

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

OEA – Union History Project

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O.H. 2208

Christine L. Domhoff

Interviewed

by

Heidi L. Scott

on

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INTERVIEWEE: CHRISTINE L. DOMHOFF
INTERVIEWER: Heidi L. Scott
SUBJECT: Association of Classified Employees
DATE: January 31, 2005

S: This is an interview with Christine Domhoff for the Ohio Education Association Union History Project by Heidi Scott at Youngstown State University in Cushwa Hall in Media Services. It's taken on January 31, 2005 at 9:30 AM.

S: Good morning.

D: Good morning.

S: Before we start discussing the unions, I'd like to do just a little bit of background information. Could you tell me where and when you were born?

D: I was born in May of 1958 in Youngstown, Ohio.

S: Have you been a lifelong resident?

D: No. As a matter of fact, I lived in Youngstown until I was 12 years old and then we moved to a rural area and then I came back to Youngstown just about two years ago.

S: Could you please tell me, what was your childhood like?

D: I grew up in a working class home. My father worked for Republic Steel, which was the major steel production in Youngstown, which is what we were known for at that time

period. My mother was a housewife and didn't go into the work world until I was in fifth grade.

S: Could you please tell me a little bit about your family?

D: Again, I grew up in a working class home. My parents both were raised on farms in rural Pennsylvania and came to Youngstown for more permanent work. Farm work doesn't pay a lot. My parents raised five children. I'm the fourth child. I was the first one to go to college, so it was a real transition in my family.

S: Could you please describe your educational background?

D: My educational background, it seems like it never ends.

S: We have time.

D: Of course, I graduated from high school and decided that I wanted to get a degree. Being the first person in my family, of course everybody was really excited about that, and my parents really wanted to do everything they could to make sure that I was successful. I received my Associate Degree in Business first and decided that wasn't enough. I came back to YSU and got a Bachelor's Degree in Education and decided that wasn't enough. I went back and got my Master's Degree in Education and a few years back I decided that wasn't enough. I decided I wanted a whole new career and decided that my field of expertise was in social studies and in particular, political science. I decided I would do something completely different and got involved in computer networking and as a result of that, became CCNA, which is Cisco Certified Network Associate, and a new program of home technology integration and we received a grant to be a premier institute for that. I've made lots of transitions over my lifetime.

S: Very interesting. So it's safe to say you like school.

D: I like school. I think that's probably why I've stayed in this environment and worked here for a long time.

S: Speaking of working at YSU, prior to being a YSU employee, could you describe some work experience?

D: I first worked at New Castle Public Library. I've always had an interest in working in a library. That was just a wonderful experience. I worked in a couple different departments then. When I finished my Associate Degree in Business, I had an internship at Shenango Valley Osteopathic Hospital, and worked through my internship and they offered me a job actually before I finished my internship. I was hired full-time there in outpatient insurance, and moved into X-ray, and worked there for about three years. I decided that I needed a little more time off, so I quit my job there and came to work at YSU in a part-time capacity, in January, 1982. I've been here ever since.

S: Now I have a feeling you're going to have a long list, but what other positions have you held at YSU?

D: I do have a long list. I started out as a student assistant actually in the library, because I went back to that first love I had. I worked in Maag Library and worked in a couple of different departments in the library. Just as I was finishing up my Bachelor's Degree in Education, along came a temporary job in the library in the Serials Department. My supervisor at the time said, "You need to apply for it," and I said, "Well, I really want a teaching job." So I thought about it and as I still loved the library so I did apply for the job and I happened to be the one that was selected for that temporary job. Then, shortly after the temporary job that I'd been working about three months, another full-time, permanent job came up. Then they said, "Well, you really need to apply for that," and I did. At the time, the wages were very low, and I said, "I really need more money, and I need to get a teaching job." Who would have thought that teaching actually paid more than working at the university? From that point then, when the union came into play, then we did receive some salary increases. There was more of an incentive to stay here at the time. Ultimately, then I worked in serials in three different positions, moved over to microforms later, went up to circulation, and from there, I went to the graduate school as the assistant to the dean. From there, in my current position in the Cisco Academy in Computer Networking, so I've had quite a round of different places and diversity on campus.

S: Now, moving onto some of the union questions, the purpose of the interview. First, why do you consider unions to be important in higher education?

D: Well, one of the things that happens in higher education is that we have a lot of employees. You need to have some standards in place for higher education so that students can come to an institution, there are standards in place, they know what to expect, that there isn't a major transition going from department to department. I think that's important and I think that's one of the great things that unions bring is more standardization.

S: Now, currently you are president of ACE, or the Association of Classified Employees, correct?

D: Yes.

S: When did ACE organize?

D: ACE organized in October of 1984. That was the beginning of it. I believe they were finalized around the beginning of 1985. I'm not sure of the exact date. I only recall because I just started working. Maybe I had worked two weeks in that temporary position. A couple of members of the organizing team came around to talk to me and of course I wasn't really able to participate because I was still a temporary employee. It was my first experience even knowing anything about a union. My father was part of a union but he never really talked about it much in our home.

S: Do you know any of the events that preceded ACE organizing?

D: I have a sketchy background. I know that they were once OCSEA, which is a different union. They didn't feel that they were meeting the needs of the union in question at the time. The Ohio Public Collective Bargaining Law was passed in 1984 and that prompted them organizing under OEA.

S: So then the same group of employees had a different union?

D: Yes.

S: And then they switched?

D: Yes.

S: Okay.

D: They had a union. They went through a period of time where there was no union and then they formed the Association of Classified Employees.

S: Could you describe how ACE actually ended up organizing?

D: The material I know is Tom Shipka was the instrumental person. He was the main leader of the faculty at the time, and he suggested that ACE form under the faculty. Originally they had thought that it would be a union that they would have what they call an umbrella organization that they would negotiate together but they would have different issues, the classified employees and the faculty. In the end, the faculty really didn't want to have an umbrella organization and we formed ACE as a stand-alone organization of the Ohio Education Association.

S: Did you have any role in that original process?

D: I did not have a process in actually bringing ACE about, and getting certification. As a matter of fact they wouldn't even permit me to vote in the election because it was while I was finishing my temporary assignment.

S: Do you know why ACE joined the OEA? Was that the only option left?

D: No, actually we could have joined the Teamsters. We could have joined AFLCIO, or any of the organizations out there. But we are educational employees and we see our role in the world of education. People tend to think of the OEA as being a K-12 organization, but it's really not. What happens to higher education also ultimately happens to K-12, or what happens to K-12 education happens to higher education. We do work hand in hand.

S: So it only seems to make sense that you be part of OEA then?

D: Absolutely.

S: Are you familiar with ACE's first negotiations?

D: No, I know that it was rocky in the beginning because the university did not want to recognize the Association of Classified Employees. They tried in many attempts to disqualify the election and the results, but the State Employment Relations Board, what we call SERB, actually upheld the election, and they were pretty much forced to negotiate with the team. We were fortunate to have really excellent people in that first negotiations team from what I understand.

S: Now at that time, do you know, did people fear for losing their jobs since the university was obviously against the ACE?

D: I think there were some people that were concerned that that could possibly play a role, but I think the strong unionization of the valley helped them not to have that fear because we still had had steel mills that were functioning, albeit, not as strong. They really didn't go completely out until that point in time. There was a strong background in unionization and a familiarity.

S: So there could have possibly been a public backlash against the university if they had fired the employees who wanted to partake and become ACE members?

D: I think that's true. I really think that they feared the possibility of enrollment declines as a result of any action that they would take.

S: Currently, how often do negotiations occur?

D: Generally, about every three years. The last few contracts we have negotiated three-year contracts. A couple of times, it's been two years.

S: Typically, have they gone smoothly?

D: Typically, not smoothly. I think there's posturing in any negotiations. Both sides take certain levels of posturing. I would say probably the most difficult negotiated items have been healthcare and vacation. Those always seem to be the two hot topics in negotiations.

S: Have there been strikes, or have you partaken in strikes because of the healthcare issues or vacation issues?

D: We came very close twice. Actually, one time we were one hour away from a strike, and I really have to credit Tom Thompson, our previous president, for averting that strike. Fortunately, he was able to talk to one of the board of trustees members, and up to that point, she was not getting correct information and he said, "Ask me any question you wish," and she was trying to understand the position that we had taken. The major issue

at that point was intermittent employees. What an intermittent employee is, is somebody basically that works at will for the university. They're not entitled to benefits. They call them out whenever they want them to work, and they expect them to work as a full-time employee but not give them any benefits. They were encroaching into a very large group, particularly in the grounds department, maintenance, and also in some of the student service areas. We felt that they were abusing them. Some of the intermittents had worked hundreds of hours of overtime, so they were really full-time employees. We were finally able to negotiate some standards on that. If they worked certain hours, then they became permanent part-time employees, and beyond that, full-time employees. As a result, I believe we ended up with 13 new positions on campus.

S: Wow.

D: Yes. That was probably the most critical. The election, I believe we had about 95% of our membership come out to that vote to ratify the contract. I think only maybe four or five people voted against it. The other time that I would say the most recent negotiations were destined to breakdown, and fortunately the Vice-President for Administration, John Habat, came and resolved that. The attorney that they had hired was not working in the best interest of the university. When John Habat came in, we were able to talk. The university had also hired a consultant, Herman Maas, who had worked for General Motors. I think through those two gentlemen, with a federal mediator, we got together for two days and hashed out all of our issues and it worked very well.

S: Could you tell me the dates of those, when it was the one hour away?

D: No, I should know that, but I don't know the actual year. I want to say it was 1988 or 1991, because I don't remember which actual negotiations it was. It seems to me it was the 1991, but I could be off on that year.

S: Okay, but so, a little while ago.

D: This was a little while ago.

S: This wasn't a recent one. And then the other one, was that more recent?

D: The other one was in 2002.

S: So that was very recent.

D: That was very recent.

S: Okay. Moving on now to what you feel the current state of the unions, particularly ACE, is. Are you happy with the state that the union is in right now? Do you feel it's being successful in its endeavors?

D: I think management has made us successful, because of decisions that they have made and action that they have taken, mostly against employees, has helped us to solidify the union. So where I began to be president, I don't think that we had a cohesion of the union. Now, I believe we're very cohesive. We may not have every member come out to every chapter meeting, but they stand strong. When I ask them to take action, they generally do. I think people feel a little bit more committed to the union because when I became president, I instituted a lot of changes. I think it's been for the better.

S: Could you tell me about some of those changes?

D: Well, a couple of things that we did, I believe firmly in helping the institution that I work for. It didn't matter if I was working at the hospital or here, working at Youngstown State. I believe in contributing everything that you can: service, money if you have it and can do it. One of the things that I moved the union to do was to create an endowment with the YSU Foundation to fund student employee scholarships, so we work hand-in-hand with student employees. We select two student employees through a process where they apply for these scholarships every year, and award them scholarships out of our foundation.

S: That's wonderful.

D: That's one thing that I did. The other thing is we created a partnership with one of the K-12 locals in Youngstown City Schools, Cleveland Elementary. That's in the upper south side of Youngstown, which is not an area that is high-income. Children basically have nothing coming to school, so we have a school supplies donation so that every child receives paper and pencils and pens, and we give other things also to them. We try to get them tickets to basketball games, and other incentives that they can use to encourage parents to be more involved, encourage attendance of the students. We've worked with some of the other unions too in our area and region. As a result of that, I think we're very active at the local level, at the regional level, and at the state level, and helping move things forward.

S: Well, those definitely seem to be very positive changes. Very positive, that's wonderful. Do you personally feel there is actually a need for three separate unions on campus?

D: I would like to see us do more together. There are times when we work together. In negotiations, when we're looking at health care, we try to do that as a team effort. We have a health care advisory task force and my Vice-President actually serves as the chair of that. I believe that is one of the ways, when we negotiate, and as I did in the 2002 negotiations, I said, "We have to negotiate a health care plan that fits everybody." That means management, the faculty, the professional union, and the classified employees, and try to find what's going to work for everybody, and that means give and take. I think there are some things that we could work together on a little bit more, but I do think that there are major differences between the different groups, so I see some difference also.

S: Since the faculty union was the first to organize here, were they apprehensive about everyone having the same health care? Were they willing to work with you or was it, "No, we were here first, and we're fighting for ourselves"?

D: I do think that they want to work with us, but they do see themselves as a separate organization outside of ACE. So where we do work together are things like the Health Care Advisory Task Force. I think from throughout their history they've had different presidents that have seen the role of being more inclusive, and some that have seen it as less inclusive. In those periods of time, when things get tough, and it's been tough for faculty also, I think there's more of a camaraderie and so we tend to work together a little bit more. We also have an organization that works very loosely. It's called the BUMS group, Bargaining Unit Member Solidarity, and we try to get together the different unions on campus. Also, we include the Fraternal Order of Police when we can and work together on issues that are similar to us. Parking is something that's an issue for all of our unions. Health care is an issue for all of our unions.

S: Why is parking an issue? It seems logical that a YSU employee would be guaranteed a parking spot. Is that not the case?

D: No. We've never had sufficient parking on campus. I would say when I began working here 23 years ago, parking was a critical state. It was not unusual for us to have to come an hour early to work to be able to get a parking space. Since then, the Parking Department has made tremendous strides, and we have a lot more parking areas. But of course the parking areas are more remote then they once were, and people always want to park right next to their building. As a matter of fact, we had a negotiations team member for a number of years YSU-ACE that always wanted her own personal parking place. Well, we really can't do that because obviously people don't work every day of the week and other requirements. But, it's always been a hot topic.

S: Very interesting. Something that seems logical and common sense, maybe not. Could you please discuss the current state of your union?

D: I think my union is very cohesive at this point. I have a tremendous group on my executive committee. I have a fantastic vice-president, and a second vice-president. As a matter of fact, my second vice-president just received the Governor, Governor Taft's Humanitarian Award for Martin Luther King remembrance. That's only one award that's given out statewide, so we feel very honored that she received that award. My first vice-president is part of the Hispanic caucus. He is just phenomenal when it comes to knowing the law. He should have been an attorney, no doubt about that. My executive committee, if I asked them to take on a new project, and asked somebody to step up, it's usually they're fighting over who's going to do it. I have no problem getting people involved. When we have delegates that we're electing to the representative assembly, negotiations team members, no matter what it is, I always have a great deal of people that want to serve. That's what makes an organization successful, having people who don't necessarily have to get a lot of credit or money for doing something, but they say they

want to contribute, and believe in the organization. I do think that as we're celebrating our 20th anniversary this year, we are in tremendous shape.

S: Just curious, who are the people on the executive committee?

D: They're elected, so right now I have a various group. I think there are 15 people on the executive committee right now. They represent the facilities/maintenance, the grounds department, the library, and admissions. I have a couple actually from the library, two from payroll, accounts payable. So we just have a wide range, student housing.

S: So a diverse group?

D: Very diverse group. I think that we're very fortunate because we have a good mix of male/female, of every ethnic group, and I think we've learned a lot from each other as a result of that.

S: Wonderful. Just a few last questions for you. What do you consider to be the union's greatest achievement for YSU employees?

D: Wow. Greatest achievement. I would have to say, that most recently, we have really tried to bring our contract in compliance with more of the state law and something that existed in our contract for basically 20 years, but was never recognized by the university, a year ago, my vice-president, Ivan Maldonado and I were able to get our student service credit to count towards our state service, which is written in the law and it was written in our contract, but nobody ever recognized it on the campus. We had filed a grievance and I see it as a major achievement because we were actually able to settle this grievance without going to arbitration, and that has not been our history. So the university, we applaud them for that effort and recognizing that I felt people really became strengthened as a result of that.

S: Besides the description you just gave now, how else are the unions protecting YSU employees today?

D: Well, we have really been looking at the state code, state law, where it comes to civil service employees, and trying to get our contract more in line with that. Unfortunately, you would think with a contract that we would exceed the law and we would have so many benefits. In actuality, we are far below the state minimums for civil service employees. We're about 10% lower in salary. We don't receive vacation, sick leave, and personal leave credit, based on the state minimums. The university has unfortunately not seen the need to bring us up to state minimums, and they want to talk about how we're overpaid. In actuality, that is just not the case. We settled the last contract negotiations because we were interested in making sure that we were here and doing our jobs. We didn't want to go out on strike. Unfortunately, we're going to begin negotiations for the 2005-2008 contract, and I don't know that we're going to have the same focus, with tuition increases and state cuts and everything else. It's not looking very good for us.

S: How has it come about that you don't even meet the minimum requirements within the contracts? How did the union go below standard?

D: Well, that's all based on the negotiations team and teams. I think we had some lean years there in the state, and the administration was able to convince the negotiations teams at certain points that they should negotiate below the law, and unfortunately, what you give up, you never get back. It's an uphill battle for us to try to just get to the minimum. If I looked at a civil service employee, I happen to be an administrative assistant II. If I looked at an administrative assistant II working in the Youngstown area, not even looking at Columbus or Cleveland, but working in the Youngstown area, they would get at least 10% more, probably more like 15% more pay than I receive.

S: And I take it these standards were in place when you took on the presidency?

D: Yes, they were.

S: And you want to change those obviously?

D: I want to change those, yes. But I also understand that with tuition increases for students, I was a student for a long time, and I fully understand what it's like to put the squeeze on the student, and if it means tuition increases, then I can't be for that. There has to be sacrifice all the way around. Students are sacrificing by paying higher tuition. I need to sacrifice something also.

S: Overall, how would you rate the success of your union?

D: I think it's been very successful. I think we have managed to have standardization. I think the one thing that we probably lack on campus is a level of respect. I think that there are administrators and numbers of other unions that don't necessarily respect classified civil service employees. They have an image of what they think a classified civil servant should do, and ultimately, once they get to know us, they realize that we exceeded far beyond that. For me, I don't have a single role on campus. I also teach. I'm a part-time faculty member, so I think maybe I'm seen in a different light. I would like to see my other fellow bargaining unit members seen in the same level of respect that I receive from others on campus.

S: What do you wish had already been accomplished through ACE?

D: Well, I think I just shared that by saying that the state minimums, I really would like to see us at least achieve state minimum when it comes to civil service law. I would really like to see us get to a point when we didn't have so many grievances, and grievances that had to be taken to arbitration. We have to get to a point where we can settle issues amongst ourselves, between those civil service employees and management, and come to a resolution that's going to work for everybody and move forward too, to make this the best institution that we have in northeast Ohio, because I do believe it is.

S: Well, that's about it. Is there anything else you would like to add?

D: No, I'm just very thankful that I've had the opportunity to serve in so many roles, being grievance chair for so many years, being on the negotiations team, being the chief negotiator, and being the president. I feel that's a true honor and representing, as a result of that, northeast Ohio on the executive committee for northeast Ohio Education Association, and ultimately then this year, being appointed to the Ohio Education Association executive committee for higher education. Representing the entire state, I think has been an awesome responsibility, but also it has really helped me out a lot, and I truly appreciate the opportunity.

S: Well, thank you for your time.

D: Thank you.

S: This concludes the interview.