in the central part of the state. Where they've got one or two sizable industries working maybe seven or eight thousand people. Organized plants. And those people live and commute all over the place in their work. The main thing their homes in the rural areas . I can cite you several places like that. These are the areas that we've been fairly successful in.

J.B.: What does the state headquarters here get per member for operating expenses?

Ramsey: Twenty cents a member a month. That's kind of an average figure compared to other states. Louisiana has probably got the highest per capita of any of them. I think Alabama is about twenty. South Carolina hasn't got into this thing as much as some of the states have. Don't believe. I don't remember what their per capita is. North Carolina I think went up on theirs a while back.

J.B.: I've forgotten North Carolina. I think South Carolina just went up to fifteen. Can that be used for contributions?

Ramsey: Dues money? Yeah, we expend dues money in a state election. So far we've been successful. Let's put it this way. We have not had a law passed prohibiting expenditure of dues money on state elections. Can't spend dues money on a federal election. At least not given to the candidate to use as campaign expenses.

W.D.V.: Do most of the candidates who you invite before your committee for an interview come?

Ramsey: Oh yeah.

W.D.V.: Do most of them want your endorsement or are they reluctant to get it?

Ramsey: Yeah. In recent years they've been very anxious for our support.

W.D.V.: Is that a change?

Ramsey: Oh yeah, quite a change. Several years back they looked upon labor's endorsement more or less as a kiss of death. We didn't have enough members and influence to deliver much of a vote. That's all changed. I think you'll probably find this in your interviews with

people elsewhere. It's important, I think, to consider the structure of the labor movement and how we operate. We have these central labor councils in different areas who actually interview the candidates, let's say for the legislature, and make recommendations. Our office works with those people. Of course we provide them with records of the candidates, how they voted on issues, and help them judge the candidates. Then they make the recommendations. We do the mailings for them. We prepare the campaign literature in our office. And make some contributions to the candidate. But in most cases that's done through our local labor organizations. We've got about fourteen of them scattered around the state. There will be several counties in one particular CLU. I'm sure you'll run into this elsewhere.

J.B.: Roughly what percentage of your membership is black?

Ramsey: I estimate about a third. That percent's growing all the time. Industry. Matter of necessity about it as much as anything else. Having to hire more blacks. The equal opportunities act forced them to hire more blacks.

J.B.: In most states there's a record of blacks showing more interest in voting for unions.

Ramsey: Same thing happened here. I was going to tell you. One of the reasons we've been getting the success we've had in recent years in winning elections over the last few years. Many of those can be attributed to black development. That the black ratio has increased considerably. Our experience in something like this. . . . If we've got a plant that's got say 40, 50, 60 percent black work force under

thirty. Those people will just about organize. If we find a work force, around middle age, predominantly white, for some reason or other they don't want to organize.

W.D.V.:

Any problems?

Ramsey: If we've got any, I don't know about them. Mississippi, like every place else, for many years when we organized people prior to '64 I guess, they were organized into separate local unions. Separate charters. All of these segregated locals were abolished several years ago. Merged into one union. If we've got any of that left, I don't know about it.

J.B.: I've been told, Mr. Ramsey, that in Mississippi at the height of the klan activity in some of those counties some of the klan leadership came from the union leadership.

Ramsey: Well, I've heard that also. I don't know that there's any way of proving that we had any leadership that was active in the klan. I know that we had some people that were . . . that could be identified as klansmen. I know that. Down in the Natchez area we had quite a bit of that. But if any of the leadership was involved in klan activity. . . . This is off the record here. I had a meeting with the FBI not long after they set up headquarters here and asked him to help me find out if we had any of this. I provided him with the names of our leadership. See, I was on the list of the klan to be knocked off one time myself. And I wanted to find out who the hell in my own ranks might be identified with this crowd. We didn't uncover any of the leadership.

J.B.: When did you have the experience of being on the klan's list?

Ramsey: In the 'sixties.

J.B.: What led up to that?

Ramsey: I was active in quite a bit of bi-racial activity.

[Interruption.] My problems really began in '62. Real problems. All had racial overtones. The Meredith situation was the beginning of it all. And I had to start standing up for what was right. We became the target of all the extremist groups around the state. A few white people at that point who were standing up for what they believed or thought was right. And of course I was active in a lot of bi-racial activity at that point. This ——— you talk about was head of the council on human relations. Hell, I helped to organize that organization before Ken ever come to Mississippi. And we used to meet out at the Tougaloo campus out here. Of course at that time anybody that went out to Tougaloo and met with blacks, they were automatically put on the list. Well, all this type activity caused this crowd to zero in on me. You know what I'm talking about.

J.B.: What kind of threats did you get? By phone? Written?

Ramsey: Oh yeah. Just about anything you want to talk about.

J.B.: Any crosses burned in your yard?

Ramsey: No, strangely enough I never had a cross burned in my yard. They threatened me with that a couple of times. I remember telling one of them. . . this is before I moved up here. . . I was living on the coast and I was commuting back and forth to Jackson a lot.



My family's still down there. *my* boy is fifteen. The other is sixteen. And they were threatening me with that kind of crap then. I told them that all I wanted was a couple of seconds notice. I said "I've all ready instructed my boys that if there is any shoot and noise around the house to/ask questions later." just come on around and we'll accommodate you. Never did have too much trouble out of them. Oh hell, you know, I've been threatened.

J.B.: How did you feel when you got those threats?

Ramsey: Well, you know, for some strange reason it never did bother me too much. See, I'm a veteran of world war two and I went through some pretty hectic periods there. My philosophy is very simple. I helped fight a damn war to help preserve this damn country and I wasn't going to let some riffraff turn me from what I thought was right. That was my attitude. I'm not trying to say I was all that damn brave about the situation. But the type people that you're dealing with there. . . they're not going to take you on head on anyway. I found out the best way to deal with them is to tell them in no uncertain terms where you stood and what they could expect. I carried a double barrel shotgun loaded with buckshot around in my car for a long time for protection. You know what I'm talking about. And I let them know that I'd take at least two of them with me when they come after me.

W.D.V.: Is it hard to believe that's about ten years ago?

Ramsey: It is. It really is. Anybody that's been around this long. Just like some of these young guys from the legislature. They just damn well didn't want to believe some of these things happened.

Just that short time ago. We had a white minister here. Ken Dean can probably fill you in on this. This was after he came to Mississippi. Unitarian minister who was active in the council on human relations, secretary for the thing at that time. They shot him in the back over here in the parking lot of the Magnolia Towers one night. I got a call shortly after that advising me to be extremely careful, that I was the next guy on the list. The thing that I used to worry about more than anything else during that period was my family and the fact that they might bomb my house. That's the thing that bothered me more than what they might do to me.

J.B.: Did you ever think of leaving?

Ramsey: No. That was the last thing I intended to do. There were some people did leave. When I was elected president of the organization I felt that the only organization of any significance in this state to provide the motivating force, the necessary troops to get the job done, was the labor movement. You take the labor movement out of the picture and what did you have left, you see. Does that make sense to you?

W.D.V.: You mean white organization?

Ramsey: Yes sir. Predominantly white at that time. That's the thing that a lot of people haven't understood yet. the thing that you have to think about, and what I pointed out to some other people, the reason that I'm still around today centered around the fact that we had a hell of a lot of other white people that felt as I did about this whole question. Enough of them stayed with me that we

got this whole thing turned around.

J.B.: What was your relationship with the legislature then and what is it now?

Ramsey: Well, we didn't have very much influence in the legislature at that time. Very little bit at that particular point.

J.B.: Would members prefer to avoid being seen with you?

Ramsey: Oh yeah. We only had two or three over there when I was elected the first time that we could consider friendly. The right to work was passed in '52 the first time and put in the constitution in 1960 when Barnett was governor. That was the first year I was on the job. If I remember right I think we had seven votes against the thing in the senate and a dozen or so in the house. That just gives you an indication of what little influence we had in the place. A rough period.

J.B.: Were you working for an agency shop bill here?

Ramsey: No, we haven't got to that yet. We've got a lot of other things that we have to do before--

J.B.: Does Mississippi have a minimum wage law?

Ramsey: No. We don't have a state department of labor. Probably the only state left in the nation, I guess, that doesn't have a department of labor.

W.D.V.: Where is the unemployment compensation act administered?

Ramsey: Unemployment or workmen's comp?

W.D.V.: Unemployment.

Ramsey: You know, unemployment is a hybrid type thing with federal

and state involvement. We've got a state employment security agency that administers the act. That's what I was talking to Goldson about a few minutes ago. We've got a bill tied up in conference now that would increase the weekly benefits. The agency has stayed separate and apart. And for workmen's compensation we have a commission administering that act. We've got a ~~an~~ fish and game commission which takes good care of the fish and wildlife, but really no agency to look after the working people.

W.D.V.: When did that harrassment end in the 'sixties? When did you see the end of that? Did it just kind of dribble off or did it end abruptly?

Ramsey: That's a good question. I'd say it just kind of dribbled off.

W.D.V.: After the voting rights act, '65, '66?

Ramsey: I'm trying to think now . . . when I would consider the period when it began to ease off some. Summer of '64 was a rough son of a gun. I'd say around '67 or '68 when it began to ease off some.

W.D.V.: When that ended, could you believe at that time that in two years, in '70, you'd have this integration of the schools like you did?

Ramsey: No sir. That's been one of the pleasant surprises out of the whole thing. Is the fact that public education survived as well as it did.

W.D.V.: To what do you attribute that? You had all those years when the state was almost up in flames. And then in a couple of years

it appears to turn all the way around.

Ramsey: Well, you see, here's what we had in this state. I told a gentleman that came in here one time who wanted to see. . . you probably know him. His name will come in a minute. But anyhow, at that time, even though we had a demagogue in the governor's office, we had some very good people. The superintendent of education, for instance. Very good, fine, outstanding people. Bill Winter at that time, I believe, was our state treasurer or something like that. Have you met Bill Winter yet? Lieutenant governor. There are some very good people in the lower echelons of state government. And I say that Garvin Johnson, the present state superintendent of education. . . if we're going to give the credit to any single individual for bringing public education through this period of crisis it would be him. Because he was standing out front, you know, for public education all the way. And of course you've got another thing that a lot of people don't fully understand about the white Mississippian. And I think this applies to a lot of people in the South. Even though they don't like a lot of damn things, the majority of them believe in abiding by the law. I think that was a factor involved in this thing. No way I can prove it, but I think it was. I'll be honest with you about it. One of the most pleasant surprises about this whole thing for me was to see the way the school situation eventually turned out. I think we come through it in a hell of a lot better shape than a lot of people did. Don't you? What have you found in your rounds?

W.D.V.: Well, the reason I asked you that is that Mississippi was supposed to have more problems than anybody else in bringing about massive integration.

Ramsey: -- We just put it all together. We just had enough good solid people in positions of leadership-that's across the board. The labor movement, the whole works, even in the business community. That decided that this state had to maintain and preserve public education if we were going to get off of dead center and accomplish anything at all. It's really amazing. When you look back at the Barnett era, when the white citizen council was dominating this state political situation. You know, those bastards were calling the shots in the governor's office. Hell, at one time the damn state government helped finance the citizen council operation. You're aware of that, aren't you? Well, I'd suggest you talk to Bill Miner with the Times-Picayune if you haven't met Bill yet. He's been around the capital for a number of years and he can give you a lot of background on this kind of stuff. Have you met Bill yet? Oh, you have. Have you queried him about some of this?

W.D.V.: Not about that specific one.

J.B.: You mean financing the schools?

Ramsey: Financing the citizen council movement. Them subsidizing the citizen council. And this is one thing I can't get down on this governor here completely, you see. He vetoes an appropriation to keep this damn state sovereignty commission going last year and cut off the funds. The state sovereignty commission was the segregationist watchdog

agency, in case you wanted to know what it was. Bill's been around the capital through all of this. He was on the scene before I came to Jackson as state president. And he's smarter. I guess he would probably be the most knowledgeable or at least one of the most knowledgeable people on a lot of these things we're talking about.

J.B.: Looking at the election returns in Mississippi in 1968 and in '72. In '68 white Mississippi was pretty much solidly behind George Wallace except a few votes Nixon got. In '72 Nixon combined the two of them pretty much. I mean his vote total was about equal to his and Wallace's vote in '68. Do you see that Wallace vote, or any substantial portion of it--particularly the blue collar portion of the Wallace vote--coming back to the Democratic party in national elections in Mississippi?

Ramsey: Yes. It will happen soon a lot of people think. I was talking to this group of young legislators about this last night. The Wallace thing is a little bit hard to understand. You know it's kind of a combination of populism and racism and a couple of other things I guess. And again, you start on this whole thing as a good one. In the '48 states rights movement. That was the beginning of a lot of this thing now. One of the things that's developing in the South and in Mississippi as elsewhere is the development of a modified two party system. You have to remember that we haven't had two political parties in this state up until recent years. The Republicans are beginning to move. They've elected a few candidates. They've got a couple of guys in the legislature and have had for several years now. Their candidate

for the Senate against Jim Eastland polled, I think, about forty percent of the vote the last time around. But this party politics, political situation, that is still in a period of confusion of sorts. People haven't yet settled down enough in national politics to start voting their economic interests, is what I'm trying to say. But it's coming around. I think it's just a matter of time now before. . . .

W.D.V.: Are they going to be doing that at the state level, too?

Ramsey: There's really been more of it at the state level than at the national level. This is the thing that's a little bit hard to understand on occasions.

W.D.V.: But hasn't it been race up through '67--

Ramsey: Right, more or less. It's had racial overtones. Right. I'd say you're right.

W.D.V.: But now that that's removed you think the interest will focus on economic, populist issues?

Ramsey: Right, I think so. I think if you look at the make up of the legislature now. The type of alignment of forces we've had in different areas to elect people to office. I'd say yes. It's still there in some areas. I can see undertones of it in the legislature every now and then. But that force doesn't dominate the legislature like it used to. Really doesn't. And I think we go through one more election and there'll be some more changes made. Our state legislature-- if we could change I'd say maybe eight, ten faces in the house and maintain what we've got in the senate, you'll see a lot of things happen over there. The committee set up in the house is where they get you.



I'm sure you're familiar with that arrangement with a few ultra-conservatives controlling most of the major committee assignments. Very easy for them to bury legislation on you. Take the department of labor situation I was talking about a few minutes ago. We've got enough votes in the house now to enact a state department of labor bill. The problem is getting it out of committee, getting the vote on it, you see.

J.B.: What are the priorities insofar as labor is concerned in legislative needs? Is a department of labor number one?

Ramsey: Well, that, of course, naturally would be at the top of our list so long as we don't have a department. Of course we are very much concerned with education. Naturally we push improvement in employment insurance and workmen's compensation because these issues directly effect the interests of working people. But education is really the key to many of our problems. Therefore we concentrate a lot of our time in improving the educational institutions. And I think we were as responsible as any other group around in establishing an ETV system here in the state. I was told by a couple of members of the legislature if it hadn't been for us that one wouldn't have went through. I don't think that system has been developed as well as it ought to be. As I visualized it at the time, ETV could be a real asset to public education and other institutions, for that matter.

W.D.V.: What's your relationship with the R&D Center?

Ramsey: Don't have any very much. I know the director of the R&D Center quite well. He and I confer from time to time. I know the director or the ETV quite well. I've been on some of their programs and

we communicate quite regularly. But I don't have too much communication with the R&D people.

W.D.V.: What do you think of the center?

Ramsey: [Laughs.] When I say what I think of the center I think we have to talk about the whole set up. The A & I board and the R&D Center. Take it all together. I think we're throwing away a lot of money. A lot of money is going down the drain on these two operations. They ought to be integrated into one operation. The whole thing ought to be streamlined. I don't think I've really answered your question, but that's the situation as I see it.

W.D.V.: You think the Center is spending too much money or the A&I Board?

Ramsey: I'm not real familiar with just what the R&D is spending because a lot of the things they do, they are re-imbursed for that. You know, it's not all state appropriations. The real waste, I think, is with the A&I board. I really do. But you can find other people that are more knowledgeable on that than I am.

W.D.V.: But the federation doesn't have a position in relation to that?

Ramsey: No, right.

J.B.: Are you COPE Director as well as AFL-CIO president?

Ramsey: No, no I got out. . . . We've got two full time officers. Secretary treasurer and myself and the secretary is the COPE director. Tom Knight. He and I have both been in office about the same time. He was elected, I think, a year after I was.

J.B.: Do you have a newspaper or a newsletter on a regular basis?

Ramsey: We've got a newsletter. A bulletin we get out pretty regular to the affiliated organizations. It's similar to the Alabama newsletter and some of the others you've seen.

J.B.: Are you hooking into this computer system?

Ramsey: Not yet. We might later on. You're talking about this thing in Washington, aren't you? Our organization is really not big enough. We don't have the membership to justify getting tied in with it. We're doing about all of the same things they're doing with a computer set up with our addressograph system already. We do any things with that that we couldn't do on the computer. We do a hell of a lot of mailings for our local unions. And in order to do that, we have to maintain an up-to-date mailing list in the office. If we had everything on that computer in Washington it would take a week or ten days to get your addresses and get everything together. But I suspect that we will eventually get on to the thing. I think everybody will before it's all over with.

W.D.V.: Do you know what percentage of your members are registered?

Ramsey: Don't have any recent figures on that. I was trying to think. . . the last time we had a check. . . *about* 65 percent at that time. That was pretty good. See, there's one thing we've got in this state that you don't have in some states and that's permanent restoration. Once we get them on the rolls they stay there unless

they move or die or something. That's one advantage we have. Once we've got the people on--

J.B.: Except isn't there a provision that local registrars can order a reregistration?

Ramsey: Boards of supervisors, under certain conditions, can order the books purged--

[end of side of tape.]

--population a little better than two million. We've got somewhere in the neighborhood of a million registered voters in Mississippi. I'd estimate that 300,000 of them are black. 850,000 to 900,000 I think would be very close to the figure, in that neighborhood. Have you dug any of this out yet? I'd be interested to see if my estimate is fairly accurate or not.

W.D.V.: What are the union's political goals for the next ten years?

Ramsey: About the same as they are any place else. In terms of electing the right people to office, of course. We're involved now in a situation over in the legislature--what I was mentioning to Goldson a few minutes ago--property tax situation. Equalization. Uniform assessment. Re-evaluation of property in all of the counties. Are you familiar with that? We've been threatening to go into court on that one for several years. If the legislature don't act this time, we'll most likely file court suits. I don't know how familiar you are with the tax we've got here. What some of the real problems are. But our state, and I guess most southern states are the same damn way, the bulk of the

tax money to run the state government comes from the sales tax. In our case it's about 53 or 54 percent.

J.B.: Mississippi is the highest in the country.

Ramsey: Right. And a few years ago they enacted a state income tax law. The average working guy is paying out a pretty good hunk of his income for taxes. During the past twelve years there have been several increases in the state sales tax. They've got it up now to five percent. At the same time we've got a number of wealthy property owners that are paying little or no taxes on property. In some/ they are paying what I think they ought to be paying--some counties they are not. In all of this. . . means that the average working guy is having to pay more than his fair share of taxes to operate government. So what we're saying is, you know, it's time something was done about this. If the legislature don't act, force the tax commission to enforce the constitution, then we're going into court. The constitutional language in our state constitution is very clear on this question, you see. The tax commission could do it on its own initiative, but it's been there for so long that they don't want to get into it without direction from the legislature, is what it adds up to. So we're going to go into court on that one.

W.D.V.: Are you taking the litigation route more and more as a way to get what you want?

Ramsey: Well, of course, if you take a look at the situation, many of the things that have been accomplished in this state have come by way of court actions.

W.D.V.: Right, that's what I'm saying. Are you thinking more and more of that as a way--

Ramsey: Well, our position is this. We'd much prefer to see the legislature act. And I told them this. I testified on this a couple of times. And I've written letters to them on this. We would much prefer to see the legislature solve these problems than to have to resort to court action. But we will go to court if we don't get action from the proper. . . .

W.D.V.: Is this based on the success of the civil rights orders and others in the courts here?

Ramsey: I'd say some of it was. Reapportionment came about as a result of court action, as you well know. Of course we've had other situations. There's any number of things. I'd frankly rather see the responsible state agency perform its job and what have you. But hell, when they don't, you don't have any recourse but to go into the courts. I don't know. I get the feeling some times that there are some of these yokels in the legislature who would rather see the courts act. They can always say the damn courts did it, it wasn't us. If they pass the bill, or the resolution as it would be this time, and then we have this re-evaluation. That has to come first. You have to get property evaluated uniformly in all counties. Then set a uniform assessment ratio, the percent that's going to be taxed. You see, when you do this, then there's no question but some people are going to be paying some damn taxes that haven't paid any. Some are going to be paying more. And when this happens of course you're going to have a hell of a

hell of a big stink. You know, they're going to be trying to find somebody to get on. Well, the legislature sits back and lets the courts do it. It wasn't the legislature that got *it*, it was the courts, you see.

W.D.V.: In a state where you've got a weak executive who doesn't have the power or doesn't want to exert any influence, where the legislature is the dominant branch of government and they won't do anything and he won't do anything.

Ramsey: Then you have to go to court. You're right.

W.D.V.: The weak executive contributes to that.

Ramsey: Could be. I don't know. It could be. I'll tell you, there's a lot of room for discussion on this comparison of the weak executive vs a strong executive and the legislative branch having more or less equal authority with the governor under our set up compared to Louisiana, for instance. The governor here is a weak executive. I think I'd prefer to have our system, really, than a system like they've got in Louisiana where the governor pretty well gets his programs through the legislature which is more or less a rubber stamp.

J.B.: I don't think *the Louisiana* <sup>AFL-CIO</sup> would agree with you on that.

Ramsey: I doubt it. They put their marbles on the governor over there. I know what you're talking about.

W.D.V.: This is one of the few states where legislators serve on boards and commissions in the executive branch.

Ramsey: And that, of course, is unconstitutional.

W.D.V.: I was going to ask how you feel about that.

Ramsey: Right. Well, they've got direct conflict, violation of the constitution.

W.D.V.: Why hasn't that ever been taken to court?

Ramsey: Don't know. It's hard to understand sometimes.

J.B.: Does the governor ever come to you and ask for recommendations on boards and commissions?

Ramsey: He's conferred with me a couple of times, in a couple of situations. In some he hasn't that he should have. He's asked me a couple of times about a couple of situations.

J.B.: How about the other governors. Williams, Johnson, Barnett.

Ramsey: No. We very seldom had very much business with either one of them. I can recall talking with Williams I think once while he was in the governor's office. Maybe Paul Johnson a couple of times. But never called on Ross Barnett at all. I hated the son of a bitch and the last thing I was going to do was call on him for anything.

J.B.: How do you rate Johnson as a governor?

Ramsey: Strangely enough, Paul Johnson turned out to be one of our better governors. Believe it or not. Have to give credit where credit is due. He went into the governor's office in this real rough period we were talking about. Ku Klux Klan was wondering why, you know. I think forty some odd churches burned. Several people murdered and all that stuff. Paul brought all this thing to an end. He cooperated with the FBI, establishing the office here. Things got more or less back on the right track during his administration. I have to give him credit for it. Really do.



J.B.: How about John Bell Williams?

Ramsey: His administration could best be described, I guess, as an example of how we could get along without a governor. Provided very little leadership. About the best way I can describe that.

J.B.: Did labor support Waller or Sullivan?

Ramsey: We didn't really support either one of them. We had a number of people running for governor and we had several acceptable candidates. It just so happened that two of the acceptable candidates were in the run off. We concentrated on the legislative races.

J.B.: How about Congressional races?

Ramsey: That's another damn subject. That's where we've got a lot of work yet to be done. You know we've got two Republicans in the delegation. One from this district and one from the coast. We had three contests two years ago. We supported the Democratic nominee in all three of them. Only won one of them. That's Bowen in the second district. And it looks like we're not going to be able to do much about that situation in this election, either. Nixon's still too damn popular in Mississippi for some strange reason or another. Maybe you can explain to me why we have that phenomenon. I suspect that Nixon is more popular in Mississippi than any state in the whole United States right now.

W.D.V.: Well, he wouldn't have to be very popular, to be the most popular.

Ramsey: No. We had a poll run recently in the fifth district to see what that situation looked like. Took a sampling. It just

surprisingly showed that a hell of a lot of people thought Nixon was doing a good job.

J.B.: What did it show about Trent Lott?

Ramsey: Kind of a mixed thing. Depends on how you want to look at the situation. Lott would be hard to defeat under the present circumstances. That's our analysis of it.

W.D.V.: Does the federation have any relationship with Jim Eastland?

Ramsey: Not very much.

W.D.V.: People tell us that he's one of the keys to Democratic politics because of his relationships with the county supervisors. All the political favors and so on he's done over the years.

Ramsey: He has that. Of course he has been, more or less, the dominating political force here for a number of years in Mississippi. We didn't have a two party system but we had factions. The Eastland faction pretty nearly dominated state politics. ~~Paul Johnson~~ faction ~~Eastland influence~~. Waller had the support of Eastland influence in the run off with Charlie Sullivan. Kind of peculiar situation, that alignment of forces. Waller got a sizeable black vote at the same time he had a lot of the old seg crowd supporting him. Figure that one out. Kind of hard to figure. There are all kinds of factors at work in this thing. Some of the pieces don't fit.

J.B.: How does your office work during the legislative session? What's your daily routine?

Ramsey: With the legislature. Well, I handle the legislative

end of the thing myself. A lot of it is personal contact, a lot is by written communication. Prior to this session we had a series of meeting around this state where we invited members of the legislature to come out to a dinner meeting with our local labor leaders. Laid out our legislative programs. The things we'd like to see accomplished. And that has helped tremendously in this particular session.

J.B.: What was the turnout?

Ramsey: Very good turn out. In just about all areas. I was pleasantly--I wouldn't say surprises, but I was well pleased with the turnout, both from my own people and from the membership of the legislature. Well pleased with it.

J.B.: Does anybody else work with the legislature other than you?

Ramsey: From organized labor? We've got a few groups. You know, the railway brotherhoods. They have a guy that hangs around and does a little lobbying. Firefighters have a person fool around.

[Interruption.]

J.B.: Did you say you probably averaged as much as \$500 in a legislative race?

Ramsey: I'd say it would probably average out to something like that. In some cases it might be a couple of hundred or occasionally we might spend eight hundred to a thousand. Depends on the situation.

J.B.: That would be something like \$70 to \$80,000 during an election year.

Ramsey: If we got involved in all of them, yeah. But we don't

get involved in all of them. And we don't make a contribution in all of them. It's kind of a selective type thing. We've got some good friends over there that we hardly ever put a nickel in their campaign. A situation like Bob \_\_\_\_\_, for instance, who we were talking about earlier. Because of his importance we spent a little bit extra compared to what we would in some others. Then, when they reapportioned the legislature this last time, they threw another county into his district and we had to go in there and do a hell of a lot of additional work. Restoration in the \_\_\_\_\_ county.

~~I thought we'd lost him. I thought he'd got defeated.~~

[End of interview.]