

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Women in Labor Unions

Personal Experience

O H 1869

DEBORAH ERVIN

Interviewed

by

Holly Hanni

on

May 10, 1997

## DEBORAH ERVIN

Ms Deborah Ervin was born in Youngstown, Ohio. She attended East High School and graduated in 1970. She is an employee of Delphi Packard Electric and a member of Union Local 717. Ms Ervin is a single parent with grandchildren. She is an active member of the Women's Committee of Local 717. Recently she attended an educational conference in Michigan that was sponsored by the Women's Committee. At the conference, Ms Ervin went to seminar classes that addressed racial issues and women's rights issues.

Ms Ervin enjoys to travel and is interested in promoting education to her grandchildren. Two years ago, she was forced to change jobs at Delphi because her job went to the Delphi plant in Mexico. Currently, Ms Ervin is distressed over the possibility of a strike at her plant.

--Holly Hanni

H: This is an interview with Deborah Ervin for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Women in Labor Unions, by Holly Hanni, on May 5, 1997 at Local 717 Union Hall in Warren, at 12.20 p m

What was it like growing up in Youngstown?

E: It was pretty okay It was pretty okay I had three brothers and a sister I grew up in a well-rounded home, structurally

H: What kind of student were you?

E: As far as my grades?

H: Yes Or your education experience

E My education experience was okay It was pretty good I took the vocational course in high school and I graduated And then I went to YSU I was there a year

H: What kind of problems have you encountered as an African-American female growing up?

E Growing up? Well, I grew up in an African-American environment, so there was really no problems for me

H: In your community

E: Exactly

H: When did you get your first job?

E: I was in 11th grade I worked at the East Side Community Center [tape stops]

H: What job did you have after that?

E: I believe I started working at Montgomery Ward's And from there I worked at General Electric From there, I went to Packard Electric

H: How did you get your job at Packard?

E: I heard that they were hiring through the news media and the newspaper And I found where it was at and stood in line I got hired right there.

H And you have been working at Packard since 1972?

E Exactly

H What are your job duties? Have they stayed the same?

E No I first got hired in as a quality control person That was in Plant 11 Now I am an LFT cutter

H What is an LFT cutter? [tape shuts off] You program a machine

E To cut and terminate cable

H Okay So you are cutting cables

E Exactly

H That they use in cars?

E Right. That they use in cars

H I saw on the news that they are just going to do the new Corvettes

E Right

H Are you going to be involved in that?

E It is possible

H How do they train you for your job?

E We have, on each classification that we are going to, we are trained so many hours for the job I cannot really speak about the Corvette I do not know I just think that is a different subject.

H What did you do when you did quality control?

E Back in the 1970's when I was a quality control inspector, we inspected the length of the cable, the core of the cable Wire -- all different kinds of wires

H You had to make sure that they were quality

E Exactly Right identification You had to identify the cable to color, everything

H Do men and women do the jobs together, or are there sexually segregated jobs?

E Men and women now do the jobs together

H. Has that changed? Before, were there certain jobs that women did?

E Well, years ago, years ago, men did not really want to accept a woman doing a man's job That is the reason why we have different classifications Now they have come around to settling and we are being treated, more or less, somewhat equal. Back then, men did not want to train women

H: Did the management bring that about, the equality? Or did the union have something to do with it?

E I think it, more or less, was the union

H The union pressed for that.

E: I would think so because in a servicing job, if a man had it and a woman got into the classification, you know, men kind of frowned on a lot of stuff back then. A lot

H: They made it hard

E Yeah So, they come around They have women doing servicing

H. But the union is also predominantly male, so women probably had to work harder.

E There are women in the union now

H. That are lobbying?

E Yes

H: I saw on your history sheet that you went to Detroit with the Women's Committee Can you tell me about that? When did you go to Detroit?

E: That was last month and it was very educational, very informative As far as different local unions coming together at a bi-annual conference, you had different walks of life there

H Are they all women, though?

E No, no. It was many unions. And then you had some from different countries coming together and sharing Like solidarity Getting together and sharing information

H: Who sponsored it?

E: The Labor Notes sponsored it. I went for the Women's Committee for the union here

H: Were you the only one?

E: No, I was not. Barbara Morgan went as well

H: What did you do there? You said you were in conferences all day

E: It was workshops. We went to different workshops, and we had the opportunity to learn information about different areas. We could pick and choose what classes we wanted to go to from arbitration to grievances. Harassments, the attorneys -- if you are unable to solve the grievances, you get the attorney information there. They shared that.

H: Does the union secure the attorney, or do you have to do that as an individual?

E: It all depends on what it is. Sometimes the union supplies a basic amount of attorney fees, and sometimes it does not, depending on whatever it is, the scope of the situation.

H: What kind of committees did you go into when you were in Detroit?

E: The workshop that I attended was for women of color. And there, they come from California, all the way from Texas, Michigan.

H: All over the country?

E: Yes.

H: Did you learn anything there that stuck out?

E: Yes. I learned a whole lot. It is about racism and discrimination toward women, period. And the lack of information that they have in different states with whatever the different reasons that they are having. But yes, I have.

H: Do you think that is an increasing problem, or decreasing?

E: No, it is there. It is like caucus. They let you know that racism is still there. In other words, they want to say, "Oh, it is okay. It is not as bad." But it is there.

H: They are ignoring it, then?

E Yes

H In 1989 you were the Queen of the Eastern Star Could you tell me about that?

E I am in chapter 37, which is Order of the Eastern Star Chapter Our chapter ran against, in the district of Toledo, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Cleveland, Toledo, Sharon, West Middlesex, and Youngstown and Warren districts. Each city participated and whoever came in with the most amount won, and my chapter came in with the most amount

H Is that a church affiliation or is it masonic?

E It is masonic

H Is that just female organization?

E It is a women organization.

H: You like to travel How has your job helped you travel?

E: The Educational Committee will put on the different classes and the Women's Committee has different classes. If I see anything that I am interested in, I will ask And if the union can, therefore, oblige me, then I will attend

H How many of them have you attended?

E Three.

H Detroit was one?

E: Yes Michigan and Michigan. [Laughter]

H Okay. Michigan, big labor

E Yeah

H Recently you celebrated your 25th anniversary at Packard?

E: Yes We had our 25 year banquet, and it was held at the Metroplex in Liberty, Ohio And it was a nice affair It was wonderful I got a chance to see a lot of people and a lot of friends that I was hired in with 25 years ago, and find out where they were working, where they are at now. Just communicating, about how their family is doing, how many kids they have and what they are doing now, where they are working

H Who sponsored that?

E. Oh, I would imagine Packard

H Packard did?

E Yes

H How do you feel about Packard?

E How do I feel about Packard? Right now?

H. Yes After 25 years of Packard

E We have a strike next week, so I do not know It is very scary

H The news has not said anything about that

E We are working under no contract, so it is kind of very scary, you know?

H How long have you guys been working under no contract?

E Since September

H. Oh, I did not know that How has the union responded to you as an African-American woman?

E Well, I do not have any complaints They respond to me very well, as a lady

H. You feel they are receptive, then?

E Yes.

H Okay What types of problems have you encountered in balancing work and your family responsibilities? You are a working mother, right?

E: My son is 27

H But your son was two when you started?

E. Okay, well, you are going back then?

H Yes Over the years

E: Okay. Well, I do not remember or recall any problems

H How was your schedule? Were you able to work while he was in school?

E Yes

H So there was not really a big problem of not being home?

E No. In his eyes it was a problem. But I needed to come to work for money The schedule worked out He went to school and I went to work and then I got off and then we would be together We did things

H So your schedule was pretty good then?

E Until I got on afternoons

H And how old was he then?

E: Oh, I do not remember. Nine or ten, maybe.

H. So what did you do with him then?

E I took him to my mother's.

H So your mom helped you?

E Oh, yeah

H How was being a woman affected your role in the work place?

E It is very much positive because I have never ever been a man [Laughter] I am always who I am, so it is very much positive You have seen women doing the work all over It is women I do not know what the percent is, but it is pretty high, so it is very positive

H How has women's acceptance in the union changed since you have joined?

E Joined the union?

H Yes.

E I have always been in the union

H From the get go, have men been pretty receptive to women participation in the union or has it increased over the years?

E This is a man's world There is no woman president in this union There is only

one woman I know who was vice-president

H Who was that?

E. Barbara Morgan

H Is she still vice-president now?

E. No

H How has your union encouraged political activism among the female members?

E How has the union encouraged?

H. Yes Or discouraged

E. I cannot see no discouragement Women, we pretty much try to get as much information as we can I am not really into the politics at all I cannot answer these questions

H How has your union's attitude toward women changed since you joined?

E I have been in the union for 25 years.

H Okay Have you ever been discriminated against because you are a woman? If so, in what way?

E Well, as I explained to you before, if a woman applied for a service job, the man would get it all the time It was not so receptive back then

H How have you or other women confronted injustices dealt with them? For instance, if a woman was vying for a job and they were having problems

E: Me, personally, I read my contract I try to stay abreast of what it is about, and I basically go from there And then if I cannot get it on my own, then I will ask for union representation, and then we will go over it. And then we go from there

H Is the union pretty responsive to you? Do you have to get after them, or are they there for you, to support you?

E Yes, they are there

H How is your union in addressing family issues?

E They are pretty good I think I have a good union, as far as addressing family

issues. We have many different programs that deal with our families. There are a lot of a programs that I do not even know about, but I feel that they are pretty good

H: What are some of the programs? Have you ever been involved in any of them?

E: Yes. They were all good

H: What problems do you face, as a woman in the union, that men do not experience?

E: Cramps [Laughter]

H: Good answer.

E: Migraines, headaches. Female problems. Walking on the floor, standing on one foot. Oh my goodness. Men have tousee cushy jobs

H: Is the floor there concrete, in the plant?

E: Yes.

H: Do you stand at your job?

E: Yes, I stand

H: Your legs must really hurt

E: Yes, they do

H: How well do women get along with each other within in the union or in the workplace?

E: Pretty good

H: What are the positive inroads that your union has made for women workers?

E: Positive? They help the women in so many ways. Just being able to be a woman and to stand and support them, stand by them, and make them become known in areas

H: How has your union worked to educate you of your rights?

E: They put the information out there for us. All we have to do is get it

H Like in the newsletters?

E Well, yes.

H How about classes? Do they send you to classes, like those conferences?

E Yes, there are classes

H What has been your most positive experience, as a woman, with your union?

E: Positively speaking, I like the education part. As a woman, being on the Women's Committee, I have enjoyed learning how it works, so far.

H: What kind of union activities have you attended or participated in?

E The Women's Committee

H What does the Women's Committee do?

E: Okay I thought you had that information with Charlotte, "Red".

H Right But what have you done?

E: Okay Fund raisers for the union I am now just getting on the Election Committee and my meeting is right after this one.

H How did you get involved in union activities?

E: I was off work for a period of time and, in order for me to know what was going on with the company, I felt I should get my information from the union, so I got on the Women's Committee.

H: When you were off work, were you off work because of an injury or were you laid off?

E No, injury

H Work-related injury?

E Yes On the Women's Committee, we also help women in distress, and we deal with families at Christmas time The Women's Committee, it generally helps out the union and the women in certain areas And it is a lot of other stuff that I really cannot think of off the top of my head

H How has the role of women changed where you work?

E From when? When I first started?

H Yes

E Well, how has it changed? I do not know

H Have they increased?

E Women? Oh, yeah

H Since when you came on they have hired a lot more women?

E They just hired a lot of people But I take it that it was a lot of women because I do not hardly see too many men

H There are not that many men on your shift?

E Well, I am on late-nights You know what? It is bad timing because they are doing away and sending all the jobs to Mexico, so this is a real bad time to ask where the men is at And even the women. [Laughter]

H: Do they pay more for working midnight shift?

E A percentage, yes

H: So is that an incentive to work midnights? You do not mind working midnights?

E No I was forced to go to midnights, because my job is gone to Mexico So I am not a real happy camper about that

H When did that happen?

E Since I have been on midnights?

H Yes

E I have been on midnights for about a month and two weeks.

H So if you would not have taken that, where would you have been, if you would have refused to go on midnights?

E Oh, only the Lord knows, I do not know, because I am the youngest in this classification in the plant, so my classification is just hanging by a thread. Other than that, it is going to be extinct or gone It is supposed to have been gone

H So, if it is gone, you are gone?

E. I have to go to another classification, which would probably be a lesser-paying job

H You just take a decrease

E: Yes, a big decrease

H When did your job go to Mexico?

E It started leaving last year

H Were there a lot of jobs that went to Mexico?

E. Yes They got brand-new machines They have homes being built there in Mexico.

H: Do you have an option to go to Mexico if you wanted?

E. No

H: No, they do not offer to you to go with the job?

E I do not think They did not offer me that They did not offer me that option But, who wants to go to Mexico? Then again, maybe some people will go

H Just to keep a job?

E No. If they pay me well and I am getting on well, yeah What the heck, I will go. Send me

H What is your definition of middle or working class, and where do you fall?

E I am poor I am poor. [Laughter]

H So would you say working class?

E. I am definitely trying to work By the time you get done dissecting everything, I am poor I do not know how in the world these people come up with building these new homes

H They are in debt Have you ever filed any grievances?

E Yes.

H Can you tell me about them?

E. For money

H For your job Was it single grievance, or was it a collective grievance?

E: Some of them have been collected I really do not like filing grievances unless it is about money But, you know, if the company just does not want to recognize paying you overtime or calling somebody before you or just missing you.

H. Does that happen a lot?

E No

H What kind of activities have you engaged in to support other unions?

E Are you asking me about rallies?

H: Yes Or not crossing picket lines

E. Oh, I never did anything like that The only thing I have done is go to the labor workshop that was held in Detroit, and that was nice.

H. What are the major problems confronting your union in 1997?

E Getting a contract

H: Do you think they are going to be able to get a contract?

E. I pray to God that they get a decent one

H. They probably had to make concessions

E I do not know what they are doing All I know is we had one and then we voted it down, so we are hoping that we get another one by next week Other than that, I do not know They said five-day strike notice and that is that.

H What has been your role within the union during strikes?

E I have not been in a strike

H Oh, it has never been on strike since you have been here?

E I have, but I did not recognize it

H. Did you walk the picket line?

E I did not

H. You just stayed home?

E I guess.

H What are the major road blocks that women face in the union and the work place?

E: I do not know

H You do not see any?

E. No

H Okay What are demands placed on women in the union are different than for men?

E We just have to clean up all the men's mess

H Like?

E Whatever the mess is We have to clean it up It is just that simple.

H Okay How do you think women can better obtain leadership roles in your union?

E Oh, I do not know. [tape stops] If there is something, that they want to get their point across, they ought to address the issue. So I really do not know how to address that

H What do you think is the future of women in your union?

E It is there, if women want to apply We have women who are dedicated, who can help and support

H. What about issues of maternity leave? Has that changed? What about issues and policies within the plant, like sick leave, family leave? Have they come about?

E I cannot answer that one because when I had my son, it was before I got hired

H What do you feel is the hardest part about being a working woman?

E. The hardest part? Coming to work and not getting really paid for what you are worth

H. Do women and men make equal pay within your job classification?

E. No. You go out to another sector because I am a traditional. I got hired way back when and I do not know anything about the two-tier. I am not the one to ask. I get paid way more than what they get paid. I have just worked all these years and the amount that I am here, I am saying it is not enough for what we do. That is the way I feel about it.

H. And how many hours do you work?

E. The basic is 40 hours a week.

H. Do you work overtime sometimes?

E. Yes, I have to.

H. Is it mandatory or is it optional?

E. Optional.

H. It is optional?

E. Yes. In where I am now, yes.

H. Where do you see yourself in the future?

E. Hopefully, I can retire and then live off, maybe, in the outskirts of Cancun.  
[Laughter]

H. Thank you very much.

End of Interview