

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Women in Labor Unions

Personal Experience

O H 1877

CATHERINE UNGER

Interviewed

by

Nick Tefakis, Jr

on

April 30, 1997

CATHERINE UNGER

Catherine L. Unger retired from Delphi Packard Electrical Systems, Warren, Ohio. Catherine was born May 10, 1947 in Warren, Ohio to John and Mary Lachowski. She attended the Warren public schools and graduated from Warren Harding High School in 1965. Catherine began working at Packard Electric in 1966 at the age of 18. On July 21, 1973 she was married to Raymond Unger of Niles, Ohio. She has been an active member of the International Union of Electrical Workers, Local 717, throughout her years of employment. To her knowledge, Catherine holds a unique position being the first person to retire from Packard Electric with a full pension and return as a full-time Quality Control Consultant through Rapid Design, for the Metals Stamping Process.

T This is an interview with Catherine Unger for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Women in Labor Unions, by Nick Tefakis, Jr , on April 30, 1997.

Where and when were you born?

U I was born in Warren, Ohio, on May 10, 1947

T You started working at Packard Electric at a young age?

U. As soon as I got out of school

T What were your first impressions of your job when you began?

U. I had never seen a factory I felt that it was a very clean factory It was hard work I can still remember how bad my hands and fingers ached. I remember coming home, at first, with sore fingers and sore hands, not using my hands in the way that they taught us to use them in the past So, it was like creating new muscles, finding out you had new muscles I was learning to use them in a different way But I enjoyed it It was interesting

T Being a woman, have you ever been discriminated against, even prior to when you began working? Are there any moments that stood out?

U. Oh, sure When we first started working at Packard, we, as women, were not allowed to be service people, we were not allowed to work the molds I was one of the first group of women to run the molds My husband, who I was dating at the time, would walk by and harass me, teasingly, but he would harass me It actually became more like an issue with the government, that they had to start putting women in equal jobs for equal pay, with the men Oh, yes, I am sure every woman at Packard, has probably been discriminated against

T You said, that you were one of the first women to work the molding machines?

U Yes

T Roughly what type of operation was that?

U Operation? It is the placing of rubber or plastic around or onto an object in order to secure it to another. Basically what it was, they would have terminals on leads, and when I say leads, it is a wire These terminals would not have any kind of a connection system with another terminal. They would go into a dye and then they would come down and actually put rubber around it, to form like a

grommet or a connector or some sort of a suction Basically that is what it did It molded in that form.

T How does management act towards women in the plant?

U It depends on the person, I would think I have seen a lot of them who specifically do not like women It does not matter who the women are, the knowledge they have, they will always talk down to them Some of the younger generation, and I am talking children that are younger than me -- and I consider anyone 30 or younger children -- that generation seems to have more respect for women in the work place But the people in my generation do not There was no respect at all for women, and you would be talked down to, whenever they talk to you

T Did this change over your time working, or is this just as prevalent today as when you first started?

U It is more prevalent today than it was before When I first started, there was no reason for a woman to have an idea No women were in positions of upper management We were stuck on specific jobs where our brains did not have to work We were physically busy Then when we became able to do the same jobs as the men at Packard, was when you started to notice that the management side would discriminate against the women Now whether it is because we were taking mens' jobs away from them, or we are making same rate of pay, I do not know I would say it is more prevalent today than it was years ago, because more women today are more knowledgeable and I feel that they have a lot to offer, but we are not always looked to for information They would just as soon look in the dictionary as to ask you how to spell a word

T Right, okay, I understand How did you come about getting involved in the union?

U Well, as you know, when we are hired we are asked if we want to join the union. You do have a choice But I do not think that anybody has ever turned it down. Then I became really involved with the union when my husband was appointed as a benefit rep, and then I really got involved with it then

T What would you consider to be, today, the major problems confronting the IUE in 1997?

U The IUE? I think they have got a problem with job security And they have a serious problem with out-sourcing Basically, I think that is probably their two biggest problems

T What threat is the out-sourcing to?

U What do you mean by to? To the people that work at the plant?

T Could you explain the term out-sourcing?

U. Out-sourcing is taking jobs from the Warren, Ohio division and taking them to Mexico, Brazil, Japan, any foreign country The taking of union jobs to countries or plants that are non-union

T Okay. As far as job security, could you explain that?

U Job security is having a 1 for 1 ratio One person retires or leaves and another should be hired Currently, we are at a 3 to 1 ratio

T What are the different demands placed on women and men in the union?

U Demands placed on us by the union?

T Yes You and your fellow union members Are there differences in what is expected of a woman as compared to a man?

U I do not really believe that the union on the whole, and I am speaking for the IUE, on a whole, demands anything more from the women than they do from the men In the local union, women run the kitchen, expect to Generally a woman is voted into positions such as Secretary Men have always, as with our government, been voted into the higher positions. Our nation and our unions do not feel secure with a woman at the top Until women stand their ground, we will never be elected to such positions

T How has being a woman affected your role in the workplace, as far as wages, different positions and being able to move up the ladder, as far as seniority and better pay?

U Until it became mandatory that women were to receive equal pay for equal work, we were affected in the work place Once that was passed, our union made it mandatory that if you have the seniority to hold a job, you could go to a better-paying job I have been very fortunate, on the other hand, that I have been able to choose the jobs that I really enjoy doing. My last six years were based as an NTBU, which is a non-traditional bargaining unit We still payed union dues, we still belonged to the union, but most of the work we do is in the management capacity I was very fortunate, I felt, to have the opportunity to take this avenue. It has given me a different insight, not a pretty insight, but a different insight But

I believe that my opportunities through Packard, through my 32 years of service, I was able to advance because the union had taken care of that position for us

T Would there be any more negative issues that you have found?

U I think the only negative issues are, we have a certain wording in the contract that states that if someone being excessed, they have preference over someone who has a request in. This person being excessed may only have four years seniority, I may have 32, she will get the job. That is a negative side of it. It is also a negative side that someone who has a physical disability or medical -- I am not referring to someone missing a limb, fingers or having diseases, I am referring to the chronic people who, because they do not like a job they are doing, go to medical daily complaining of something as a fan giving them headaches -- may get a job before I will because medical is putting them in that position. So, that is a disadvantage. Can the union take care of it? I do not know. That is something they have to look into.

T Currently, what do you feel are some of the more important issues that women face in the work place?

U I would have to say they have no credibility. Management gives them no credibility. Even union leaders do not give them credibility. We also have a lot of discrimination, for a lot of different reasons. I believe that those are probably the two worst.

T You are referring to management?

U Yes

T They try to play off various issues to try to make divisions within the union?

U I would consider management a very good lattle. They love to keep the pots stirred. They do not like to have the calm waters. They want to keep everybody at everyone's throat. They do not want the people to get along.

T Now we will go more into the union aspects. What problems do women face in the union that you feel men do not?

U Advancement, definitely advancement. I do not know if in my lifetime or maybe even in your lifetime we would ever be able to see a woman president of a local union. It will be a long time coming. It is very hard for them to get appointed into any position, and when they are appointed, it is usually because they have been a friend of someone or they have been related to someone. If a woman has

done something in the union, and I have known quite a few of them that have, they have really had to work hard. I think a lot of women in the labor force do not get involved with the union, for whatever reason. I do not know. But there is a lot of woman that do not get involved.

T. As far as the women involved in the union, is there any difference in age? Do you feel that younger members are less active or more active, or vice versa?

U. I think the younger employees of the union are more active, more so than my generation. My generation, it was, "Yeah, the union is there. It is secure, no threat of job loss," -- Packard at that time was growing -- "we will pay the union dues and we do not have to go to the meetings. We will let everything take care of itself." It has not been until recently, with all of the jobs going to Mexico, jobs going down to Mississippi, Indiana, Illinois, wherever they have been going, into a lot of scab shops where they are not unionized, that the women are starting to speak up and say, "Wait a minute, I am the lower seniority employee," because most of the men have more seniority than us, "I am the next one to lose my job. If I do not start fighting now, I am not going to have a job." So I think that is why we see the younger generation fighting harder.

T. Seniority -- that is just based on the number of years you have worked?

U: Right, it is from the time you are hired.

T. You mentioned that you felt it was harder for women to take more of the leadership roles. What are any of the positive in-roads that your union has made for women, if any at all, for more involvement?

U. I cannot say that I really believe that they have really done anything to encourage women to become involved with the union. Yes, we do have a Women's Committee and the Women's Committee does do a lot of good work. That is something that is new. But as far as women being involved with the union and actually doing some of the leadership roles of the union, I only know of one lady in the international that I worked with, and her name was Patty Tutoki. She is still with the international. The other person that I know is really involved with the union is Charlotte Ingalls, and she is now the Recorder. But as far as the union leaders making headway for women, I do not see that. Even though we give our blood, sweat, and tears, if we were men, we may have a chance to follow in footsteps. Women do not have that opportunity.

T. Could you describe exactly what the Women's Committee is and what their responsibilities are?

U I really cannot give you the details of that. I think the best person to talk to, would be a lady by the name of Marylou Devers or Charlotte Ingalls. They are both involved with that committee. I am not. I would not even want to speculate on what they do, what they take care of.

T How do you feel your union is addressing family issues, for men and women alike?

U Wow, that is a good one. I do not think they are addressing them at all. That is a terrible thing to say. I think there is more that they can do. I think that there has been a lot of suggestions to the union as to what we can do to make the women and men of our union more involved with our union by taking on a more family attitude. They have not bothered to do that. Currently, our president of our union right now, Nick Border, is a very good friend of my husband's. Yet his wife does not work at Packard. She does not get involved. She does not come to any of the functions even though she is more than welcome to come. So the family issue is not there. It just is not there.

T Have you been involved in any strikes, and if so, what type of involvement did you have?

U In my 32 years at Packard, we only struck once. That was for a period of 12 hours. At 12:00 we walked out the doors, and I was one of the ones walking out the doors. You walked down to the union hall -- I should not say walk, we rode down to the union hall -- and started working in the kitchens, thinking that, you know, we are going to need food out on the picket line. I feel that I have been very fortunate, not having to look at a strike. I do not think I would enjoy any part of a strike, and I pity anyone that has to go through one. But after twelve hours we went back to work, we had all this food and no one to feed. [Laughter] It was a relief, it really was, but that is the only strike that I have ever had to be involved in.

T When was this strike?

U Oh, Lord. Good question. I am going to say 1971 or 1972. Maybe even earlier than that.

T You mentioned you went down to the union hall and you went into the kitchens and started making food for the picketers.

U Right.

T Did the members look towards the woman as, specifically, it was their

responsibility to take care of things such as food preparation

U Absolutely, I mean, women did the cooking, and men did the fueling of the fires. But we are talking, what, 29, 28 years ago? Absolutely, definitely. The women did the cooking. And still to this day, if I am not mistaken, you will not see a picket fence with nothing but women. There will always be a man there.

T. What activities have you engaged in, and your fellow union members, to support other unions?

U. Well, we have done a lot collecting for different unions that are on strike. We do a lot of fund raising. We put baskets together, a lot of raffles. My whole entire time that I was at Packard we basically supported any union that was on strike. Especially if it was an IUE. Sometimes the work was just a collection at the gates, sometimes the work was putting something together and wrapping it up, and sometimes it was just simply money out of the fund, out of the union fund. Not always do we have to go out and do something special. But when it needed to be done, we were there, regardless of what had to be done. We went to any of the solidarity days. It was not because we had to go, it was because we wanted to go. We believed in trying to get everyone together.

T I saw in one of your union flyers a list of goods and services to boycott. Different products. Could you explain that?

U Basically what it is, is they are telling you that you are a union employee and you should not buy anything that is not union made. Or if a company is on strike, we just do not buy their product. Personally, the new K-mart, down by the mall, my husband and I have not been in it. We will not cross the picket line. Those are just things that you do as a union employee. And they just keep us updated. If, for example fruit is coming in that is coming from a non-union shop or came in for all the wrong reasons, they will tell you, "Please do not buy any green grapes." If you are a good union person, you do not do it.

T. What is the success rate of union members upholding these boycotts? Do you feel it is very common among the members?

U No. I believe that, probably -- and I am guessing -- 80 percent of the union members have probably been in the new K-mart. They probably go out and buy the green grapes, because they want them. But that is just part of -- and it is a terrible thing -- but it is a part of working at Packard Electric. We have always been able to do and buy and whatever we wanted to do, Packard has afforded us a luxury. And we do not know what our fathers know. We do not know what it was to sweat over the union or fight for something that we really wanted.

- T. What do you feel has been the most positive experience you have had within the union, being a woman, specifically?
- U. Unfortunately, you are asking me at a bitter time. I do not know that I have a positive, because of what has happened recently. I just feel that everything that has happened is negative. But I think that, on the whole, I believe that every woman has benefited by being a union-member, only because we do have the seniority. We do have the right to pregnancy leave, we do have the right to come back after we have had children and not lose any seniority and go in there and do a man's job and get the man's wage. Those are the positive things the union has done for us. And I would not give any of them back. Not for anyone. There is still a long way to go.
- T. Are you familiar with the specifics of the maternity leave and the seniority?
- U. See, this is really the sad part. I do not know about the PHP's [Progressive Hiring Program] and the CHP's [Competitive Hiring Program]. I do know that when I was hired in 1965, if you went on maternity leave, the time that you were off, did not count towards your retirement. Recently we fought a battle in court and won that. They had to give us that time back, because it was no different than a man being on reserve leave, or in the service. So they basically got that back. But as far as the new kids that are hired in as the CHP's and the PHP's, their benefit package grows with years of service. When they, or if they, ever get the package, I cannot say.
- T. What do those stand for?
- U. We call them Chip's and Pip's, that is all I know. [Laughter] But it is different wage hiring tiers that the union has allowed the company to bring in. Some of them have insurance, some of them do not. Some of them have retirement, some of them do not. And I am not really sure if they have any kind of a pregnancy clause or not.
- T. Do you feel there is solidarity between women in the union? Do they back each other up?
- U. Absolutely. Very much so, very much so. I think if a woman is running for an office, I think, probably, most of her votes are coming from the women. And I believe that the last general election that we had, we saw more women than any other time at Packard, be voted into the office. I think it was because the women are starting to rebel and say, "We are no longer going to take this." So I think, yes, they do stick together very tightly, very tightly.

T You are in a very unique situation with your current employment status. Could you explain it and say what some of the negative aspects might have been?

U Okay Basically, what I can tell you is that I retired January 1 On January 13, they called me back in as a consultant I could not go back in as a Packard employee because I was collecting a pension from General Motors So I went in through Rapid Design I entered Rapid Design, signed a contract with them, and I went back into Packard on January 13 And I went in doing the exact same job that I did when I was working there When I was working there, I was a union employee. At Rapid Design, I was no longer union I was part of management The amazing part was that I found that the union was not so much concerned that they were taking a union job and making it a non-union job, but instead, they found it terrible that it was Catherine Unger that retired from Packard and came back as a Rapid Design employee Although, my union is the one that gave me the right to 30 and out, to retire early, and they also gave me the right to make any amount of money I want after I retire, without jeopardy to my pension.

I was the talk of a board meeting. Nothing got settled Mind you, at this time, we still did not have a local contract We still do not have a local contract at Packard Yet they could spend their whole entire board meeting talking about Catherine Unger They felt that I was betraying them, which I was not They felt that I was a scab, which I am not I did not cross a picket line And I felt that the union, if they had the gripe, should have griped about taking away the union job and making it a non-union job But that aspect was never raised And now that I have left -- I am done as a consultant in that field, there is another employee doing the job, I have trained him, and he is non-union -- nothing has been said about it And I doubt if anything ever will be said about it

T Did he previously work at Packard and then take over your position as a consultant, or did he come from the outside?

U Okay, he was a previous member of Packard Electric The job that I held was not a consultant. I was brought in as a consultant The job I held was called a coordinator Yes, he was a Packard employee He was what they call an NBU, which is a Non-Bargaining Unit. The gentleman that has taken over the job was a union employee, left the union, and went into management, and he is the one doing the job

T. After you returned, was there any difference in the way your fellow employees looked at you, along gender lines?

U Oh I am sure. People that I have considered friends were not friends I think if a man would have walked back in the door -- even though I am a very strong woman and most people know that I am very strong, and when I speak to them,

they know that I mean business -- I think if it was a man, they would never question them. Because it was me, they tried to push me. I had my car keyed. I had a lot of things done to me. Because I was a woman, because they thought I would break, because they thought I would sit down somewhere in a corner and cry. It never happened. I just shook my head in disgust, but it never happened. Those things happen every day to women who try to go into any kind of a field at Packard, whether it be union or management, especially union. They will try to belittle you. They will try to make you feel bad. They will try to make you sit down and cry. They want you to be children, they want to take care of you, they want to be your father. I do not need it, and neither do a lot of women at Packard.

T How would you encourage more women to become active within the union?

U How? I would say that we would have to get them more involved inside the plant. Once you get them involved inside the plant, then you can get them working outside the plant. It is unfortunate, but most of the women, even though today, feel that they have to take care of a house, they have to take care of a husband and the children, and they cannot find time to spend with extra-curricular activities. Most of the women that are in the union are women who are very strong, have very strong husbands, self-supportive husbands, that will allow them to do that. Not every woman at Packard has that opportunity. So, therefore, I think we need to get them involved in the work force, in the work field, right there on the job. Get them involved, and then we can see them go further on.

T Where would you like to see the union in ten years?

U I would like to see the union strong. I do not believe the union is strong right now. I think we are building, but we are not there yet. I believe that it should be an equal mix, fifty-fifty, men and women, with women in power as well as men. I would like to see, like we were discussing, a more family-oriented union. I think that there is only a few occasions where we have the family's all involved. We need to teach our children what it is to be a union member and what your responsibilities as a union member are. I would like to see a union that is strong in representation of the people and if we continue to let the jobs go to Mexico without unionizing Mexico, we will not have the strength. There is a lot of room for growth and I think that there is a challenge out there and we have got to find somebody that is able to meet it.

T Is this a common belief among most union members, that you would like to see the workers in Mexico become unionized more than resenting the fact that jobs have been taken away?

U· I do not think there is any chance that we are ever going to get those jobs back from Mexico. I really do not. The people in Mexico right now are making, I think, \$ 52 an hour, although we pay the government \$3.52 an hour. I am not certain on these numbers. I do not know if we could go in there and unionize those people, but until we unionize and give them a fair wage, we cannot be competitive. Right now we are not competitive because of Mexico. Mexico is building everything cheaper. Yes, they are a big help to General Motors, there is no doubt about it, but I do not see us ever getting those jobs back from them. I really do not.

T You had mentioned that you feel that a lot of women have responsibilities at home with their family.

U Sure

T How do you feel that family life has affected women's participation in the union?

U I think that women in the union -- regardless of when it is, 1965 or 1995, it does not matter -- if there is any kind of a fundraiser for someone running for a higher office, it did not matter, the women were in the kitchen. The men were dealing the cards or playing the crap games or whatever. But the women were in there serving it. The jobs have not changed. They are staying the same. It is just whether or not we are going to have those women in there doing that because we no longer want to be in the kitchen. We want to be standing on the podium giving acceptance speeches. So, how is it going to change that, I cannot even foresee it. I cannot even begin to see where all of that is going to come from or how we are going to be able to change it because of the family life.

More of the women at Packard are financially secure to the point where they do not need a husband. If I am married to my husband for 24 years, it is not because I need him. I no longer need that man to support me. I am married to him because I care about him, because I love him, and because I want to share a life with him. If I choose to do the house work and to take care of him and ignore the union, that is my choice. But, at the same time, I do not have the right to stand up and say, "Women are not being recognized." Because I, being a woman, must stand there and do the work also. Therefore, more of the women at Packard, because they are single, tend to be more involved with the union. Hopefully, they will stay involved with the union. If they do not, we are lost. It takes a special kind of person, it really does.

P· We can conclude our interview. I would like to thank you on behalf of Youngstown State University and the Oral History Department for taking time to add to our archive.

U. Thank you, Nick

End of Interview