

Interview with Michael Murphy

M.M.: My name is Michael J. Murphy. I was president of the CSEA around 1951 and those years for three years.

F.V.: Now, how did you get started with the union?

M.M.: I came to the state service in 1935 from New York. Having arrived in this country in 1929 I was six years in the city and someone told me about Central Islip the state hospital that I could become a nurse out there if I was qualified. So, I went out there and I heard of... in the course of time, I heard of this union and I went down. There was a man by the name of Jimmy Kiernan who was president of the local chapter and from that first meeting, I got the impression that it wasn't a genuine union ... that it sounded like a company union. So, I followed through and the course of things began to change. After a while there was more opposition to his thinking. Then we started in and were getting the things we wanted for the employees. Am I going too fast?

F.V.: No, you're fine. Tell me more about Jimmy Kiernan. What was he ... he took the company side more than...

M.M.: Well, he wasn't on the union's side. He was on the company union's side, if you get what I mean. In other words, the director of the hospital wouldn't want any opposition to his running of the hospital. And as an employee of the union you could point out what was wrong. They-didn't want that.

F.V.: So how did you change-things? What did you do?

M.M.: Well, in course of time they got the idea that we meant business and that we wanted to change things and they went along with it as time went on.

F.V.: Back then, the labor movement seems to have been stronger from what I have been reading. Was there more interest in organizing then?

M.M.: Yes, there was an interest in organizing because the employees weren't getting a fair share of the credit for what they were doing.

F.V.: So how would you ... what would you do? What's the actual ...

M.M.: Well, you made protestation. Then we had a personnel director named --- Ron. He was very good. And we met with him. It started that way. We took our grievances to the personnel director, Neil Ward, and he was good.

F.V.: Now, what would he do when you brought him your grievances?

M.M.: He would investigate and find out what was wrong and have it corrected.

F.V.: Now, was there any activity on the part of the State of New York in helping the union or were they on the company side or...

M.M.: No, there was no... the State of New York didn't interfere.

F.V.: So, you started as... what was your title with the union? Were you a shop foreman, were you...

M.M.: No, I was just a member.

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F.V.: Started as a member. And you were a nurse at the...

M.M.: No, I wasn't. My job afterwards was budget director of the... for 10,000 patients. There was 5,000 women and 5,000 men, roughly and I had to budget for their clothing. Everything they wore from inside out.

F.V.: What year was that?

M.M.: That was 1953, until I retired. The other years before that I worked in a lesser job in the warehouse. I worked in the office, the main office and the warehouse.

F.V.: How many people were employed?

M.M.: In the warehouse, we must have ... must be ten or fifteen, I guess.

F.V.: Were they all active in the union or just you?

M.M.: Oh, they were ... some were in the union and some were against us. We had another organization... I forget the name of it now ... the ... it was bucking us but we came through-is the respected union, eventually.

F.V.: How did that happen that you were the respected union? What made the difference?

M.M.: Well, the others were too radical. They were like those ... what do you call them? It's some big long letters ... I would have to be reminded of that part-I can't recall it.

F.V.: What else do you remember about the early days there. About the union, I mean.

M.M.: Well, it wasn't impressive. Later on, as time went on from 1935 when I got there, as time went on it developed. The union got stronger. The CSEA got stronger.

F.V.: Now, CSEA actually got started in Albany, right?

M.M.: Yes, it was founded in Albany.

F.V.: How, did it get down here?

M.M.: Well, they sent representatives around. Had a field man and he went to the different places where the union would be and try to get the union into different places in the state and it also in the county. The state and county. That was the field man's job. Do you remember the field man who came down,

M.M.: I remember the field man. Danny Donohue was a field man in his day.

F.V.: Well, how did he start?

M.M.: I don't know. He started, I think, in a minor position in Albany and as he showed his challenge he was promoted.

F.V.: But didn't he work down here? Didn't he work for you?

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M.M.: No, he worked in the hospital, in the garage as a driver.

F.V.: What were the driver's duties? I mean, I know driving, but what and who would they drive?

M.M.: Well he was ... they had several trucks and cars in the garage and had a lot of employees there for doing different jobs. Getting food around. Getting clothing around. Getting things moving around. A lot of trucks.

F.V.: So do you remember Danny back then?

M.M.: 1967.

F.V.: And he was a driver then?

M.M.: Yeah, he was in the garage then. He came a long way.

F.V.: What do you remember, when it was starting, when the field man would come down from Albany? Do you remember the name of the field man or...

M.M.: Well, I remember one very distinctly. Jack... He was the last one, I think. We had other ones before that. We had a lawyer there as a field man. Came from Brooklyn but I don't remember his name. I forget it.

F.V.: That's all right. Names aren't important. It's what they did. It's the kind of things that went on that I want to know about what they did, what they said, how they organized.

M.M.: Well, it's too much for me.

F.V.: Too much?

M.M.: I couldn't go into all that detail.

F.V.: Well, any detail you can go into, we're here. Any details you've got, I'm ready to listen to...

M.M.: No, I don't remember...

F.V.: Okay, that's all right. We'll talk about what you do remember because that's why we're here. So, what was the day- to-day work like there at the center?

M.M.: Well, my work was very pleasurable. I had an assistant who was very good and could do all the things I did, in a lower grade, in my regular work.

F.V.: Did the company have any problem with organizing? With CSEA organizing people?

M.M.: Not really. We never had a strike or ... we worked closely with Albany. They got the information from us that they needed. Inquiring the different chapters around the island or wherever and kind of synchronized the information. What do you think were the most important things that happened in CSEA while you were a part of it.

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M.M.: It's hard to say.

F.V.: Well, do you remember any stories? Any people? Any funny things that happened?

M.M.: Well, take for instance, there would be people working in the ward - service with patients and there was a case of, a lady who had a lot of operations and she was put cleaning windows in the course of her job, which wasn't her job really and we took care of that, that she didn't have to do that. Things like that we corrected and went to the proper authority, the personnel director. Brought anything that was irregular to the attention of the people responsible.

F.V.: Good. Let's think. What...

M.M.: I was also a delegate there for 38 years to Albany.

F.V.: Oh good. Tell us about that. The people you met, the things you did.

M.M.: Well, the most we did was listened. We're good listeners.

F.V.: What did you listen to?

M.M.: We, the ... what the headquarters was telling us while we were up there what they were doing. What they were doing as far as the bills they were projecting. We, of course, had submitted our- views on bills that should be submitted and, of course, as I said one time, some of them never saw the light of day.

F.V.: Who were the leaders of the centralized union in those days?

M.M.: Well there was Bill McDonough and John Powers and they're the two outstanding ones that I remember.

F.V.: Remember any stories about them?

M.M.: Not really.

F.V.: You know, you can tell secrets because this is all for CSEA. It's not going out on the air. O's not going to know any of this. So, if there're any little stories that reveal what these people were like, I would like to hear them.

M.M.: The people were all right. The directors were all right. They could communicate or call them any time. Of course, the CSEA was not their job, so to speak. It was an offset. They had regular jobs through the state and Albany. They weren't making their living on the union.

F.V.: Other people have told me that up in Albany, not only did they work hard for their people but they played hard too. There must have been some good times. Some parties, some...

M.M.: Oh yes. We had dinners always up there, when we were up there.

F.V.: Remember anything about those?

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M.M.: Well, there is nothing exceptional. They were routine dinners and a lot of speech-making. It was a little political, of course.

F.V.: Well, there was some in-fighting in those days, wasn't there..

M.M.: Were you partied to any of that.

F.V.: I don't know.

M.M.: No? You're not talking. You're not giving me the secrets. Well, what ... tell me what you think about your days with CSEA. About the organization and how you felt about it and how you worked for it.

F.V.: I enjoyed it. I attended all meetings and was very involved. In fact, one of the things that I did for employees in my time there ... I brought- in the...what was that insurance company? The Blue Cross. I had the Blue Cross introduced to cover the employees. They joined up and I collected the money from them and sent it into New York where the agency was and then I was president of the credit union and we finally turned the collection of the dues to the credit union. And the girls in the credit union collected the money and I sent it in. And then there was something else I did there...

F.V.: We'll that was ... Blue Cross was...

M.M.: Blue Cross & Blue Shield.

F.V.: What were the health benefits like before that?

M.M.: They didn't have any coverage.

F.V.: That's a big step.

M.M.: So, those were the things. And then with the credit union, of course, they were able to borrow it ... with the federal credit unions, they were able to borrow money and pay it back month by month in small amounts.

F.V.: So, basically, improving life for people ... for the union members. That's big. Now, when did you start the Blue Cross. Do you remember what time of year?

M.M.: Oh, it was around the (inaudible)I guess.

F.V.: That's good. That's very good. What other things are you proud of in your CSEA career because those are important things. How often did you go to Albany?

M.M.: Maybe two or three times a year. And later, with the retirees after, the retirees, came on I was also a delegate in the retirees. I went up there and it was not easy to introduce the retirees. The people weren't really enthused that much about it so you had to get a few together and develop from there. You could hardly get enough officers to take the job. Unless you gave it to someone that knew nothing. Just perfunctory.

F.V.: Sounds like you never did nothing. You sound like a very, very involved...

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M.M.: I was quite involved, yes. I was out a lot while ... I had four children.

F.V.: So, your philosophy of unionism...

M.M.: Reach out and help people.

F.V.: Well, it seems that maybe ... we have been interviewing people about CSEA and the history and how they got where they are and it seems to me that that's the reason for the success.

M.M.: Yeah.

F.V.: Sums it up very nicely. What do you think ... do you think it's going to continue in the future and how...

M.M.: As I see it now, it seems that way... that it will continue. That it is a stable union.

F.V.: How big was the union in the 50's'? How many people?

M.M.: You mean the entire...

F.V.: Represented. Yeah, how many union- members?

M.M.: Oh, it's hard to say. I couldn't give you a figure on that...

F.V.: 100,000 maybe?

M.M.: I wouldn't speculate.

F.V.: Well, now it's a quarter of a million. Did you ever think it would be that big?

M.M.: No, not that much in those years. It grew and grew gradually like every such thing.

F.V.: Well, you either grow or you shrink. In this case it grew, You think it's going to continue to grow?

M.M.: Oh yes. It'll continue to function. I think it'll continue to function. They have a good man at the head, Danny Donohue. He seems to know what he is doing. He didn't come to the top without being, having the talent. He started alone and climbed up all the way. So, he must have produced.

F.V.: Well, you got to be the head of your unit. How did you do it?

M.M.: It wasn't hard. I was popular with the employees.

F.V.: ?

M.M.: Well, I ... it was more or less an Irish community, you might say and Central Islip in those years. Civil service Came in, in 1946...Competitive civil service for the war service. And... I got off my track there.

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F.V.: That's all right. What made you ... what got you to the head of your union? Were you popular because you were Irish? Or because you were...

M.M.: Well, that didn't hurt. Because the Irish were very... funny, there too like every ethnic group, they'd...if you came from one part of Ireland or another part of Ireland it made a difference.

F.V.: What part did you come from?

M.M.: The west. Mayo.. County Mayo.

F.V.: Do you remember it?

M.M.: Oh, very well.

F.V.: Tell ... tell us about...

M.M.: I have been back there many times. I have a lot of nieces and nephews. As a matter of fact, some of them are in the country here right now, came over. And they're going back in a few days.

F.V.: So, how old were you when you came to America?

M.M.: I was twenty-seven.

F.V.: What was life like there and here? What was the difference?

M.M.: Well, I was in London for five years before. I was teaching there for five years.

F.V.: So, you came here as a man of the world.

M.M.: Yeah. Yeah, and I think that's why I was so... I was popular in Central... the union. In other words, I knew something.

F.V.: Exactly. Right.

M.M.: We used to have a guy who would talk off the top of his head and give false information at the meetings. And I'd have to get up and say, "I'm sorry, but your president is conveying you the wrong... I'm sorry that I have to say this, Tom, or whatever he was. That's not the facts ... these are not the facts of the case." So I'd state that and they knew that I knew. The members around that attended. They knew that.

F.V.: So, we came back to your philosophy.

M.M.: I was a good listener. I like things to be true, not just trumped up. Like you have with some of the media today.

F.V.: Well, I think people respond to the truth. They really do. That's what they want. That's...Even if it's not always pleasant.

M.M.: Yeah. Yeah, right.

F.V.: You got any message& for the future for CSEA?

M.M.: Not really. I am more interested in the retirees' part of it and their future. They seem to do very well here on the Island. We have over 400 ... we have about ... oh, we have a few thousand members. Well, the headquarters is down here. You know that place?

F.V.: Yeah, we're going there from here.

M.M.: So, the retirees have their dinners and their functions and: their meetings, so many meetings a year. And they seem to enjoy it. And it's get together from different branches. From the hospitals, from the state and from the county. And different other civil service branches get into it. So, you have a variety of opinions coming from their background and their work.

F.V.: Well it sounds like pretty lively meetings.

M.M.: Yeah. Retirees are a good outfit and they enjoy getting together like your senior citizens.

F.V.: Yeah. So it's a special club.

M.M.: Special club.

F.V.: So, what do you think about the movement of CSEA into the private sector?

M.M.: I have no opinion really on that.

F.V.: Okay. I just wondered if you did. You got any opinions on anything else? Because I'm here to...

M.M.: Yeah, my opinions are getting limited all the time.

F.V.: Well, if you have any memories of people, places or things, this is the time to tell me about it. I'm sure you've been thinking about it since I called you.

M.M.: Just when you're gone I might think of them.

F.V.: You know what, we'll come back! Want to take a break? Or do you want ... ?

M.M.: No, actually. There's not too much left out.

F.V.: Okay.

M.M.: Not too much.

F.V.: Let me ask you ... I've asked you what you're most proud of. When you look back at CSEA, what are you most disappointed by?

M.M.: CSEA?

F.V.: Yeah. If anything.

M.M.: I was never disappointed by CSEA, actually. I used to write articles in those years on certain things that I'd protest that they weren't doing enough for. And I'd write those articles in the Civil Service paper, which originated in New York, downtown. And they used to print up those letters. So I used to

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write occasionally on the items we needed. That the employees needed. On improvement on their circumstances of work, and so forth.

F.V.: Did you get most of them in?

M.M.: Yeah. It had affect. It had affect. They listened.

F.V.: Well, is sure sounds like a good organization to me. I mean, I've worked for it but have never been part of it. It just sounds like it's grown naturally and...

M.M.: It's growing, yes. Growing naturally.

F.V.: And doing what it's supposed to do.

M.M.: Then they hooked up. I think they hooked up with another bigger federal union or ... in recent years. Or it has the backing of the bigger union.

F.V.: Right. AFSCME.

M.M.: Yeah, yeah, that's right. Do you know why they joined? Why they did that?

F.V.: Well, I guess it gave them a boost. It gave them more breathing space. I think it helped to stop raiding too. That's what some people have told me.

M.M.: Yeah. If you get too small and you're thinking you get broader perspectives if you're in something like those bigger unions or your hooked up with...

F.V.: Well, yeah. I mean, you've got influence in Albany but it's nice to have influence in Washington. Did you ever go to Albany for political rallies or demonstrations?

M.M.: No. Well, there were... they had a few strikes, I think, in the CSEA. I think they had a few strikes. Yeah. It's like Mike Quill in New York or the Mayor Lindsey said, "You're civil service. You can't strike." And he said, "Mr. Lindsey ... Lindsey" in derision, "We can do whatever we want." And they did strike and they beat Lindsey. He went to jail in and out and he came out on top eventually. He was an Irishman who was in the IRA over there in Ireland from after 1916. He was a character.

F.V.: Now, when you were ... when you were teaching in London, were there unions there? I don't even know the history of...

M.M.: No. No.

F.V.: So is the union movement like an American kind of a thing?

M.M.: Yeah.

F.V.: Did you study it? Did you study the history of unions?

M.M.: No.

F.V.: You just joined and...

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M.M.: I just came into unions here. We never knew union.

F.V.: It seemed like a good idea?

M.M.: Oh yeah. Union is a good idea. It helps the people who are not treated properly and there is strength in numbers.

F.V.: All right. Anything else you want to tell us-this is the time. Although, like I said, we'll come back if you want us to. There must have been some great times back then.

M.M.: No. That's about the sum and substance of it ... at my age.

F.V.: Well, we appreciate it. I'm really glad we got to talk to you and it's a privilege and an honor.

M.M.: Thank you.

F.V.: You got any questions?

M.M.: It was nice talking with you too. You mentioned there was a plaque at CSEA.

F.V.: All right. Tell me about it.

M.M.: Well, we had a meeting as my term ended. I didn't want to continue so I had this Hilda, she was a senior in the office work, and she took over and we had the personnel director, it wasn't Neil Ward at that time, it was another name. And he said that his remarks were, he says, "Hilda, you'll have a hard job filling these shoes. Filling his shoes."

F.V.: I believe it.

M.M.: She did well though. A lot of good people, some retired teachers took over afterwards, the retirees... we had had them as secretaries and what not. And we...

F. V.: Okay. All right. That was really nice. Anything else you want to say? This is it.

M.M.: Not really.