

**Transcript: AD Thomas Interview**

**Interviewee:** AD Thomas  
**Date:** June 18, 2007  
**Location:** Birmingham, Alabama  
**Interviewer:** Kimberly Hill  
**Interview length:** 72 minutes (approx)  
**Transcribed by/date:** Carrie Blackstock, July 2, 2007, Winston-Salem, NC

START OF CD

KH: This is Kimberly Hill in Birmingham on June eighteenth, 2007. I'm talking with Mr. AD Thomas. Let's see. I'm going to turn it down a little bit.

AT: OK.

KH: Thank you for having me, Mr. Thomas.

AT: OK.

KH: I'd like to start by just talking about your childhood and how you got interested in the type of work that you do.

AT: Hmm. Well, in the work I do—. Well, particularly are you talking about work that I perform on the airplane or work—? Kind of define.

KH: OK. How did you get interested in doing airplanes work?

AT: OK. Well, my grandfather was a mechanic or sorts. He would say shade tree, so I was exposed by my grandfather to different aspects of mechanics. I was intrigued by flight. I liked to work with my hands.

KH: What type of work did your parents do?

AT: Well, I guess I were four or five years old. My father was a construction worker in Dubose

[Alabama]. My mom and my father were divorced, and my father, like I said, was a construction worker. He was a construction worker in Cincinnati, Ohio, most of the time, building bridges and so forth. My mother was a teacher. She's a retired teacher. She taught mentally retarded kids.

KH: My mom does that, too.

AT: OK.

KH: And you grew up in the Ensley area of Birmingham.

AT: Well, now I was born there. I grew up in an area called Dolomite. It was not incorporated at that time.

KH: Can you tell me a little bit about your neighborhood?

AT: Neighborhood was a pretty quiet neighborhood, pretty close-knit. Most of the people worked in the mine or worked in the steel mill. Very few, but a few professionals were mostly teachers and maybe one or two doctors. That's about it. It's a typical neighborhood back in the early to late sixties, early seventies. It was predominantly black neighborhood. On the outskirts, you did have some whites, but on the interior the neighborhood was composed of black. Wasn't a whole lot of mixing back and forth with white kids until around the seventies, when integration started to kick in wholeheartedly. So that's about it about the neighborhood.

KH: OK. With so many people working in the mines in your neighborhood, did you hear much about union activity?

AT: Yeah, I heard about union activity. Heard about coal miners and the steel workers. I had uncles and cousins who were mostly in the steel mill. They were in the union. While none were real active participants, they carried a card and participated. They had friends who were coal miners, and they were attracted to it because of the benefits derived from having a union, you know, how could they have a voice in the workplace with a union. I was raised by my grandfather, and my grandfather was disabled. So he had been in the mines, but nobody really—. Well, the household next to me, which I

lived next to my grandfather, nobody was really there as far as in the union. My father was in the union in the north. We had a few. We talked to each other every so often, but wasn't a real relationship there until after I got older.

KH: Did your grandfather get hurt in the mines?

AT: Yeah, he had a disability. I don't recall what it particularly was, but he had been disabled and had some kind of form of pension in the process, a pension disability in the process.

KH: OK. So you graduated from high school in 1978.

AT: Right.

KH: And then you went to community college. Did you start doing your technical training there?

AT: No, well, I didn't put the date. I don't remember the date exactly when I went to community college. After the military, I came out, did community college a bit. But what I find in community college is I guess I was out in the world a bit too long. I started to question some of the things I read and some of the things I knew. We didn't quite see things the same way.

KH: What were you questioning?

AT: Well, some of the things in history. I come through a school system which, at that period of time, more concentration was on white students than black students because of the transition period. Some kids had an advantage because they had private schools, and my being a child of a single parent, there's some things that couldn't be obtained, what advances some of those kids by going to schools they went to. I read. Later I read, kind of self-taught myself about history and so forth. I wanted to learn in college, but it was fraught with what I read versus what was said, so I guess in college sometimes things tend to be a little subjective.

KH: Yeah. You were in high school here when all the civil rights activities were going on.

Actually, you were more like middle school then.

AT: Yeah, more like middle school, but I wouldn't say—. You know, we say civil rights reached its peak in the sixties and so forth, but long after that it was still battles we fought. See, I was in a high school that really—. When we came in, they had a ceremony with a casket. They walked down the middle of Main Street with a casket symbolizing the death of an era. After that, we were embroiled in struggles where we had protests. Had cousins from the north who were down there who were instrumental in kind of leading these protests, and we had water hoses. Around seventy-two, seventy-three, we were sprayed down with water hoses.

KH: I didn't know that.

AT: We crawled through windows. Yeah, it was one of those things like you see out of a movie like—what was it? *The Titans* to a certain degree, only difference it was cooked up. It was so thick with people not wanting to get along and so forth, and it created an atmosphere where it was so much tension that it eventually exploded into—. Nobody got really hurt bad, but they had bruises and a whole lot of protests took place.

KH: What were the issues behind those protests?

AT: Some of the things were culturally what we wanted versus what they wanted for us. Really just they wanted to track kids in different settings as far as the school, and they didn't want to pay attention to the students who may not be at the level they expect them to be because of—. It was a little disparity between the educational—the way folks were taught back then. There was just competition over athletics. That created a problem. Then the situation between male/female relations created some problems, and just in general trying to break down the barriers between the two where mama and daddy may have taught this way, that you don't do this, you don't do that, on both sides.

It was just we had to get to know each other. We kind of smoothed through it to a certain degree, but that was the biggest thing, the politics of choosing a white—. Not choosing a black, say, for a cheerleader and so forth, and these things, so it was just a whole lot of things that just didn't seem

fair. Then I guess it was frustration of losing the comfort of being in your neighborhood, being bussed—. Let me see, what was it, about six miles? Six or eight miles away, so that was some of the reason then. Cousins up there were kind of more militant coming out the north, so they'd spark stuff, just trying to exercise your rights to be treated equally in everything, be not just pushed away. And they have tokenism in place for these positions, so that brought on a whole lot of it.

KH: Did you feel like you were a civil rights activist back then?

AT: No, I clamored, but no, I feel like I was an activist to a certain degree, but not so much civil rights activist.

KH: What's the difference, would you say?

AT: The part of organizing ideas and getting involved in the process. It don't take much to protest. You can protest anything. I did a protest, objected for the protests, the heart of defining your battle, more or less. Some of the things, like I said, some of them may have been out of sheer frustration. I was active my own way.

KH: Could you tell me some about your experience in the Navy?

AT: Well, the Navy was—. When I went to the Navy in—. It had its share of racism there, but it wasn't as intense as it was at the school because people had a common—. They had to reach some kind of common ground to work with each other. What I grew through that experience when I had a guy named JP Walsh I was in the Navy with, and he told me his father wouldn't agree with him consorting with black folk. But what's so striking about that, he told me was that he couldn't go back with me with his father, but what he had learned on his own was that his father had told a lie, more or less, about how black folks was. The perception was based purely on what his father said, until he come to a realization or come to see how black people are, or people were. Then he realized, I think, that was just a perception he had. We grew a fond, fast friendship.

Race wasn't a big issue in that period of time in the 1980s. In the late seventies and early

eighties it was a deal about survival, just trying to make it. You had enough things at some time to keep you busy, and at other times, they had no choice but to select who was bad and who was qualified, regardless of race, because of the numbers. I didn't experience much of a racist attitude in the service. I did have brief periods where I worked that are not on there, during school, but those are the major points right there. I had breaks in employment between strikes and between layoffs.

KH: When did you start working on airplanes?

AT: I worked on airplanes in the Navy. I worked on F14, and it led to me being hired on at my current job. That's when I went from mechanics, learning mechanics, learning about working on cars. That led to working on airplanes, and my career actually started with the military, working on airplanes.

KH: So then you transferred your skills back here to work at the airport?

AT: Well, we're an independent contractor right outside—we are adjacent to the airport. Yeah.

KH: Could you give me just like a brief description of your specific responsibilities on the job? Like what part of the plane do you work on?

AT: Now we may be assigned to various areas of aircraft, but at one time I used to work my area where—. I guess I describe it as—well, what they call a thing called the horizontal stabilizer go. On an airplane, you got the tail section. The total configuration is called the empennage, and it's various flight controls that are attached to the empennage. I worked in an area where they had a—. Once they took that section off, they had a thing called a hand shield that was internally inside the plane and was some parts in there that allow what they call elevators to rotate up and down. I worked that, and I worked on what they call bladders. They got internal bladders like a balloon, like a tube, a tire tube, that are installed in aircraft to hold fuel.

KH: OK.

AT: And I had various areas on the plane where you had supportive structures that you put on,



take off, to support flight control. Then you had what are called flap tracks where I worked for a while installing a structure to support what they call flaps that go up and down. I worked on landing gear, rigging. They call rigging it, you know, sequencing it to work. And just general work, taking panels off, putting panels on, what they call clean and secure the aircraft, and just so many little small jobs, too many to mention. But as far as mostly removing installation of parts as far as rigging and stuff, very little rigging took place by blacks in the workplace because that was one of—. I worked landing gear for a while and worked on what they call engine scrugs. It was a structure that's where engines hang on the aircraft, but a whole lot of those jobs were reserved for white counterparts because of the way the workplace is now. Truly that environment now has been more racist than the Navy itself.

KH: You mean even when you were doing this like in the late seventies, they were still reserved for whites?

AT: Well, I went there in the '80s, so—.

KH: OK.

AT: Hey, if you didn't demand to be able to do these so-called technical jobs, which I had done other—. In the military, I had rigs, did rigging and other things in the military, and like I told them I could read and write, so I was perfectly capable of performing the job. I had the instruction necessary to perform it, but when I came in the workplace, they had classification called A and B. I was a B, because you had to go from the B to the A. They consider that more or less a helper class, but it wasn't. So you'd be assigned a person to work with, and in essence they wouldn't want to teach you, especially some whites wouldn't want to work with blacks. The thing about it is that they may teach you, but they may teach you wrong. If you took it upon yourself to learn it on your own, then so be it. So I learned things on my own.

I was demanding to a certain degree, demanded that I learn more than just a menial task, because they subjected us to menial tasks, the things that nobody else wanted to do, and dirty tasks. A

few of us got a chance to get a chance to do some of the so-called technical tasks, which in essence you find out later what is challenging is some of the ones who supposedly was menial. One of them I got laid over, but see I was a participant in a law suit for the company also, and they just settled on it. They went to court in 2000 for discrimination, racial discrimination and a hostile work environment, so—.

KH: Because of work division like that?

AT: Well, because of that and because we had—. See, frankly this place is notorious for violating the rights of workers, black workers especially. While they violate workers' rights, but they violate black workers' rights—. Like I said, black workers are confined to the menial tasks, and then those tasks where supposedly technical, they were areas where most of the overtime was given out. Particularly white workers were pushed in those tasks. They may have a token black here or there, if they had any at all. It's subsided somewhat, but it still isn't the way it should be, blacks still not really recognized as they should. But it's been a journey. It's been rough if you didn't stand up. Then when you learn things, then it was used against you in the process because they sometime expected you to be perfect. You know, the bar always higher, so . . .

KH: Yeah. I interviewed some people at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission last year.

AT: Oh, yeah?

KH: So they were telling me about some of these types of discrimination cases.

AT: Well, you may know the history. I'm quite sure you do. I ain't got a whole lot of faith in the government when it come to us. Like I told you, I was an avid reader, and just reading, I might be spinning off the page, you know, and it might be saying something, you know. What's striking is just reading about things black workers endured. Frankly, the history of PEMCO—. PEMCO used to be Hayes International. It was the home of—. Before it was Hayes, it was called Belcher McCombs. And when it was Belcher McCombs, Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth worked there for a short period of



time. It was the place where you had a contingency of Klan that castrated a guy from the Bartwell Auditorium. Yes, and then it got in Lou Jeffries at one time. We was involved in everything that went on downtown with Bull Connor. It's chronicled more or less in *Carry Me Home*, the book called *Carry Me Home*.

KH: I've seen that one.

AT: They got a real history, I tell you. It's got a history. Not good, but—.

KH: Some of it can turn out for good, though.

AT: Well, I think accomplishment to come out of almost eighty percent white voting, voters in the union approximately—less than twenty percent black, and still be able to win by a slim margin. Now whether I'll be here the next time or not, that's another question. It shows something, and then saddled with a lawsuit, knowing that, and openly knowing, taking a position that—. It ain't about black or white; it's about wrong or right. It gives you a boost, but hey, this ain't been a joke either, so [chuckles].

KH: Well, let's talk about how you got involved with this union.

AT: Well, I got involved with the union because I believe in workers rights. I believe in the right to organize. I believe in fighting to help not only my local but others, and trying to work to move in the right direction as far as working together. I just got involved because I felt I could make a change some kind of way, but I need help making that change. But if I wasn't vocal and try to get involved, there wouldn't be a change. So I got involved because I wanted a voice, wanted people to be able to voice their opinions and feel comfortable in voicing their opinions. If nobody did, then nobody come forward and really do it, so I felt as though everything wasn't being said. That's before it represented black workers or in some aspects represented all workers.

KH: What specific issues did you see weren't being addressed?

AT: Well, the biggest issue was not really respecting the black worker based on his abilities on

the job. And then management just kind of hand-picking folks, passing over people and continue to put people in these menial tasks.

KH: Um-hmm. Was there also a problem with wages or the hours worked?

AT: Well, wages wouldn't necessarily be a big—. It's not a problem because of the structure of the union as far as the way they can structure overtime and picking and choosing based on what they call departments, and selectively put more white workers in the areas where they would tend to get more overtime. That was a challenge itself. That was part of the challenge of being selective and picking folks and placing them in departments. Most of the time you would see the way it was set up. Like I said, it was to the advantage of white workers more so than it is to balance it out among all workers.

KH: OK. When did you join the union?

AT: I joined the union in '81.

KH: OK. And when did you seek office?

AT: I run for office for the last—. The first office I got was in ninety-eight, I guess. But see, I been active in the movement—. I wouldn't get involved. I was just an activist, so to speak, at that point, because the time wasn't right. I won the first offices for unexpired term as a black in 1997. Or '98?

KH: Hmm. Why wasn't the timing right before?

AT: The composition of the local. We had a transition where we had more workers receptive to change. Back then, it was guys from World War Two and Korean War dominated the local, and those old ideas, you know. And the old guard was just still there, so it was hard to break through that.

KH: Were these men the leaders when you came in?

AT: Yeah.

KH: OK.

AT: Yes, they were.

KH: So what kind of issues was the union working on when you first joined?

AT: Well, basically bread and butter issues, wages, work hours.

KH: Um-hmm. Even back then, did these two groups of workers feel like they had something in common?

AT: Somewhat. Look, the only time they really felt like they had something in common when it came to the picket line. Then they felt like—. A mock battle take place, but once that was over, those other issues still existed. But it was a whole lot tougher then. They appointed people on boards based clearly on their actions whether they would do what they were told. They had no independent voice in saying things. If they were wrong, then they pulled them away. They wouldn't be allowed to sit on committees anymore. They thought they had total control.

KH: How many strikes did you participate in?

AT: I participated in four strikes, the longest being eight and a half months.

KH: Oh. Do you remember when those were?

AT: No, let me see if I can get my head together. OK, 1989, '93—. No, '89—. Let me think now. '89, and there was one in '96. I'm missing two back. There was two prior to that. It was [chuckles]—.

KH: '89, '93, '96.

AT: Well, not ninety-three.

KH: OK.

AT: Somewhere in the nineties. There was one in '89, and there was one in '96, being the longest in '96. See, I been here so long. There was one in '83, about.

KH: OK. So it seems like the UAW was like one of the more active unions in the city then.

AT: Active in what way?

KH: Was it unusual to have this many strikes for a union?

AT: It was the most strike-active union probably in the region of the UAW at one time. Yeah.

KH: OK. [Laughter] Why would it be the most strike-active union?

AT: Well, some myths surround the reasons strikes took place. Whether they're factual or not, they say, well sometime they strike during the—. Typically, the strikes took place during the spring, early spring or late spring, or early summer. They claim the farmers took advantage of the situation. Well, that's just sheer speculation as far as on my behalf, but it was some strong words passed, some people on management side taking some strong positions. Locals felt like ultimately they had no other choice but to strike because, you know, based on decisions by the company. Some of them was from just not being able to agree. They have had a pretty adversarial relationship all along, but it just seemed to be a thing every so often they strike over issues concerning wages and so forth. Sometime the demands would be met and sometime we'd win, and sometime we'd break even. But it's been a position of the company to try to break the union in at least the last three. Some of them precipitated by the change in management, different owners taking different styles, and that brought on different things and forced things and forced strikes also.

KH: Did you usually strike against the same companies, or are you involved with independent contractors?

AT: No, we just—. Well, one company, Hayes International. No, we not an amalgamated local.

KH: OK. And how have you found it negotiating with the company now that you're in office?

AT: Oh well . . . [KH laughs] They don't seem to be receptive to the opinion of the union to a certain degree. They'll listen to some ideas, but they—. It's a little bitterness on their behalf because of me being a member of the lawsuit, so that don't help matters either. But it's been difficult. They give impression like they want to work together, but it's been difficult. If you got the winning hand, then it's

a whole different thing. But as far as if you got to reach some kind of compromise, it don't seem like they're too receptive for compromise. They want to have it all. They respected me a little more. They work with us a little bit, but not a whole lot. It's been up and down, more so down than up.

KH: [Laughs] Could you tell me a little more about the lawsuit and how that got started?

AT: Well, what happened is during the course of—I guess in ninety-nine, several nooses were hung in the workplace, company property was defaced, and things were said by workers against other workers, you know, names called out that shouldn't have been, the “n” word was used. It was in certain areas of the plant, they discovered graffiti, and the company took an attitude that they really didn't care about cleaning things up or making it different. When it was brought to management's attention, they really failed to respond. It was at a point where to try to resolve these issues, they come to management and they wouldn't do nothing. So some other guy was already discussing it. Then it came around, well, we might be able to get some justice to take it outside and take some legal recourse to try to get the company to do the right thing.

The union wasn't really taking a strong position. That's another reason that spurred me to get involved. They wouldn't take a strong position on what side they were on. I asked them to raise their head and say, “Look, what's wrong's wrong. We ain't going to divide on the basis of color. That shouldn't be. If it's wrong, it's wrong. Stand up and say things.” Through numerous union meetings, this was said, but to no end. They reluctantly just sit by and let it go. I got beat up a whole lot of times by saying what I had to say and being active, but that's part of it. I was kind of frustrated and upset because the union didn't take any action to a certain degree, then decide to take it outside based on the company not doing the right thing, just kind of being nonchalant about the whole situation.

KH: Did that turn out to be a racial divide within the union?

AT: Somewhat. We had an experience where a young man was disciplined for an incident in the parking lot where he called another guy the “n” word. Almost a fight almost ensued. To show you

the race divide, though, some of the blacks got involved. The majority of whites—. When he was disciplined, he was suspended for two weeks. So they took a collection up to recoup his lost time. They didn't feel like it was wrong. And you had your folks who was clearly on one side and the other, but like I said, the transition period took place, and a whole lot of those folks have moved on. It was divisive, because they were waiting kind of like—. You know the OJ trial?

KH: Yeah.

AT: You could just listen. You could hear a pin drop when the decision came, and the same thing with the decision. Now we lost in the courtroom and later came back, and they refiled. We got—other folks were awarded something through a deal the EEOC made and it's just been recent. [Phone rings] I'm going to let that ring.

KH: OK.

AT: It's just been recent that this took place, so we could really see the division. People wouldn't talk, and it was obvious who was on one side and who was on the other. Then they wouldn't associate with people, and the management had rumors that we was trying to shut the place down with a lawsuit. I told—. I don't know any lawsuits filed by African-American that can shut any company down. If that had been the case, we wouldn't have any problems. [Laughter]

KH: I didn't ask you for these specifics before, but how big is the union?

AT: It's considerably smaller than it was. Dues-paying members, we are five hundred and three now. Prior to that time, we were about nine hundred, eleven hundred members. But due to some contracts that we haven't been awarded, the numbers have really went down.

KH: Because of the contracts?

AT: Well, we kind of in that loop with the war. The funding of the war, it has a negative affect on the funding of contracts.

KH: OK.



AT: We waiting that war. Really, I don't know whether I be sitting here next year based on that war, so we're at a critical period right now whether the company survive or not.

KH: I didn't know that the war would affect the industry.

AT: Well, see, we refurbish military aircraft based on the funding and they're scrambling for funds. The way that war is eating money up, they have to make a decision on who going to be funded first. And naturally, the troops on the ground going to be funded. They push back dates for awards. We don't have a whole lot working at this point. We used to have quite a bit of work, but like everything else, the military got smaller. Therefore, it's less work out there. So it's one of them things.

KH: How many employees of Hayes International aren't with the union?

AT: We don't have -- we have one hundred percent on check-off at this point.

KH: OK.

AT: Typically we never ran -- we ran about zero point five percent at the most. When we had a big number of eleven hundred or fifteen hundred or more, we typically ran about zero point five as far as check-off.

KH: What was it like to be on strike for eight and a half months?

AT: Oh. [KH laughs] Hand to mouth. It could be highly energizing at times. It could be pretty traumatic in other respects when you get close to the holidays. The energy level was there. People kept up doing things, trying to keep their spirit up. Things just went on. With UAW having a strike fund, that helped out some, the people doing other things to fund other aspects of life. Then we had full insurance, so insurance was a big thing, you know, no question of having insurance. That was a plus. Down in the end, it got whether we going to settle or not, we're just going to end it. It got rough at the end.

KH: Did you get another job in that time?

AT: Yeah, I worked for myself more or less during those periods of time. Did a little carpentry

work, a little roofing work, a little yard work.

KH: Did the—?

AT: Go ahead.

KH: Oh, did the company ever talk about replacing you?

AT: Well, they did have replacement workers in there, and they threatened to replace us. But in the end, the replacement workers left, we went back, and everybody was employed. I don't know if you want to call it re-employed. Everybody was back at work.

KH: How much of a time commitment has union leadership been for you?

AT: It's like trying to raise a child. [KH laughs] It's consumed quite a bit of time after hours and trying to go out and get involved. Well, I always got involved, but get more involved with different union activities. So it's consumed—. Overall time, I gave over twenty-five to thirty percent of my time that I normally would give otherwise, to try to build something.

KH: Is most of that time spent talking with other workers, getting people involved in projects?

AT: It's talking with other workers, getting them involved, and trying to build a commitment or trying to build some kind of relationship with all the locals, other unions in the area.

KH: Which other local unions have you been really active with?

AT: Well, I can't say active because ain't a whole lot of active folks around, and that's my frustration right there. I been working with the CWA a little bit and IBEW.

KH: And can you remind me what those stand for?

AT: OK. Sorry about that. Communications Workers of America.

KH: OK. And IBEW?

AT: International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. Sorry about the acronyms.

KH: That's OK. I'm sure I'll be getting a lot of these in the next week. So what do these two groups do that the other local unions don't do?

AT: Well, they get involved in a whole lot of social events more or less. On Labor Day, they promote events. They have a Labor Day event at what they call Sloss Furnaces. They get involved with that. They have a membership with a dues base to be able to get involved in community events and fund different things. They have a strong relationship with the United Way, and they work with other organizations like muscular dystrophy and so forth. That's a bigger portion of it, what they do.

KH: Why do think the other local unions aren't that involved in community events and just being active in general?

AT: I think it's the makeup of the union, more or less. Most of these unions in this area as far as industrial base unions, large unions, you know, a larger base membership is that so many folks live outside in other outlying counties that it's difficult to have a sense of community by not living within the community they work. Frankly, the leadership don't exist there who really—. They don't seem to understand the purpose of—the importance of working within the community.

KH: It seems to me like Birmingham has such a history of union activity that it wouldn't be that difficult.

AT: That what everybody think. That's a misnomer right there. That what everybody think. It seems strange, don't it?

KH: Um-hmm.

AT: I'll give you a typical example. And like I say, I've been active. During the time of the church burnings, I was really upset with what was going on because of the history of church burnings. I tried to get the local involved. The local got involved to a certain degree, and going forward they got involved. They managed to raise money and sent a donation to one of the churches that got burned recently. You know, the group of churches, and I—.

KH: Yeah, last year.

AT: Right. I give them praise for that, because I asked from the board and requested, we made

a gate collection, and we sent a little bit over a thousand dollar donation to one of the churches who hadn't had anything. So I applaud it for that, but in trying to get them involved with the church burning prior to that, it was like pulling nails. I did manage to go through the plant and physically collect some money to go down, but I couldn't get no real support from membership to go down and rally behind what was going on. That's not only here, but in Birmingham other groups and so forth. You talking about the history of Birmingham, you'd think they'd be active. It was really a bitter battle between Birmingham participating and supporting what was going on down in Selma when that was going on. It took me off my feet to think, well, where's Birmingham? We had people represented from all over the world, but very little if any representation from right here in the heart of Birmingham, and that was strange to me. It's bizarre. I don't know what's the reason behind that.

KH: You mean like the Selma march, or are you talking about something more recent?

AT: I'm talking about the church burnings that took place—when was it? I don't know exactly.

[Knock at door] Uh-oh.

KH: I can pause it.

AY: OK. [Tape paused]

KH: OK, so we were talking about how it's not true that Birmingham is riding off a glorious history of unions.

AT: No, sad to say. The basic function from my inside view of the elected leadership or the appointed leadership within the union, it's all about Democratic party. They're not progressive in the way of doing things like some folks in the Carolinas. I know some folks in the UE who are more progressive. I don't know if you're familiar with the UE.

KH: No, I'm not.

AT: But no, they don't take up the community base issues, they don't take up those issues.

They say they do, but they'll do more things when it's about show, trying to give an impression of

something being done. As far as a sustained base activity working with communities, it's just the United Way, their liaison with the United Way, and through the Red Cross to a certain degree. But as far as beyond that—. Now they're helping with the Red Cross disaster relief, they'll help in that vein, and then maybe some catastrophic things take place where you're challenged by, kind of pushed by them nationally to try to give the impression of doing things, like tornadoes and stuff and give relief. As far as having any sustained involvement with community, having a relationship with leadership in the community, like I said, basically part of that is the makeup, the composition of workers, where they come from. They kind of prevent that from taking place. You've got to have some people willing to step up and sacrifice some of their time to do things.

KH: It seems to me like that's a change from the values that were driving like early union work. In the background reading that I've done, it seemed like the unions were right in step with the same values that were pushing people to go into civil rights protests. It was about bringing more opportunities to the community than were available before.

AT: Yeah. Now while we see a so-called boon employment in, well, in Alabama to a certain degree, like you said, your research will look back that double-digit inflation has existed continually from then till now on our African-American side. Yeah, they did have value systems. But from my point of view, they gave the impression that they went along with it. But if you really know the inner workings of these larger locals with a predominantly white membership, in the South particularly, they went along with it, but they didn't necessarily seem to give the impression they totally agreed with it. They didn't get on the point of holler and scream for wrong is wrong and right is right.

You'll probably read that the value system was similar, but Luther got the exposure he got from being there, and A Philip Randolph and others moving along. But they had internal strife within locals themselves, and I learned that through educating myself informally. The movement is slide backwards. It's not advancing. The numbers aren't there. That's part of it, true enough, but there's really no

progressive leadership that understands how important community is or how important it is for locals to work with the community. I don't see it. Well, you've been back and forth Alabama enough to know—well, you may not know—the "Mecca" that supposedly exists.

KH: Pardon?

AT: The "Mecca."

KH: Oh. I've gotten a hint. [Laughs]

AT: Well, people think that it's like we've got this glorious history. It should be continued, and people, a light should be in their head going off saying, "Hey, this is the right thing to do, and we're going to do it."

KH: Well, I've been here enough to hear people lamenting like how the city is like population and income is just going way down. There's not much tax base left. They feel like Birmingham is dying essentially.

AT: It's a rebirth taking place. You can call it re-gentrification or gentrification, whatever, however you want to define it. You're going to see—. What they're hoping is the downtown center has a resurgence of bringing typically affluent white folks in. They're working on that, but like you say, it has died. Let's say it's typical of black cities. Think about, well, Detroit, some areas with an urban center but predominantly black typically we all got the same problem to a certain place, I would think. It's floundering, but it might be design. [Laughs]

KH: By whose design?

AT: The power structure, the one who controls things, the press. Just push the property value down to the lowest possible where you can go back in and redeem them and then raise them.

KH: Um-hmm. You feel like people's interest in the community has really diminished. Do you see that as a general change throughout Birmingham or specific to unions?

AT: It's specific to unions because they seem to—. The ones I encounter, the majority of the



ones I encounter, don't seem to get it. Not in general, because you have some folks who trying on their own and have been members of the union trying to wage campaigns to change things. You have some fights, but it ain't highly organized.

KH: How much have you been involved with the local politicians through your work?

AT: Oh, I've been involved. I got two boys and the culture of the school system in Birmingham has brought on a whole lot of battles. The disparity between the more affluent school systems outside is just—. When you got a school system that really doesn't challenge or really does the right thing or try to utilize the resources on hand to make a difference, and kids are being warehoused as opposed to educated—. Well, I wouldn't say educated. Educated, I guess I could use. Most of the time, they're being trained. But no, I've been involved in politics. I was a neighborhood association vice-president at one time, and I've been involved with various community issues. Folks who referred you to me were from the Greater Birmingham Ministry. I'm involved with them somewhat.

KH: Have you ever had to talk with the mayor or the city council as part of your work with the UAW?

AT: No. No, UAW, it don't—. Like I said, as a whole the local don't—. It may, during strike activities, get involved with the city government. I talked to the mayor a little bit because prior to the mayor being the mayor, he was neighborhood association president and I was the vice-president at that time.

KH: OK. Looking back, what would you think are the best things that you've been able to achieve during your union work?

AT: Open some eyes up, open eyes and help people to question and see that some things can change, and make people look at things differently and look at people differently, and give a little hope. Right now, with the scattered resources, can't do much of nothing.

KH: What do you still want to accomplish?

AT: Well, I would like to see the local—. We talked about transitioning into a force that could be reckoned with in the sense that it worked with the community and worked on issues that were vital to members, not only on a local level but throughout the country. Be a more visible, viable local.

KH: What would you like to do on the national level?

AT: No aspirations so political. It's so many deals made there. I think a local working at the local level and maybe meeting some goals on the national level. Work at the local level, pushing the goals on the national level. One thing I would like to see achieved on the national level is universal health care. I've actively pursued that on my own, through my own efforts out of my own pocket, with no support from the international.

KH: Are there other people who would support that, too, do you think?

AT: Yes, some of them looking up. Part of it is because of self-interest, but we handle that, too. Yes, there's a few, but it's just trying to educate people on that so-called—that ill word socialized medicine. They think of socialized, demonize it with words and then it's hurt just the same. You got what—? Forty-seven million Americans without health care and countless millions with less than adequate health care. I'd just like to be able to educate workers more and be able to articulate more, in a clearer fashion, my views.

KH: Is there any one message that you would hope people would get out of your experiences living in Birmingham and being involved in the unions for so long?

AT: Well, that even though circumstances may seem impossible, sometime you can raise above the circumstances and be able to effect some change.

KH: Um-hmm. Well, those are all my questions for today.

AT: All right.

KH: Is there anything else you wanted to add?

AT: No, I can't think of much. I just kind of—. Everybody—. People—.

END OF TRANSCRIPTION