

CSEA HISTORY PROJECT

JOSEPH CONWAY INTERVIEW

4/13/05

INTERVIEWER: Can we start just --
tell us your full name and spell -- spell the
name for us --

MR. CONWAY: I sure will. My --

INTERVIEWER: -- and then tell us --

MR. CONWAY: Okay.

INTERVIEWER: -- what your work
history was --

MR. CONWAY: Okay. I sure will.

INTERVIEWER: -- with CSEA.

MR. CONWAY: I sure will. My name is
Joseph Conway, C-o-n-w-a-y. I served as both a
union representative for the Workers' Comp
Board, I was there about 18 years. I was a
clerk there --

INTERVIEWER: M-m h-m-m.

MR. CONWAY: -- served as a union
representative, delegate to the conventions, and
then I ran for president and won, served as a
one-term president. Then I went to work full
time for -- in those days they had an agreement
with the State for what they called an employee
monitoring specialist which meant at that --
under that contract each employee was evaluated

and if you didn't get a good evaluation that meant you didn't get your increment or raise, period, but you could appeal, and I served on -- I represented the employee. The State had their people. I read the union -- I represented the union at their -- at their level.

That was interesting, believe me. I toured the whole state from every -- every big prison to you name it, and I found out which department was good to people, which one wasn't.

Then one time Feathers invited me to -- to lunch, which I felt -- I knew him from various, you know, meetings at -- gee. In fact, I went to college with one of the employees.

So, anyway, I went down. He said -- you know, he said, now, I'd like you to head the -- our political action program. I said I don't know dog about politics. You may want somebody -- he said if it's not you, you tell me who to get. You're articulate, every...you know everybody. He said I want you, so that's how I became political action chair.

Before that Ted Wenzel appointed me as

a full-time legal chairman. For eight years I served as legal chairman, but that was a, you know, you worked for your regular job and that was an extra duty. So this political action chairman meant you're full-time CSEA. They even had a buy-back arrangement.

What they'd -- the Union would do, every year at the end of the year, they would pay for my wages, pay for my hospitalization, pension, and that was -- that happened for years and years. That's what I did.

Then as political action chairman we -- we notified employees, we thought it was pretty important to know if you're inhaling a toxic substance. Before that they just -- let's say you're a printer. They wouldn't tell ya that what you're inhaling was dangerous, might be -- eventually get to your skin, cause a problem. We changed the OSHA law; you now have to write on the label, they have to notify employees. If they're inhaling anything dangerous, they have to be told. That's one thing we got.

We also modified the Taylor Law in

different ways. One thing we did is you no longer had to -- let me see. Oh. I think the most important thing, as far as I'm concerned, did you -- you probably heard of the (inaudible) extension?

INTERVIEWER: Absolutely.

MR. CONWAY: Before that, what they would do is at the end of the contract every -- all your benefits would stop. Now they go on till the new one is signed and voted on, which is great because what -- what the advantage to the State would be, you'd lose your medical, you'd lose your pension, you'd lose everything until the new contract. If none isn't signed, lots a luck. Now, at least, it continues.

And the teachers got it, too, which is, I thought, pretty damn good, myself.

INTERVIEWER: So go back for a minute. We were --

MR. CONWAY: Sure.

INTERVIEWER: You were telling me earlier that you actually worked under five different --

MR. CONWAY: Oh, yeah. Five

different --

INTERVIEWER: -- CSEA --

MR. CONWAY: Oh, yeah. Joe Feeley, Ten Wenzel and Bill McGowan, Joe McDermott and, of course, I retired under Danny -- President Danny Donohue. Now, they were all good and they really accomplished a hell of a lot, but we became from the Association to a real Union.

The first time we endorsed Cuomo as the first Governor we ever officially endorsed, we worked like hell to get him elected and he said he wouldn't have been elected unless CSEA -- unless CSEA helped, which we did.

INTERVIEWER: We'll come back to that campaign. Tell me first about Joe Feeley. We haven't heard a lot about him.

MR. CONWAY: Well, you know, it's funny, but he was very quiet, rather quiet. The Union, it wasn't really a union. It was more of an Association. In fact, without the Taylor Law, really all they had to do was listen. They didn't really have to do anything. But he was a nice guy, really nice. He was a genial Irishman, very nice. I don't think he ever

alienated -- everyone who knew him liked him. But he was -- as I said, there was more of an Association then, you know?

They -- in fact, the Union didn't have that many members then either. Now they have all -- now, of course, they have AG shops, so instead of just paying dues they may (inaudible) which they do.

As I used to tell people, we used to have these tables set up in different prisons or mental hygiene places or public places. I'd say, well, if you look at that draw card and figure out what the CSEA negotiates, you'd know they make many times over what you pay in dues. You can't beat it. It's the best deal you're ever gonna have in your life.

INTERVIEWER: So from Feeley then you went to --

MR. CONWAY: Ted Wenzel.

INTERVIEWER: Obviously a (inaudible) type of individual.

MR. CONWAY: Oh, yeah. He had me right up his goddamn -- I'll never forget this. Up for his election against Bill McGowan, he

said would you please go up there and represent me? I said -- you know what he wanted me to do, make sure that he had an honest count, which I did. He lost by very few votes. But ever since then, they counted 'em and counted 'em and -- he sued and lost.

Then, of course, I figured I'm -- my goose is cooked. Back to the Comp Board. All of a sudden I get a call: This is Bill McGowan. We'd like you to be full-time CSEA. I said, I'm sorry, Bill, but it's too political for me. Then he said, well, I'll have something else. Maybe a -- some type of committee assignment, so then okay.

The next thing I know Feathers invited me to lunch. That's when he asked me if I'd head the political action program. So at that time they had -- you wouldn't believe this. Beautiful office in the Twin Towers building, right on top. Oh, you gotta -- it even had a sauna. I couldn't believe. It was Rosenbloom, the owner of Twin Towers? He had that all set up. We rented that for about a year, maybe two at the most. Then we moved it in State Street.

We were there for about two years at least.

Then back -- they finally made room at headquarters, in the third floor of headquarters, which I -- second floor, I think, which we liked, which we really enjoyed.

But as political action chair, we -- as I said, we might have had the Taylor Law, we kept the canal open. They tried to close it many times. We lobbied to have that open. We also -- also we kept a lot of buildings. Mental Hygiene, they wanted to close, make apartments out of it. Mental Hygiene, we kept that for years and years. And they --

INTERVIEWER: You still remember when you were political action chair, you were also involved in helping in -- in helping to stop the IRS from taxing --

MR. CONWAY: Oh, yeah, they tried --

INTERVIEWER: -- and that was a very --

MR. CONWAY: Oh, boy, I guess so.

INTERVIEWER: -- famous campaign --

MR. CONWAY: And we were nervous, too. We -- although some of 'em we were successful,

some we were not. For instance, we -- the more I see the papers, the more I think -- I know damn well we were right. We tried like hell to get a national health insurance goin' and unfortunately we weren't able to do that, but yet you should see where -- where's the health insurance gone? Up and up and up. Medical care is unreal. People are -- it's unreal how they have to suffer now. Now I know damn well we were right.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember with that -- that IRS when you stopped them, do you remember going down to Washington --

MR. CONWAY: Oh, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: -- meeting with Senator Moynihan?

MR. CONWAY: Oh, yeah. He was brilliant, but I had one thing. I found out he was a real canal fan so we had a local president of the canal get a lantern that was in the canal. You know how they had those buoys with -- and we gave it to him and he loved it. He had it in his farm for years.

But, boy --

INTERVIEWER: Do you need a break
or --

MR. CONWAY: No, that's okay.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me a little bit
about your role as chair of the political
action --

MR. CONWAY: Well, you know --

INTERVIEWER: -- aside from the
legislation itself, what did you do to try --

MR. CONWAY: Well --

INTERVIEWER: -- and get the members
more aware and --

MR. CONWAY: Well, let me tell ya.
Luckily I worked hand in hand with Cheryl
Shell -- not Cheryl Shell any more, Rosenzweig.

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

MR. CONWAY: We were -- toured the
state. I would tell members what legislation
was on the -- on the docket, which ones we could
pass, how we needed their help, and they joined
the people which helped us, federal elections,
and got 'em involved, you know?

Find out you not only talk but you
also listen, which was very important, I

thought. Also gave a report at conventions and we had something like maybe 13 people on the committee from all over the state, which was good. Told me what the hell the issues were, you know, in different parts of the state, which was good too.

And we started to hold our meetings in different locations. One in Buffalo, one in Syracuse, one in Long Island, one in New York and so forth.

Oh, by the way, George (inaudible) called me the other day. I hadn't heard from him since I retired. I hadn't heard from him.

We also got OSHA laws modified, as I mentioned before. We fought to keep the Barge Canal, which I mentioned. We fought many large Mental Hygiene places to keep open, so it seemed like the minute you elect a governor, what do they want to do? How do they want to save money? By privatizing which, naturally, we're against. We don't want to lose one member if we can help it. There's nothing more important as our membership, period.

We also got involved in federal and

state elections. We -- we elected a Governor. We worked, as I mentioned before, hard to elect Governor Cuomo twice, then three times. I remember Lou McDermott had all kinds of money, but very close election.

Then -- I forget the guy's name, Pierre somebody -- ran against us. He was a real loser. He hasn't run since for nothing. Then we endorsed -- I'll never forget it. We had Jimmy Carter come to our convention, first time a President ever came. I'll never forget it. He -- he addressed us and we met Jodie Powell, his -- one of the people with him. George Stephanopolus, and then, I'll never forget, he flew back on Air Force One, it was at the Buffalo Airport, so Gerald McEntee, the national president, flew back with him. What a thrill.

I remember going to the airport and he was on the plane with Gerald McEntee. I see this door open and all these people coming in, sitting in this car. (Inaudible). People just wanted to sit where he sat. I couldn't believe it. I said, boy, what the hell next.

Then, as I said, we --

INTERVIEWER: What -- what do you remember about Carter's speech? I mean do you remember --

MR. CONWAY: No, I really don't remember.

INTERVIEWER: -- delegates --

MR. CONWAY: I remember one thing I'll never forget as long as I live. It was, I think -- I think it was his birthday when he spoke and Bill McGowan as president, naturally, was introducing him, so he got nervous and mentioned "Happy Birthday." He mentioned the wrong President. I'll never forget. He really goofed. The one time he really goofed. I forget which President he mentioned but it wasn't Carter.

INTERVIEWER: What do you remember about the Cuomo -- the first campaign when we -- when we helped to get Cuomo to win the primary?

MR. CONWAY: Oh, I'll tell ya --

INTERVIEWER: (Inaudible.)

MR. CONWAY: Oh, yeah. We worked our tail off. We got a plane, we chartered a plane,

went all over the state. Boy, I'll never forget. One time I was in Buffalo and this convertible with a big bull horn, Jobs and Justice. Jobs and Justice. Vote for Cuomo. All through the university there. We -- and also we staffed different offices with CSEA help. Unreal. We really worked our tail off for him.

INTERVIEWER: And then after he was elected --

MR. CONWAY: He --

INTERVIEWER: -- the first thing he did --

MR. CONWAY: He is the first one --

INTERVIEWER: -- was lay off the employees.

MR. CONWAY: Yeah. But he did come back to our building, shook hands and thanked us. Then laid off the people, then tried to privatize. It's un...after a while, you don't respect many politicians. They want your vote. As soon as they're in, they want to save money. You're gone. That's the way they are. You know, it burns me up, but it's so true.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

MR. CONWAY: But I'll tell you one thing. We have a real good organization. It's like a -- CSEA is like a family. You know, the foundation, it grows and grows and grows. It's great. I love it. And they're not like other unions. They're not crooked, they're not stealing. You know, they're just -- really, really are good, I think.

Naturally, over half my life in (inaudible). I have to say I do like them.

INTERVIEWER: Obviously, you saw -- you saw the change in CSEA over the time that you were --

MR. CONWAY: From the time -- from the time, as I said, I saw the change from an Association to a real Union, which I can't speak more of. They were great, absolutely great. They -- they started to represent the employees. As I say, they improved their medical, they improved -- you tell me. My wife belonged to the (inaudible). Do you think they have dental and drug cards? Still don't have it. We had it years ago. They never had it. McGowan got that

enacted. That's just one benefit. But, no, a whole bunch of 'em.

INTERVIEWER: What do you remember about the contract fights, about the --

MR. CONWAY: Well, what I remember, one -- one time, I'll never forget, the whole Department of Mental Hygiene, the contract ended on Friday. They walked off Saturday. The State settled on Sunday. That I'll never forget. Here we won our -- couldn't believe that, but it happened. The one time only that -- I even -- at that time I was a local president. I even rented a desk and an office. I thought for sure there was gonna be picket lines galore. We never used it. One day, came and got it, that was it. Even had a phone line.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about Hugh Carey and his relationship with CSEA.

MR. CONWAY: Well, you know, he could be -- he could be nice but he's what I call the Dark Irishman. He could be like he never even knew ya, could look right past ya, but if he liked ya, you knew it. He would do anything for you then. Very loyal but, as I said, he also

tried to privatize, which burned me up. But he was okay.

He came up to me, I'll never forget -- I forget what Senator in Washington I was lobbying, but he was there waitin' in line too. He came up and he said, "Oh, I'm very sorry to hear about Bill's death." He was very sincere. He was in his eighties then, I think, either seventies or eighties.

And then one time, I'll never forget, in one of his inaugurations they had it at the Empire State Plaza? He come up and he shook my hand. My daughter was with me and, I'll tell ya, she -- she stood about ten feet -- she said, Dad, I can't believe (inaudible). Actually, well, that's him. He was very nice.

INTERVIEWER: Now he and McGowan got along.

MR. CONWAY: Oh, he liked Bill. Yeah, he really did.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

MR. CONWAY: He sure did.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember much about the relationship between Cuomo and

McGowan?

MR. CONWAY: Oh, that -- that was pretty good too. He, as I said, the only thing was Cuomo definitely tried to privatize and McGowan, of course, couldn't go along with that, so there was a little bad feeling. Plus, the contract, you know, you're on one side, he's on the other, but nobody -- as I tried to tell people, nobody is 100 percent for ya.

You have to take a look at the whole record and if their record, some -- most of it is for you, then you vote for him. If they're all against you, then vote against him. That's all, but he was pretty good.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think CSEA was able to succeed for close to a hundred years now?

MR. CONWAY: I'll tell you why, what I think. One, they have real good employees. They really have a feeling for their members. That's number one.

Number two, they keep up with technology. I don't care whether it's a -- a photo machine or a computer, they get -- they go

out and get it.

And three, they're not cheap. If you work for CSEA it's top dog or none, period. And -- plus, they have a real good research department. They know what they're talkin' about. They're certainly the State's equal if not above it. That's what I think, and they continually grow, which I think is important. I really do.

INTERVIEWER: I mean you talked about a whole bunch of different things that were accomplished while you were --

MR. CONWAY: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: -- with -- doing the political action work.

MR. CONWAY: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: What are you most proud of, of your career in CSEA?

MR. CONWAY: Well, I'm really -- I'm really proud of the (inaudible) shop, one thing. I'm proud of that. I'm also proud of the fact that your probation was extended during my term. It used to be -- they used to look at -- if they didn't like ya, you were gone. They'd put in

there -- for instance, if your wife got pregnant, all they could do is fire her. Now they have to at least they give her time off, a year or two to come back. They can't fire 'em any more. That's one good thing.

As I said, their drug plan is unreal. Eye glasses. I can't believe -- you tell me what other union gives you that.

INTERVIEWER: True.

MR. CONWAY: Yeah?

INTERVIEWER: Joe, CSEA certainly has had its share of memorable characters. Can you remember some of the characters?

MR. CONWAY: Well, they had Pat Bisholey (phonetic), which was a nice guy. They had -- beside Bill they had Irene Carr. They had Joe McDermott. They had Jack Gallagher as treasurer. They had, who else, all kinds of real weird -- they had George Bonkire (phonetic) who's still a president. I'm probably not pronouncing his name right, but he's a nice guy in New York City. They had out on the Island, of course, Danny Donohue came from Long Island. He used to be --

INTERVIEWER: What do you remember about Danny particularly in --

MR. CONWAY: He used to be a region president on Long Island. I remember him quite well. Yeah. He came up from the -- he used to be, believe it or not, a truck driver in Mental Hygiene. That's how he started out. He really -- he's another one came up from the bottom to the top. He's a real, real good person, plus he's very knowledgeable and very union oriented, of course, with his position. Yeah, he is definitely. He's very honest and very fair too.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Can I just stop here?

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

INTERVIEWER: I mean there's a lot of noise.

INTERVIEWER: So tell me about Irene Carr.

MR. CONWAY: Well, you know, she used to be Ted Wenzel's secretary, but she stayed on for years and years. She was, you know, she was very interested in women's affairs, very able, competent. It's a shame. Of course, she passed

away, I think either last year or the year before, yeah, but she was a nice person.

INTERVIEWER: M-m h-m-m.

MR. CONWAY: I knew her well.

INTERVIEWER: And you mentioned Jack Gallagher. I think people have talked about him.

MR. CONWAY: Oh, gee.

INTERVIEWER: I think he was a treasurer, wasn't he?

MR. CONWAY: He was for years. He was our treasurer. He was another nice -- he also -- in World War II what he was, he was a head of a bomb disposal squad. Can you imagine the nerve he had to disassemble bombs? That's what his job was.

But he was a very good treasurer and he presided over for years and years. As I said, we -- you know, the dues, they don't go down. They always go up, like everything else; cost of living, phone, building, taxes and so forth. But he's a very nice competent person.

INTERVIEWER: How about Tom McDonough?

MR. CONWAY: Oh, Tommy. You know,

he -- it's funny, but he passed away -- in the middle of a snowstorm he went out to brush off the car and dropped dead. But he was very, very -- he was the first political action chairman. He was very nice. Knew him, as I said, I knew him well, but he always wanted to be president but, you know, it just never happened. But he was very, very capable. He came from Motor Vehicle, as his career. Worked there. I forget what grade he was but, anyway, that's where he came from, but he was very competent, very nice. Knew him well.

INTERVIEWER: Irving Flamingbaum?

MR. CONWAY: Oh, Irv was from Long Island. He was a -- he was a union character. Very, very knew what he wanted, knew how to get it, very vocal, but he was pretty decent too. He's very -- as I said, very alive. Put it that way. Very vo...as I said, very vocal and he knew what he wanted, knew how to get it, and he got it most of the time.

INTERVIEWER: Bob Lattimer.

MR. CONWAY: Well, he ran -- he was very popular in -- in his own region, but he

tried for president a couple of times. Never won, but he was -- he was never satisfied with the status quo. Always wanted something else. Never happy. Our contract, never any good. He -- he was -- he dealt more in negatives than positives, which is one of the few presidents that was that way. That's what I thought of him.

INTERVIEWER: M-m h-m-m. And Joe McDermott?

MR. CONWAY: Oh, he was o...he was from the Albany area, another one from Motor Vehicle, but he was -- I'm sorry, DOT. He was -- he was very capable. He was also involved with the international union. I think he was a vice president, but he was a decent guy. Very capable. Very honest. And it's just a shame he retired, but he earned it. No doubt about it.

INTERVIEWER: M-m h-m-m. What are some of the best things that happened to you with CSEA if you remember?

MR. CONWAY: Well, let me think. Well, the best thing is I think, really, when we got involved with AFSCME. We became national

rather than just state. We got involved in presidential elections, governors' elections, state -- state and federal Senate and Assembly and Congress which we never were before.

We also got a little influence on labor -- federal laws, labor laws. The feds -- first the State said we weren't -- we didn't come under federal OSHA laws. We fought in the courts and the courts decided we did, so they had to now abide by federal and State law, which was good. Only fair.

Before that the State were like second-class employees. They're not now.

INTERVIEWER: No question.

MR. CONWAY: You said it.

INTERVIEWER: I think that will actually do us pretty well.

MR. CONWAY: Okay. Good.

INTERVIEWER: Yep.

MR. CONWAY: Very good.

INTERVIEWER: That was great, Joe. Wonderful. We really appreciate your time.

MR. CONWAY: That's quite all right. I'm glad you stopped by.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

MR. CONWAY: I'm just sorry for the --
you know.

(Conclusion of interview of Joe
Conway.)

