

Interview

with

GUY TIPTON

August 17, 2006

by Sarah Thuesen

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The Southern Oral History Program
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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TRANSCRIPT—GUY TIPTON

Interviewee: GUY TIPTON
Interviewer: Sarah Thuesen
Interview Date: August 17, 2006
Location: Birmingham, AL
Length: One CD, approximately 79 minutes

START OF CD

ST: Today is Thursday, August 17, 2006. My name is Sarah Thuesen. I am with the Southern Oral History Program, working on the Long Civil Rights Movement project, and today I'm with Guy Tipton in Birmingham, Alabama. We're at the Whatley Drake Law Firm. Thanks so much for sitting down with me today. I really appreciate it.

GT: I'm glad to do it.

ST: I thought we'd start first just by getting a little bit of information on your background. Where were you born?

GT: Huntsville, Alabama.

ST: OK. What year?

GT: 1951.

ST: OK. What did your parents do?

GT: My dad worked at Thiokol Chemical Corporation. He ran warehouses. He was a member of the Machinists' Union. My mother was a buyer at the Thiokol Chemical. My uncle worked there; he was one of the union stewards. It's strange when Dad and them used to go on strike, he'd have to go up to the picket line and let my mother out, because he

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wouldn't cross it and she had to go on and go to work. She was management. He'd get out and walk picket all day long, and when they got off work, she'd walk out and walk out the picket line, and he'd go home. Of course, a lot of my family are labor union members, communication workers, pipe fitters, carpenters. The old Chemical and Atomic Chemical and Oil Workers, I think that's the name of one of them my granddaddy was in. So I had quite a few people in my family that were members of unions, and auto workers in addition.

ST: Did the situation within your family with your mom and dad ever create any conflict, where he couldn't cross the picket line and she could?

GT: No, no, my mother always wished that she could walk and picket and join the union, too, because he didn't have to put up with crap she did. I remember Dad telling these stories all the years they kept trying to promote him and probably for twenty years, and he would refuse promotions because that way, see, he couldn't file a grievance. Or if they fired him, wasn't anything you could do about it. So he ended up he had the most seniority in the department where he worked and wasn't much they could do for him or to him or anything. They'd call on weekends and he didn't want to go in and work, he'd exercise his seniority. He'd say, "I'm busy. I'm not going. Get somebody else." I think she was kind of envious that he had those rights and then she didn't.

ST: Right. Do you remember your dad talking about why union membership was important growing up, any lessons that were instilled in you at an early age?

GT: Well, if you work for a living, you don't have any rights whatsoever if you're not in a union, with the favoritism in addition to the security for your job plus wages and benefits. I remember when I was a kid, they always had their union meetings to ratify the contracts on a Sunday. We of course went to the grocery store every Friday evening when

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they got off work, back in the fifties, and that was the ritual. They got in from work; we loaded up and went to the grocery store. I remember on those Fridays that we'd get twenty pound bag of corn meal, twenty pounds of flour, really not any meat but big bags of dried beans, I knew that they were taking a strike vote on Sunday. I learned that very young. I could tell just by what they bought at the grocery store whether or not there was a contract negotiations and whether or not they were taking a strike vote on that Sunday. I recognized that real young.

ST: If you got meat, it meant there was probably no strike on the horizon, right?

GT: Well, we would didn't buy the big bags either, the five and ten pound bags of peas and pinto beans and dried beans and flour and sugar and meal, things of that nature.

ST: Right, right. You were sort of coming of age during the civil rights years in Alabama in the sixties. What impact did the Civil Rights Movement have on you as a young man?

GT: Well, it was strange, because where we lived, my parents' house is less than a mile from Alabama A&M University. When I was a kid, to get a little spending money, we'd pick cotton. It would be the whites and blacks out in the field. We'd pick cotton, we played together, lived in the same neighborhoods, everything. It was out in the country, and the only difference was when it came time to go to school, we'd get on one bus, they'd get on a different bus. We'd play before the bus ran together, and when we got off the bus, we'd play then. First time I went to school integrated, I was in the tenth grades, 1966, and we never had any problems. There were no fights, no issues, anything, because out in the community where we were at, it was rural. It's a few miles outside of Huntsville, Alabama. All the black kids and white kids grew up with each other. We knew each other. Our

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parents, my dad worked with several of the guys' parents out at Redstone arsenal at Thiokol. Parents knew parents, so I just really never experienced the racial issues like they did in Birmingham or like Decatur, Alabama and those areas.

It seems strange to me, because I could remember going in a little restaurant, and there'd be blacks and whites both in the restaurants. I wasn't exposed to that kind of segregation when I was growing up, so I thought it was strange when I went off to college and then see what's going on in Birmingham. That was more of a different world than I'd been exposed to. Even though there were a lot of racial injustices and segregation back in those days, but I don't even recall when I was growing up seeing signs in Birmingham where you see where colored only bathrooms. I don't ever recall even seeing that, because like I say, we picked cotton together, we ate lunch together, and took our breaks together. I really never experienced that like a lot of people did, so it was different for me.

ST: Yeah. So in the rural area outside Huntsville, you had a pretty different world than the one you saw when you came to college, and you went to college in Birmingham?

GT: No, I went to University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa.

ST: Oh, OK. What was the situation like there when you got there?

GT: Well, at that time they had just started—. Blacks had been in school probably three, four, five years, and they were starting programs for African studies and things of that nature. There's a bunch of guys, a couple of them are lawyers now, one of them's a judge, I remember I'd run around with them a little bit back then, and they were just like the campus radicals. I laugh about it now. I saw one is a judge and saw him a couple of weeks ago, and we were laughing about some of those things back in Tuscaloosa in those days. It was really more the Vietnam War protest that I was familiar with in Tuscaloosa than the racial issues.

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That was more predominant when I was in college.

ST: Were you involved in the anti-war movement at all?

GR: I attended some meetings and did some marching. The university's changed dramatically from then to now, because then it was Democratic and very liberal. Now it seems like, especially the attorneys and those guys and more Republican and conservative. You can tell from people went to law school in fifties, sixties, seventies, a lot of them that I socialized and deal with anyway that went to Alabama are just extremely liberal. It's a different attitude now, I think, than it was then.

ST: Yeah. So after college, what did you do then?

GT: Well, I had one or two minor jobs, and then I ended up going to work with the Alabama Departmental Health at Bryce Hospital as a personnel assistant. My mother—

ST: This is still Tuscaloosa, right?

GT: It was in Tuscaloosa, yeah. It's the major mental health facility or hospital. State of Alabama had probably three thousand employees and five thousand patients back in those days. The governor, Lurleen Wallace, had assisted a lot in getting additional funding to correct a lot of the things that had been wrong with the mental health system. Plus at that time, there was an historic case, *Wyatt v. Stickney*, that completely changed the mental health systems in the state of Alabama in the federal court system. It stayed, I think, under basically federal supervision for probably thirty years. Basically, it was drugging the people, and there was no meaningful treatment or anything.

I was a personnel assistant, and I basically worked with the groups that were non-patient care, like food service, laundry, areas like that which predominantly black at that time except for the maintenance department. I was to advise managers and things on discipline.

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They had some old hard-core management people at that time that wanted to fire everybody or really penalize the people to make them suffer for what I would consider minor offenses. I thought it would be more appropriate to give them a warning and give them an opportunity. That was not their way, and it so happened during that period of time, I was there about a year, a year and a half or so, and a vacancy opened up for the representative from the local union. I happened to be out one morning about two o'clock in the morning at a drinking establishment and ran into the business manager of the local union. Me and him were talking, and I asked him what he was going to do, who he's going to hire to replace that guy. He said well, he didn't know. I told him I'd be interested in going to work with them.

That's when I was lucky enough to meet Bruce Carr, and so he called, Bruce came in, we had lunch, interviewed, things of that nature. They'd never quite seen somebody working in personnel that was favorable to the employees and didn't think they should be fired and mitigating circumstances and all these things. So I went to work with the local union at that time in Tuscaloosa as a field representative. I was representing employees in grievances and things of that nature. That's how I got in the labor movement. Of course, when I called home, told them I was quitting the job as personnel assistant and going to work with the union, my daddy said, "I'm proud of you, son." He was proud that I had done that. That was 1974, so here I am thirty-two years later, and still looking for justice on the job, I guess you would say.

ST: So it's clear for the record, that was the Laborers International—

GR: It was the public employees' Local 1279, which was affiliated with the Laborers International Union.

ST: Were you already a member before you started working for them?

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GR: No, but the day I went to work, I joined, which was unusual for that time. It's normally everybody was a member and came through the ranks as a steward or whatever, and was hired by college education dealing with the personnel systems and how they work. That time it was the merit system and the way you work registers and all these kind of things. Bruce felt like that they needed somebody with the knowledge in that area and could benefit the membership. He recommended me to the executive board, and they unanimously hired me.

ST: Oh, yeah. At that time, did you see becoming part of the labor movement as civil rights activism in any way?

GT: No, not at all. Looking back on it, they're so closely related, you can't separate them. It's a lot of one and the same. What I saw in mental health was not as severe as what I saw when I ended up with the city of Birmingham. Most of the black employees were in the lowest paying, the crappiest jobs, pretty well limited in promotional opportunities. There weren't any black supervisors to mete any fairness and justice. Worst working conditions, lowest wages, that's what it seemed like it always was. Then as I was only there probably about two or three years before I—. And I went back and I worked on my master's degree. When I completed my master's, I left that local unit and proceeded on to another job within the union.

ST: Are there in cases from those years in Tuscaloosa that really stand out in your mind, cases you worked on that made a real impact on you?

GR: Not just one particular case, because it was just generally the unfairness, period. Like I was told and it was kind of during my period of my time, one of the guys had a case or something that—. If you went sleep on the job, OK, you didn't necessarily get fired. If you

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worked on the third shift and you were sitting up in a chair and you dozed off or something, well, they may give you a few days off for that, OK. But if you were sitting in a chair and had reared back in a chair and propped your feet, well, they'd say that was reclining on duty and that was a termination offense, because you had the intent to go to sleep. You're still asleep, regardless of the outcome, but you intended to go to sleep. That intent, they looked strongly against that intent. So they fired you for reclining on the job, even if you weren't asleep. They said you were intending to go to sleep. So it made not a lot of sense, but what I would find then is that the supervisor would just, something they didn't like or something, whatever, they just fired them. They wouldn't listen to witnesses, they wouldn't listen to reason, they didn't seem to understand mitigating circumstances.

There's people that work a long time, they're good people, and everybody screws up. You may give them a chance, you may discipline them a little bit, but you just don't fire them. There's an old lawyer that his name was Jack Evans is passed away now. We had several personnel board appeals, because if you were terminated and you were state civil service, you could only file an appeal through the state personnel board. Jack, his famous argument, which I did use on occasion probably since then, but he likened a termination of employment to the death penalty, because it's the worst offense you could get, the worst criminal offense, that's the death penalty. The worst offense you could get in employment was termination. He always drew an analogy between the death penalty and the termination of an employment case.

I'd agree with Jack a lot, plus people had asked Jack when he was the first lawyer they had hired when they began organizing. We had no laws, nothing at that time, and they ended up we had like twenty-eight hundred members in just one local union when I was

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there. Somebody had asked Jack one time that you had no laws and it's illegal to strike and you could be fired and how did you do it? And Jack would respond, "Ignorance and reckless abandon." He said he couldn't figure out any other way. Back during that period of time—and like I say, I came to work with them in '74, but they were organizing in '72 when I went to work in mental health—there was the Solomon Act was on the books in Alabama, which you would be terminated for joining a union. They could fire you.

ST: For public employees.

GR: For public employees to join a union, you could be fired. It was illegal; it was a violation of the law, which is clearly unconstitutional. At that time, we had an attorney general named Bill Baxley which was pro-labor. You talk about the New South sometimes, I think Bill was probably one of those few first New South politicians as attorney general. He was not a racist, he was pro-labor, a fair guy, and he challenged the Solomon Act and declared it unconstitutional in circuit court in Madison County. I'm sure Bill had something to do with it being brought in Madison County. Then it was not appealed [laughter], so there was no appeal on the issue which then they could legally join the union. You couldn't be fired.

But we never had had any statutes that had been passed to authorize collective bargaining with public employees or anything of that nature, but we've done a lot of things, and I've been involved in a lot of suits over the years for employees to gain their rights through lawsuits in federal court. Like access into certain facilities like the Department of Corrections, where they let insurance companies and people like that come in, set up their table to sell insurance stuff, but they wouldn't let the union in. So we sued them on an equal protection claim and ended up with a consent decree giving the union the same rights.

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There's been a number of cases like that over the years, where a lot of public employee rights have been established against different employers just by having to sue for them, and using the United States Constitution, not the Alabama Constitution.

ST: Before the Solomon Act was overturned, how much fear did you find among the employees you were trying to organize?

GT: Well, I was not involved at that time. I was in college. I think that was in sixty-nine. I came to work in seventy-two and Bruce and those guys--. But from what I understand, and the people when I first came to work for the union, all these people were the founders of these local unions. They were not afraid, and that's why they organized, because they were not afraid. People back then seemed to care more about each other than they do now, seems to me, and they stuck together. We always used to use this phrase that you'll either hang together, or you're going to hang separately. So all of the people when they went on strike and all, they hung together. Nobody went back, because they knew somebody did and they start breaking it a little by little, those that did not would be out of a job and out of work.

Face it, I mean what benefit was there for going back, because you could get fired and find a job equally as good or if not better than what you left anyway. So there was not really anything to fight for, it was fighting for something to make something out of that job, which it did. We were representing the University of Alabama; at one time the wages were three dollars an hour higher for a similar class case than at Auburn University because of the unionization at University of Alabama-Tuscaloosa. So you could tell a difference. You could go to places where they had unions and where they didn't, and the benefits and wages were completely different.

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But the right to grieve, to file grievances and have somebody else to speak for you, I always thought and somebody asked me why I liked working for the union. I said, "Well, where else can you go in, cuss the boss, talk however you want to talk, and they can't fire you and there's nothing he can do to you whatsoever." I said, "Show me a job better than that. Show me the job better than that." Because you took the brunt for the member. You took the heat off them. You didn't care if the boss got pissed at you because he couldn't fire you anyway. He couldn't do anything to you. I think that's the attitude a lot of us had then is protect the members, take care of the members, represent the members. That's what it was all about. The members stuck together, and the union didn't have any power unless the members stuck together.

ST: Yeah. Did you ever find racial divisions to be a problem in achieving that kind of solidarity?

GR: No, for some reason, like here in Birmingham, I know when I had been to a couple of other local unions before I came to Birmingham and that was in eighty-one, but even then, there were still some Klan members left over. They were members of the union, but it seemed like the black guys and white guys just overlooked those issues when it came to strikes and the job itself because everybody benefited economically. I didn't see that, even though I'd been told who some of those guys were. But I did not see that. What I saw were a group of people and the city of Birmingham was a common enemy. I think that's why they stuck together is they didn't dwell on that issue. They looked at the city of Birmingham as a common enemy, and they bonded against the city of Birmingham, that one objective.

When the city of Birmingham first organized, the laborers were all black and they were day laborers. They paid them every day you come to work, and that's all. You had no

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benefits whatsoever, no vacation, no holidays, no sick leave, no pension, no health, nothing. But all the whites were in the personnel board system, and they had all the benefits. What they had, they had what you called the classified system and the unclassified service. Well, the classified were the whites under the personnel board, and the unclassified were the blacks without any benefits under the board. I think they realized, and Bruce Carr did a great job of putting those groups together, recognizing everybody could benefit from sticking together. Of course, it took a strike for the city of Birmingham to get organized.

ST: You're referring to the sanitation workers now primarily.

GT: Yes, uh-huh. The city of Birmingham. At that time, there was more and I think that's a misnomer a lot of people have. It was the park and recreation board, it was the garage, it was the horticulture department. Street sanitation's always the one that's stated about because they were the biggest group, but it was all blue collar workers within the city of Birmingham. It was not just the street department.

ST: Are you referring to the strike in '75 that—?

GT: There was one around '72 also, I believe. That was the organizational strike in '72. I helped participate in the one in '75 even though I was in another local union. We came up and assisted the guys and everybody did. That's just the way it was.

ST: Do you have any particular memories from that?

GT: Yeah, but I probably can't discuss some of them. Statute of limitations may have run, but I think it's time for those to just lay there. [Laughter]

ST: OK. Well, if you change your mind, we can go back to that. Before we get into the time when you actually moved to Birmingham, getting back to the mid-seventies just for a little bit, when you're in Tuscaloosa, did you have a sense at that moment—? Obviously,

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given your family background, you knew that the labor movement had a strong presence in Alabama in some arenas of employment for sometime. But did you have a sense that you were part of some sort of new phase in the labor movement at that time?

GT: No, not really. No, we were just joining those groups that were already there and strong like the Steelworkers, and that it was just another segment of the work force that was unionizing. It was nothing historic about it or anything of that nature. We didn't think so. It was a lot more difficult for us, because we didn't have the National Labor Relations Act and things of that nature, so we had to rely on the courts and the political system and the political power of the other unions. Other unions helped out quite a bit by getting meetings with certain politicians or support with us and things of that nature. The other crafts and other unions helped a lot. The Firefighters Union assisted and played a big part in organizing the city of Birmingham. They're the ones that first got to meeting and contacted somebody about coming in and representing the laborers and those people. They knew if the whole city was organized, everybody would get more.

ST: Oh, yeah. Besides the firefighters, what other unions were closely allied?

GT: Well, there were no others unions then here in the city other than FOP, which somewhat had occasionally acted like a union and sometimes they acted like a fraternal organization. But they did negotiate together with the laborers on economic-type benefits, and we did negotiate with the city of Birmingham with the police, the firemen, and then a group they called a base group, were basically your white collar people. It was not affiliated with a labor organization; it was an independent group. Birmingham Association of City Employees, BACE.

ST: Oh, OK. Hmm. Before moving to Birmingham and after you left Tuscaloosa,

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you traveled around quite a bit.

GT: I went to Atlanta and worked with the Georgia and South Carolina Labor District Council for a while and there primarily organized and organizing. There I worked for a lifelong friend of mine which was with the Laborers International Union, was the district council business manager, which later went on to become director of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service. We still stay in touch, but we were organizing a lot in the forestry industry in Georgia and other areas in Alabama as well. The Local Union 246 where I eventually went to work had jurisdiction in Alabama and Georgia.

ST: Who is the person you were working with?

GT: Richard Barnes.

ST: OK. Did you find that in Georgia you had similar challenges and levels of success, or were there some differences between your work there and Alabama?

GT: You got in rural, rural Georgia, and Georgia did not have the labor history Alabama had, especially around Birmingham and Tuscaloosa and areas like that. Like Tuscaloosa had a huge rubber plant with three thousand members, a paper mill with a couple thousand members, a big building trades and construction unions. In Birmingham, at one time you had forty-two thousand that worked at US Steel in Fairfield, so they had like sixty, eighty thousand members in and around the Birmingham area, just the steel workers, the mine workers. The construction unions had about twenty-five thousand members. You put up a picket, everybody knew what it was. When it came election time, everybody knocked on your door. It was not like that in Georgia. Not at all.

ST: Do you remember any particular stories from that time?

GR: Yeah, an International rep named Alfred Hazel, me and him and Richard Barnes

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were organizing a place around Warm Springs, Georgia. Alfred's a black guy, and had one of his supervisors every morning drove a Jeep and tried to run over him. When we were passing hand bills, he tried to run over him on several mornings. It's funny, one morning Alfred told us, said, "I'm not moving this time." He come through there and he swerved like he was going to hit Alfred, and Alfred didn't move. He's too close and the guy lost it and went out through the woods on his Jeep, and he was dodging pine trees. He didn't wreck it; we don't know how. But just the anti-union attitude was unreal over in Georgia compared to Alabama. It was really anti-union.

ST: Hmm. Why do you sense that in Georgia the workers were not able to achieve the same kind of solidarity that—?

GT: They didn't have the union history, and they didn't have the family or friends that were in unions, didn't have the personal—. Now that was not true everywhere. We had one union in Meriwether County, Georgia that was as strong as anywhere you'd see. But you'd go around Warm Springs, Pine Mountain, the Callaway area, very anti-union. You go below Phenix City, Russell County, Alabama, down in there was a fairly strong union. You had a big paper mill and then you had some unionized industries and things of that nature. Rural Alabama and those areas in rural Georgia where you didn't have the context, it was no different. It's not any different.

ST: Yeah. So it's more a rural-urban difference.

GT: Yeah, it's just whether or not if you have big unionized facilities that are close to where you live or you have family or friends that work there, so you know the benefits of being in a union. And if you have people that want to work there because the benefits and all that, and they know that's because of the union, the attitude's completely different. But

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you've got some areas in Alabama and Georgia that's probably as non-union as they come.

ST: Hmm. You came back to Birmingham in eighty-one?

GT: Yeah.

ST: What brought you back here?

GT: A local union had some issues, and they needed somebody to run it who had some experience with public employees. At that time, I was working at Local 236 in Columbus, Georgia, and we had a lot of industrial and some public service-type areas. One was Tuskegee University, which was unique within the city of Tuskegee Alabama. Small town in Tuskegee, but all four of the major employers were unionized, three of them by the Laborers Union, and then of course the VA Hospital was American Federation of Government Employees. But Tuskegee University was with the Laborers Union, and John Andrew Hospital was Laborers Union, and the city of Tuskegee itself was unionized. So that was probably seventy-five, eighty percent of the population was black in Macon County, and almost all of them were union members. That was a good situation to be in. The city was strong as a result of that. Alfred Hazel's the same guy that organized the city of Tuskegee that I had worked with over there.

But he came to Birmingham, and like I said, they needed somebody with some experience with public employees and running the locals, so Bruce gave me a call. I wanted to go to law school anyway, so I considered going to Georgia, but it was about a sixty or seventy mile trip to the nearest law school. So I came up and took over the Local 1317, which represented the city of Birmingham and the city of Fairfield and a few other places. Then over the years, we organized additional areas like the Parking Authority, the Jefferson County employees, the Airport Authority, we had the Birmingham Zoo, a number of places

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like that were organized. We had eight or ten groups within the city of Birmingham there. Or in Jefferson County, there were public employees that were organized by the union over the years.

ST: Oh, yeah. Did you end up taking classes then at UAB Law School?

GT: No, I went to Miles College School of Law, which was a predominantly black school in Birmingham, and I graduated and passed the bar.

ST: Oh, yeah. What year was that that you finished?

GT: 1986.

ST: Oh, yeah. Uh-huh.

GT: And didn't leave the union. Sometimes I question that decision. [Laughter]
Financially, anyway.

ST: Uh-huh. When you moved back here in the early eighties, you of course were well aware of the momentum that there had been with the labor movement here in the seventies with the public employees. Did you sense that that momentum was still building in the early eighties, or had things started to change?

GT: The last strike the city of Birmingham had was 1979, which was a very successful strike over the insurance where the police, fire, () labor, everybody went on strike and really united them. For a number of years there, there was no cause or any need to strike. Over a period of years, people did become complacent. Even then when I came back, the union was strong. If one group had a problem, everybody had a problem with the city. Still had a lot of holdover supervisory people. There was still a lot of racial issues that I had to deal with which came up in the employee discipline issues. Over a period of years, though, I used that to my advantage.

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If I had a female employee, we alleged that she had been discriminated against because of her sex, which was true on a lot of occasions. We had black members and they were being discriminated based on their race, and if we had a white member, well, he was subject to reverse discrimination. So we argued all we could to get the members justice, whether black, white, female. To be honest with you, there were all three of those types of discrimination going on within the city of Birmingham. I think a lot of people recognized it just wasn't the black had been discriminated against, wasn't just the women, it was some of the white guys, too. Guess you'd say that Birmingham was an equal opportunity discriminator, and it was amazing.

ST: Do any particular cases stand out?

GT: () city of Birmingham, since they're public employees, have due process rights. We had due process determination hearings weekly at one street department every Tuesday. Then we'd schedule in the smaller department because we wouldn't have them every week, but we'd have four or five hundred of those a year, just for the city of Birmingham. Yeah, we had some crazy ones over the years. We had a lot of crazy ones. Poor guy that was a funny one, I guess, a guy, garbage collector, people had a hole in their fence, and they kept putting the can up there next to the fence with the hole in it. Had like a German Shepherd or something. He'd come up there and get the garbage can, that dog would get his head out and almost bite him and things of that nature. He'd notify the supervisor to move it, and they wouldn't move it.

One day he finally came up there and the dog reached out, and somebody got a wine bottle or something. He got that wine bottle and knocked the dog out. They wanted to discipline him for that. Of course, the director's understanding that () the guy did all he

could do. He told them, the supervisor wouldn't tell them, what else—. He's going to get bit or something? So he just knocked that dog out with that wine bottle. [Laughter] Things of that nature, some funny things like that happened. There were thousands of them. I was there eighteen years as the business manager, and like I said, we had five, ten thousand hearings over those periods of time.

We had a lady that they were going to fire, and they actually did, because she had a gun on the job. A lot of people carried guns then. It came out in her testimony that her supervisor, which was a black guy and this was a white female, that he knew she had a gun. He asked her one day to see it because he's thinking about buying him one and he liked her gun. And they still fired her. Of course, some supervisors and other guys carried guns; they'd carry them in their boots. We appealed her dismissal, and we settled it for a few days suspension, because that's what they done to the males that had a weapon on the job. They suspended them and didn't fire them.

So we got that settled, and then we turned around and filed with the EEOC a discrimination claim on top of that. The city ended up having to not only give her job back and then all her back pay up to like five or ten days suspension we'd settled on to get her back. Then through the EEOC settlement, they had to give her the rest of her time back and pay her. The city was fairly well upset at that, and I said, "Well, we drafted the settlement agreement, you didn't include no further action or going to EEOC on it, it's your fault." But a lot of things like that were just—. Any time they charge somebody with something, I could pretty well find within the city, because of friendship, nepotism, or something, somebody that had done the same thing and the supervisor had taken a different action. Our grievances pretty well, all stated unequal treatment. That was pretty standard at the time.

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ST: Um-hmm. You mentioned cases of reverse discrimination with white employees. Tell me a little bit about that.

GT: It would probably have to do with scheduling or things of that nature. At the time over the years, you didn't have those issues whenever the department heads and a lot of people were white. But there was a lawsuit that was—. A number of years, city of Birmingham where they had to start upgrading these black guys into the truck drivers, heavy equipment operators, labor supervisors, () supervisors. When they got some in supervisory positions, they made some rulings or did some assignments and then—. I don't know if a lot of them were intentional. I probably don't think they were. They would have an adverse impact on the white guys.

So then it got strange. Every time you'd come in you'd have a black supervisor, it was reverse discrimination. Every time you'd have a white supervisor, it was race discrimination. Some of them would really get mad at me, but we would win about eighty-six percent of all cases, because somebody's being treated unequally somewhere. It wouldn't necessarily be because of the race, but I could use that in order to win the cases for our membership. It wasn't always the case, but there was—. Like I said, you had some eight hundred employees. Somebody, because they're related or they just wanted to give them a break or something, they would treat them differently. So we'd always claim same or similar circumstances the whole time.

ST: In pressing those different types of discrimination, did you ever find it difficult to still maintain some sense of solidarity among union members?

GT: We never had those issues. No, everybody knew, look, he's going in there to represent me and do the best he can to get me out of it, or to make sure justice is done. My

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position always was, look, if you're guilty, tell me you're guilty. At least you won't get fired, but you may take some penalty. But if you end up lying about it, it's going to be worse, and I won't be able to get your job back. So everybody knew that we were just trying to save guys' jobs and argue any mitigating circumstances. They all knew I was doing it. Some of the supervisors would be in there for like two or three different people, and I'd have opposite arguments. Two or three of them, they'd come out and they were members of the union before—. And they'd laugh about it, like what in the hell? You know, what's going on? And this kind of crap, and they'd just laugh about it.

A lot of the supervisors didn't care, but you said some of the old-time guys that really took it personal. They took it personal. Other guys didn't take it personal. Then they'd just write the guys up sometimes to keep their boss from writing them up, and they didn't want to write them up to start out with. But the lower level supervisors did not have a lot of authority, and they just wrote guys up sometimes even though they had a good excuse for being late or being absent. But if they didn't write them, then they're going to get something from their boss. So we'd go up to the director's office, explain the circumstances, things of that nature, charges dropped, and go back to your business. We were fortunate to have some fairly reasonable department heads. Those we didn't do, it was like war and went to the mayor, and it was just a battle. But over a period of time, retirements and deaths and things of that nature took care of those problems.

ST: Yeah. It sounds like, from talking to a number of folks, that the one area of public employment that have been the most challenging in terms of organizing is the health care sector. Would you agree with that?

GR: Yes, and I don't know why, other than the employees that work in the health

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care are looked at, at least in the South, as a "professional," and we don't need a union or we can't have a union. Of course, in other parts of the country now, a lot of people are organizing in health care. Nursing homes are really the only areas they've been lucky enough to organize in the South. Quite a few of them have with some other unions, but Laborers had some nursing homes over the years, but through consolidations and things, they probably don't have but about one left. Most of our nursing homes, again, were in pro-union areas, like Jasper, Alabama, where the mine workers union is so strong. It would only be in those highly union areas that you'd have any success in health care, and that's just simply again because people, friends, relatives, neighbors know the benefits of being in a union, so they'd be more apt to organize.

But those employers would take you on—. Because of laws, too, health care couldn't organize for a number of years. They didn't get to organize back in the thirties and the forties and the fifties when everybody was organizing. It was on up in the sixties and seventies before they changed the law where those health care people were really subject to the National Labor Relations Act compared to the other groups. The anti-union groups were pretty well defined and pretty knowledgeable, and at that point in time were more effective to fight you. You know, with the NLRB, it's ineffective. They can delay the election or contest the election, appeal it up to the board in DC; if you don't, then appeal it to federal court, delay it for years. By the time it gets there, nobody that supported the union or worked there when they had union votes is no longer there any more. They pretty well destroyed union status just by firing people and committing unfair labor practices, and there was no teeth in the law to prevent that.

ST: Were you involved with any attempts to organize hospital workers or nursing

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home workers here in Birmingham?

GT: No, that was prior to me. That was Bruce Carr that did that. Bruce did that, and Richard Barnes worked along with him and done that.

ST: Oh, really. Hmm. Did you say he's still around?

GT: Yeah.

ST: Oh, yeah.

GT: He's in Atlanta.

ST: Oh, yeah. After you finished your law degree, did the type of work you were doing for the union change quite a bit?

GT: Yeah, I could appeal a case myself to circuit court from the personnel board, things of that nature, represent people that had been denied disability pensions or pensions, well, we would sue the pension board. Now sometimes it's the threat of me being able to sue the city, they'd just go ahead and settle, too. Some of the things that the union did—. And we did more of it because it didn't cost that kind of money. Public employee dues are generally not that high. You don't have a lot of money available for activities other than salaries and representational expenses anyway, so that did help tremendously. Some years I think we did some figuring that if I had been an attorney, it would have been twenty, thirty, forty thousand dollars more in attorney fees than what I even made that year, and they would get it all free.

So it did benefit the union quite a bit. A lot of things we could do that we weren't able to do as much of as we had in the past. Usually we had to look and see if there's some kind of constitutional violation, so the lawyers would get attorney fees by suing on behalf of the union. So the union didn't have to pay him, because we didn't have the money to pay

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him. So we really looked for issues where that there was a federal claim so that the lawyers could be reimbursed fees.

ST: Thinking back kind of broadly across all your years of working for the union, what would you say are some of the successes that you're most proud of?

GT: A lot of it is just sometimes you think about the guys that retire from the city of Birmingham that would have never made it to retirement because they got fired for some crap, just like not long ago a guy retired from the park board. He'd been fired fifteen or twenty years ago for some violation of letting people in without tickets to a football game. Come to find out during the hearing, the mayor didn't get tickets and they let him in. The department head that ran the maintenance out there, he let people in. But here again, do as I say, don't do as I do, and that's the way it is with the working people. They get away with all this crap, but then you have a regular guy there, they fire him, OK. Fortunately enough, we got his job back, and he got to retire with a good pension, had another fifteen, eighteen more years with the city of Birmingham where he had good wages and good benefits, good health care, and he got to retire with a pension.

I guess looking at those, every now and then somebody will tell me the new (). Such and such came by and asked how you's doing. He's retired now and all, or he's getting ready to retire and all and somebody asked about you. A lot of these are guys that would have been fired, or were fired but we got their job back. The justice in it, I guess, or being able to retire with dignity, because you know if they had lost a job with the city, they may have ended up with some crappy job, not had any kind of pension, still be working. You can't live on just social security. But you know you made a real difference in those guys' lives. That's the part of it is that—. You gain a lot of friends with people over the years

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because they're your stewards or they're on the executive board of the union with you. You get to know them, you get to know their families, and it's a different kind of friendship. It's not just a union type; it's really a friendship, and a lot of them last for—.

Some guys I talk to them been retired ten or fifteen or twenty years, and even though I don't see them and I'm not at the office, if they drop by the hall, they'll ask about me. That doesn't happen often in a place where you don't see people fifteen, twenty years and stuff. But people that just have—. An injustice is done to them simply because the boss or some-- not investigating the facts, not being understanding, not recognizing that people have problems sometimes. Good people do stupid things, and that one stupid thing shouldn't cause the death penalty in the employment setting. They ought to be given another chance. There's a lot of people, especially young kids, you have attendance problems and this and that, and they're good workers, but they just—. You know, they're young.

ST: Right.

GT: We would save a lot of them's job to get them out of those early twenties to the mid-twenties or thirty when they have a wife and family. Then you go on working another twenty years with the same employer and be able to raise their family in a decent area and decent wages, get them a college education. I guess those are the kind of things I think about more than anything.

ST: Yeah. Are there any disappointments that you have?

GT: Yeah, and it's almost related. The same people that swear to you they're not going to do that again or they're going to straighten up or whatever, and you just turn around and they've done it again. You've saved them two or three times, and then they've gone through the employee assistance to correct this and correct that and all, and they just won't

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learn. That's I guess the biggest disappointment, and then, too, disappointed in the politicians in Alabama and the people for not voting and correcting a lot things. We've got some terrible laws in this state, some things that are not as labor friendly as they should be or worker friendly or family friendly or just not fair, just not just, just not right. It's just not equal. Somebody ought to step forward and run for office and be a representative of the people for a change.

Every time the TV comes on, I see a certain individual and all I can do is cuss. How did that person become president of the United States? [Laughter] Twice, that's not just once, but twice. I just don't see things going in the right direction in this country. It's too many of the rich just keep getting richer, and the tax breaks for the rich, and I just don't see the poor. I was talking with some people from the federal reserve, was having a meeting with them one day and talking about something, and I told him, said "Bush's tax cuts, that's the worst prime example I've ever seen. Give all these rich people tax cuts, they're not going to go out and buy a stove or a refrigerator or a tire for their car. You give the tax cut to the people that make ten, twenty, thirty, forty, even fifty thousand dollars. That's what's going to get the economy going." Well, hell, I never heard from them after that either, but I guess my sense of fairness is different from theirs. I just don't think a person with a million dollars needs a tax cut. I'm not going to say increase their taxes, but at least take away some of all this crap that they're giving them and letting them break. Give the break to the families and the people that need it. You know what a yellow dog Democrat is?

ST: Yeah.

GT: Well, I'm one of those. My saying's always been that I thought the difference between the Republican and the Democratic party, the Republicans, all they look for is the

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rich and the business and corporate. The Democrats, what they should do is be there to look after the people that cannot look after themselves. These rich people ought to be able to take care of those less fortunate than them and pay a little more tax and stuff. I think the injustice in our entire system, I think we've got it a little bit backwards. That's just the way I look at it.

And then people now, I see these younger people in their mid-twenties and thirties, and aw, they're against taxes and this and this and all this crap. I ask them questions sometimes. I say, "Look. Your parents are in a nursing home or whatever, they get their drugs, prescriptions; they get social security and this and that." I said, "You going to do like the Republicans and just cut out all social security and crap, where are you going to put them? Are you going to let them live with you or put them in poor house?" You get to thinking about it, and some of them's attitudes have somewhat changed a little bit.

But unfortunately, you can't get to enough people to make a change. They don't think. They're thinking only about themselves; they don't think about the good that these social programs have done for a lot of people that they'd be starving to death and just couldn't take of their self. You shouldn't make a choice between medicine and food. I guess that's the reason why I'm still working for a union, because I think the union is just not for the union members. You see a lot of things that unions support over the years are for everybody in the work area, like the safety laws, OSHA, the minimum wage. Union members don't get a raise when the minimum wage goes up generally, OK, and things of that nature that are for the public good. I don't think there's enough going on now for the public good, and that's my speech.

ST: [Laughter] In talking about your disillusionment with politics, you're referring

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to sort of the national scene. Have you felt similar—?

GT: Oh, local, too.

ST: Local, too.

GT: State, Alabama.

ST: What about city of Birmingham?

GT: Yeah, yeah. It just doesn't seem to be effective anymore. There's too much division, and I don't see anything getting done. You don't see the cooperation between the mayor and the council. And here again, hell, they give twenty million dollar tax breaks to Wal-Mart to put in the new store out in an area, but that's twenty million dollars worth of taxes that could be used for the good of roads or something within the city, the infrastructure, something. We're too apt to give away millions of dollars of benefits to come here, don't need them to start out with.

Hell, if Wal-Mart don't want to put one there, don't put one there. You want it there, you'd never pick the place because you're going to make money with it there. So why am I going to give you twenty million bucks to do it? Those kind of programs I think are a big mistake offering all these breaks and crap, and then companies like Wal-Mart take advantage of it. Everywhere they go, hundreds of millions probably they've cheated governments out of taxes by them giving them those breaks. They don't give the breaks like that to citizens, so why do they give them the corporate breaks? Hell, it's more corporate welfare now than it is citizen welfare.

ST: Individual, right.

GT: Yeah. So I got problems with. [Laughter]

ST: Thinking back to the seventies just for a moment, did you anticipate big changes

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on the political scene locally with the Arrington administration?

GT: No, Dick Arrington was already mayor when I got here and had been it two or three years, and we always had a good relationship with him. Unlike other people, I used to call him up and have a meeting with him, and me and him would just get in his office one on one. Wouldn't be a lot of people taking notes and this and that. Now with the police and firemen which was predominantly black, I mean white, and almost always fought him, our organization was probably fifty-fifty at that time. Then over the years we're predominantly black, probably seventy to eighty percent now, simply because blacks can move into those higher level jobs and supervisory jobs and truck drivers and equipment that they couldn't then, or the skilled jobs. The mayor knew that we were there for the benefit of the people.

After I came here, it took me eight years to get the law changed in Montgomery to change the pension system so that all employees of the city of Birmingham were on the same pension. Police and the firemen and the classified were under one; the unclassified which was laborers which almost all black were on a separate pension. Got a tenth of the pension benefits that the others got, but we got them a pension started over the years. But because the money in the other one where you got three or four hundred million versus four million, you couldn't provide the same level of benefits. You had to change the statute in order to do that, and the mayor and them supported me on that. It took a long time talking to senators and house members that represent areas of Jefferson County, not just the city. You could be from another county; if you had a little bitty district, you were in the local legislative committee, so it had to go through their local legislation. It took eight years, but it was finally passed.

One thing I was proud of, and that is one of the things that now, no matter where you go to work with the city of Birmingham, whether you're a laborer or the chief of police, OK,

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you got the same insurance, you got the same pension, the same holidays, the same sick leave, the same vacation leave, the same benefits up and down the line. There's no discrimination in benefits whatsoever among the classes anymore. That is one thing I'm proud of, probably that pension fund.

ST: Oh, yeah. So you felt like during those years that you basically had an ally in the mayor's office.

GT: Yeah.

ST: Where did you feel like you had your strongest opposition? Where was it coming from locally?

GT: Department heads, some of the old holdover department heads. The mayor had the same problem because he couldn't do nothing with them either because they were on the () personnel board. We'd appeal these grievances over their heads all the time, and we had a personnel director with the city of Birmingham named Gordon Graham. Gordon had been around some. He was from Birmingham, but he had worked in the city of Cincinnati as personnel there where they were unionizing in some areas. Gordon knew how to deal with the unions, and he was always fair to us. I wouldn't appeal just crap, only good cases, and we would win almost all of them. That made the department heads mad, but the point is, we had good cases is why we won them because they were wrong. We did get justice. Even though it was an internal system, I felt like that most cases we should have won, we did win. Won some I shouldn't have won. A few of them I should have won but probably lost. But over and all, I think we did get justice through that.

I thought we got more justice going through the city than we did the personnel board on the grievance areas. In the disciplinary actions, we had a gentleman by the name of

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Robert Betowt, an attorney, older guy. His dad was an attorney here recognized, and we really with Mr. Betowt got a lot of justice out of the personnel board. I think now some people think the personnel board is there for the benefit of the jurisdictions in the cities. They forgot that the reason they have a personnel board back in like 1939 is to get rid of all the giving jobs to everybody for the nepotism and all those reasons. That's why we got a personnel board to separate all the graft and all the crap of you getting elected and everybody hires their friends and relatives, and every four years all the employment changes just because of who you support. The personnel board was there for the benefit of the employees. I think some people have forgotten that. They think it's there to benefit the cities or the counties or the government. It's not. That's why I think the working people every time always end up on the low part of the totem pole.

ST: Where do you see the labor movement headed these days?

GT: I don't know. You've gotten new a coalition with a number of unions called Change to Win, and I did attend the Change to Win founding convention in Las Vegas. The Laborers are part of that Change to Win, but we're still also part of the AFL-CIO also. I see a lot of things that the AFL-CIO had done wrong. I don't know who's right at this point in time. Time will tell, but the AFL-CIO was not very effective politically, OK. They didn't do the things to organize that you should do and put the monies and efforts into it. It got a little too bureaucratic, too, and top heavy. It probably happens with every organization that the older they get, the bigger they get and things of that nature, is they lose sight of the little person or the people that are the reason or purpose which it was founded. I think this Change to Win is giving AFL-CIO something to say. Whether they're going to recognize it or not, I don't know, but you have got to organize a lot of those groups.

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What I've seen in this country that bothers me is we're losing so much of our heavy industry. That, I think, could be a problem, not because just wages and benefits, that's what drives the economy, but also national security. How are you going to build a tank if you don't have anybody trained to build tanks or you don't have the steel that you produced to go into the tanks and things of that nature? All this free trade crap, that's what I think. It's wrong and it's bad, because we let everybody come in our country, but other countries won't let us into theirs. So why should we? Why should we? I just don't think--we don't have fair trade, and I don't think anything's wrong with a monopoly every now or keeping, because national security or things of that nature, keeping some things out and us producing ourselves here. Sourcing out is bad, in my opinion.

I disagree with a lot of these economic theories that they're using today. I think hell, what are children going to do? How are they going to afford a house? The rates are five or six percent, have gotten so low, but the houses have gotten so expensive. With interest only, you'll never own your house with an interest-only mortgage. People are starting to lose them now because with the ARMs are going up so high you're doubling and tripling the payments. I think we're headed for some bad times in the near future because of the economic policies of this administration. That's my feeling.

ST: Getting back to the Change to Win coalition just for a minute, were you in support of formation of that organization?

GT: Yeah.

ST: You felt like the time was right.

GT: Yeah, I thought the time was right, because AFL-CIO hadn't been effective enough to organize the unorganized. They should have been spending more money and

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doing that and building the politics back at the grassroots. And all the spending on a presidential campaign that they haven't won one in several—what? Won two of the Clinton ones in the last six or four campaigns, five?

ST: Right.

GR: Then I blame the AFL-CIO, too. When Clinton was so favorable, why didn't we get a lot of the legislation? Now here's what I don't understand. When the Democrats are in control, we don't change the National Labor Relations Act, we don't change situs picketing, we don't change all these laws, OK. We kind of play fair, include everybody. Republicans come in, hell, they just start wiping all employee protections. They just wipe it out, but we don't do that to them. Just like that little thing that Frist tried with the nuclear option in the Supreme Court and crap, we never would do that to them. The Republicans play hardball, Democrats, they ever get back in control, they need to play hardball. The Republicans may not want to be hardballed again, but that's what they do. Just like the NRB, they're changing the precedent cases that are thirty and forty years old. He didn't put fair people on these boards. They put them there for an agenda, and that I think is wrong.

I've never voted for a Republican in my life, and I probably never will. If I don't like the Democrat, I just won't vote in that particular race, but I'm not going to vote for a Republican. I think politically the Democrats are just so weak that they don't have the strength to do what the Republicans do. Why doesn't the Democrats go in and do things George Bush did? When it comes to environmental and this kind of crap, let's have it our way for a few years. They want to change it back, let them change it. We get back in, we're going to change it back. But no, I think these things Bush and them did, they'll never change them now, even when the Democrats are in trouble, which I think is sheer stupidity. That's

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my point of view.

ST: Thinking about the future of the labor movement, how do you think the movement for immigrant rights is going to affect the labor movement here locally?

GT: It has gotten to the point now that I've seen a big shift from being neutral to the majority in this country just being anti-immigrant. Probably in the last two years, I have seen the shift, and it's not just Republicans. I've seen Democrats saying the same thing now about stop illegal aliens, stop this, stop that. I do know I think it's had a negative impact on the wages, especially in the construction industry, which is heavy Hispanic down in Alabama and areas like Georgia and Atlanta. A lot of the construction work are Hispanic workers, and it is definitely reducing the wages and the employment opportunities.

ST: How much of a concern is that among the union members you work for?

GT: I see more and more of it. At first, this was a Republican issue, but it's grown now to I think a national issue. In polls I've seen, even in the Democratic, it's sixty or seventy percent opposed. Time will only tell, but I think right now that the mood of the country is anti-Hispanic immigrant. They don't seem to say much if you got somebody from Europe coming over. The technical type jobs and the skilled jobs, but it's the job everyday old guys can do like hanging sheetrock and laying brick and stuff like that. That's guys you really see that are, I mean, they're really down on it.

ST: How are labor leaders going to effectively deal with that issue and—?

GT: Well, I didn't think it was going to be as difficult as it was, but now with homeland security, you're taking the position they have looking at all these no-match social security numbers that, you know, what do you do? You try to organize the guys, and if you can't get them green cards, well, the employer gets arrested, and are you going to be hooked

in with them or what? I don't know. That's something I wonder about. I wonder about that a lot. It's going to be probably one of, I think, the biggest issues other than the Islamic issues and all the war issues and all. Those are going to be the major two issues for several years to come in this country. I think the Muslims and the immigrants are both really going to take it hard. A lot of people, just no socialization, discrimination, and things of that nature.

I don't know how it's going to work out, but you don't see them passing a law any time soon, because what passes the Senate's not going to pass the House. Like I said, I've seen Democrats in some advertisements now, we're against illegal aliens and this and that. You would have never heard that two years ago, not from a Democrat running for office. But I think the general population, that's one of those hot button issues. I always said Republicans weren't for anything; they were just against everything. Guns, God, gays, the three g's and stuff like that. They have no policy, they have no plans, they just family values. Family values does not move a country forward. I agree that you've got to have some values, but you've also got to have a plan for the nation as a whole, too. They just sit up there, and they just use the hot button issues. That's all the Republicans seem to do.

ST: Just by way of wrapping up, a little bit ago you mentioned that when you first started your work, you didn't really see yourself as a civil rights activist. Looking back on it now, would you say that you have been one?

GT: No, I was an employee rights activist, because I didn't care whether the guy was black or white or male or female. It was just justice for employees. Yeah, a lot of it was a civil rights type situation, but I was doing the same thing for white guys that I was doing for the black guys. If somebody didn't get promoted and it wasn't right that they didn't get promoted, I didn't handle it any different if the guy was black or the guy was white. I didn't

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see it as a civil rights issue; I just saw it as an employee rights and a fairness issue. Still do. I don't think you should make decisions based on the race, the sex, and the issue. I think you should just do the right thing, period. That's why I don't view it like that, I guess.

ST: What would you most like for future generations to remember about your work with the Laborers International?

GT: That I always represented the members, that I did the best I could to take care of the members and to make their lives and the lives of their families better. That I did something so that when they retired or worked that they could retire in dignity, or they could have the benefits and the wages so they could educate their family so that their kids—. I think everybody's this way. You want your kids to be more than you were. That have the membership to be able to undo that unfairness, injustice, so they keep their job, they get good wages and benefits so that their children can be doctors or whatever or just be successful. I don't know so much now if I'm at this stage if it's be a doctor and a lawyer, but the kids can do what they enjoy and what they want to do and that they can provide for their families, and I think the big thing to me is that when you retire, you retire in dignity. That's what it's all about to me.

ST: Is there anything you had wanted to talk about that I haven't asked you about?

GT: No, not really.

ST: Well, I certainly appreciate you sitting down with me.

GT: Well, I enjoyed it.

ST: Well, thanks very much.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

Transcribed by Carrie Blackstock, September 2006