

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
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Labor Series

LESTER TRACHTMAN

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INTERVIEW

[Note: This interview was not edited by Mr. Trachtman.]

Q: ...for the Department of State's oral history of labor diplomacy. And I had the pleasure of working with Les early on. We both were at the Labor Department early on in our careers, and it's a pleasure to have this tape of his memories of his work in labor diplomacy. And, Les, why don't you first just give a few words on your name and your date of birth? I do need to mention to you that we've given you a waiver so that I'll give the rights of your statements to the oral history program so scholars can draw on it, publish perhaps parts of it, and I'll get that to you. We won't publish it before you get a chance to look at it, but why don't you just give a little bit on your background and how

you got interested in labor, particularly international labor.

TRACHTMAN: Well, first, Jim I want to say that I really appreciate your taking the time to do this with me today. I'm certainly very happy to talk about my background, but I also feel it's an honor that one feels that what I have to say has some historical significance. It's also therapeutic as one becomes older and watches the gray hair multiply in the mirror that you start wondering what you've accomplished over a lifetime, and talking it through gives a little bit of perspective to look back on it with a clear conscience.

Well, let's see, how do we start? I was born April the 11th, 1934. Where did my interest in labor arise? My parents came over as Russian immigrants when they were both quite young. My father came around age five, my mother around age one, and they both had a very liberal orientation, probably more of a socialist orientation. And I certainly picked that up in the house, question of liberal values and always very strongly Democrat: the Democrats were the good guys and the Republicans were the bad guys type of thing. And I remember even when Henry Wallace was running that they strongly supported his candidacy. But I think it's more a question of basic values. My basic values were always with the common man, with the working man, and with the labor movement. Perhaps as I grew older I became disillusioned with some of the things that the trade unions were identified with, but at the core I certainly felt that trade unions were a very positive influence on the development of the American society. I'll get into that more as we go along.

Q: What was your first job in labor affairs, or particularly in international labor affairs?

TRACHTMAN: Well, I guess the background to that is that it was a trade union that sent me through college. I got my engineering degree at Columbia through the munificence of Local Three of the National Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, to which I was indebted. And then, after finding out that I really wasn't cut out to be an engineer, I went on to Cornell School of Industrial Labor Relations. And it was the Cornell ILR school that introduced me to trade unionism, and always having had an interest in international labor affairs, when it came time to choose a major in the master's program I decided I would make my major in international labor. Looking around for an appropriate place to focus my energies, the countries of Africa were just becoming independent. Ghana was the first, particularly in English-speaking Africa, so it was very logical to see how the labor movement of Ghana had evolved. So I wrote my thesis with the title of "The Labor Movement in Ghana: A Study in Political Unionism"--something of that sort. And soon thereafter, I met Jim Taylor of the Department of Labor, and he advised me to come to the Department of Labor as an intern, to OILA.

Q: How did you meet him?

TRACHTMAN: I think I was doing research on my thesis. I came down and went to the Library of Congress. At that time I met Dan Izczyk, because he was the African specialist for Steinbach.

Q: That was the Office of International Trade Unions, is that right?

TRACHTMAN: Right, and OILA would be International Labor Affairs. Steinbach and Semple, right? Yes. And somebody must have introduced me to Jim around that time, and I got the offer to come to the Department of Labor, in OILA, or maybe it was OILB at that time, as an intern. And that was the beginning of my professional involvement with labor affairs.

Q: You took what was then the management --

TRACHTMAN: Management Intern Program.

Q: You didn't take an exam, right?

TRACHTMAN: I don't remember any.

Q: All right.

TRACHTMAN: And then I became an African labor specialist. I was always the number two man in the system back then, labor specialist. I think my first boss for the first few months was Don Avery, then Bill Steen, then John Condon. And I worked in that position from '60 to '65. And the corresponding person at the Department of State we dealt with was Oliver Peterson. He was the husband of Esther Peterson, who was the consumer affairs advisor to Lyndon Johnson and who ran the Women's Bureau for the Department of Labor later on. She still is around, a remarkable woman, great insight and personality. So I could really go back to those days in the Department of Labor, what distinguished them and why I felt that ILAB had a contribution to make and was important and still is important and should be strengthened rather than weakened as part of the American government's outlook on international affairs. My feeling is that trade unions are an integral part of the society and the politics of every country, and if we want to encourage democratic institutions to develop in Third World countries, we should be encouraging the development of trade union movements, and there are a number of specific things we can do. And I think it was that conviction which motivated a lot of us in the international labor office.

Q: What country did you spend the most time on at that time and why and what were the circumstances?

TRACHTMAN: I wrote a thesis on labor in Ghana. My French was weak. Though I had studied French both in school and at the Foreign Service Institute, I probably had a preference for the English-speaking countries, and Kenya was becoming important. I would say Ghana and Kenya probably received a lot of attention. Though for that matter -- there were only two of us covering African affairs -- we really covered the continent quite well, kept the assistant secretary informed of labor events throughout Africa, from South Africa throughout North Africa.

Q: Kenya has often been noted as a country that, in a sense, vindicated an investment by the United States in international labor affairs. Why do you think that's true and how did you respond to what was happening in Kenya?

TRACHTMAN: Well, first thing that comes to mind is Tom Mboya, who was originally a trade union leader with support from institutions beyond Kenya. He became a political figure, with a very strong democratic orientation. First, one would say that people like Mboya who had the opportunity to become national leaders were helped by the KFL, the Kenya Federation of Labor, in various projects. The first one that comes to mind is the tailoring school in Nairobi. By the time I joined the African-American Labor Center in '65, the tailoring school was already going strong. My recollection it was the work of Veda Springer. It was the work of Veda Springer and the Garment Workers' Union, I'm thinking of Ross out of Philadelphia, that helped the Philadelphia joint corps contribute money to the establishment of that school to show what trade unions can do specifically: give your members vocational training; help them become skilled so they can earn more money in an area where there weren't enough skilled tailors; so that trade union school was always going very strong and was always identified as the creature of the Kenya Federation of Labor and then COTU, the Central Organization of Trade Unions. That's what I can say about Kenya labor. They were strong in a number of areas. Municipal workers were strong. Railway workers were strong. The dock workers were very strong; that was the origin of _____ they came out of Mombasa to head COTU and then to head OATU, the Organization of African Trade Unity, or the Pan-African Trade Union Movement.

Q: What was COTU again, please?

TRACHTMAN: The Central Organization of Trade Unions.

Q: Of Kenya?

TRACHTMAN: Of Kenya -- COTU(K).

Q: So it was the overall umbrella.

TRACHTMAN: The umbrella, but the early one had the KFL, the Kenya Federation of Labor. They were strong supporters of Kenyatta in the early days, and I guess the interesting thing about it is that they were, as many unions were, multi-tribal. Kenyatta was identified as a Kikuyu leader. The Kikuyus were the most dominant Kenyan group, and they came to lead the country. But COTU had groups from many, many different tribes and, like some of its counterparts across Africa, had great unifying function that showed how people of different tribal backgrounds could get together in their mutual interest and elect someone regardless of tribal background to lead them. And after Mboya, who was not Kikuyu -- Mboya was a Luo, the second largest tribe -- the next labor leader that I remember was Ke Mobundi, who came from a *small* tribe. And the various groups thought that Mobundi would be a good leader, and he was. He eventually

became a member of parliament. So there's a lot to be said for our encouraging the trade unions, which in turn encouraged pluralism to grow in Kenya and succeeded, though based on strong British roots as well.

We did a number of things across Africa. By *we* I mean the International Labor Affairs Bureau, as it got to be known through the years. The first Secretary that I remember there was George Lodge, who was a tall, good-looking guy, and his father was Henry Cabot Lodge --

Q: In the Eisenhower administration.

TRACHTMAN: In the Eisenhower administration, right. And he tried to give dynamic leadership to the Bureau. I don't think he had much of a trade union connection himself, but his outlook was that trade unions could be very helpful. I'm sure he did a lot to try and bridge the gap between his class and the American labor movement. Sure, there were good ties, and he left in the Kennedy era and George Weaver came in, who was a very good leader as well.

What were the projects I was involved in? We're now going back to the '60's -- this is 1960 to 65 -- the first thing that stands out in my memory is when Don Avery and Ike Golden sent me out to a trade fair. I was the leader of a delegation to the Conakry Trade Fair, in Conakry, the capital of Guinea. At that time Conakry, Guinea, was viewed as very much in the Communist camp, but they were going to allow the West to hold a fair there. And I found when I got there that the major staples that you could find in the supermarket were ping-pong balls and some rice, I think. Basically the country was very, very short on all the necessities. They had bartered their soul away. They had very little to rely on, extremely poor country. But we set up shop for our trade fair and they had given me a team of several French-speaking trade unionists. It turned out one of the team was from New Orleans, and his French consisted of "*Mon ami!*" slapping somebody on the back, and the conversation seemed to end there unless somebody could figure out what they were trying to say. A real character. And then there was a fellow, Fern Woody, coming out of Maine, off the supermarket shelves of Maine, who had French-Canadian background and could speak French. And Fern stayed with International Labor and went to Vietnam and was known to a lot of people in the Washington area as an international trade union leader. Those were two of us. And then the third person on our mission was someone who stayed in the Department of Labor until maybe a year or two ago when she finally retired. She was a chief officer I think with the Department of Labor Credit Union -- her name Lena Gray. Maybe she came out of the Islands or something in the Caribbean, but her French was quite good. So I was the head of this team of four, which was quite an honor, because I was pretty young at the time.

Q: What was the idea of having a trade union angel on a trade fair?

TRACHTMAN: It was a good idea in the sense to show that a major part of the United States, our cultural institutions, was the labor movement, that we were not all industry or any particular segment dominated, but that America was a multifaceted society and labor

had a significant role. By putting on or bringing a labor mission to the trade fair we indicated what that role was. We showed the importance we attached to labor. And so we manned the booths and gave out a lot of literature. We met with the trade unions. I remember at that fair -- by the way, the labor attaché at that time was Phil Heeler, we decided we wanted to make a presentation to the labor movement. We wanted to give them a little bit of a show. We brought over a lot of films. Some had a French soundtrack, probably because they came out of Canada. And so we invited everybody to the only local theater, which we had rented for the day, and we decided I would give an introductory talk in English and Lena Gray would translate. I didn't have much confidence in my French to hold forth before a large group of trade union leaders. And so I remember starting my presentation. I said a line or two and I waited for Lena. She got stage-struck. With all of the people and distinguished personalities there, she just looked at me and was afraid to start. And I remember talking and translating myself. I would say ten words in English and put them into French, and we did that for a couple of minutes, and then Lena recovered her composure.

Q: Kicked in?

TRACHTMAN: She kicked in and we did fine. I guess when you're talking yourself you can somehow in your own mind translate what you are saying, so that worked. It was a very good experience. I think we did win some friends. I know we got a lot of literature out, the chance to talk to people, and I think we broke some of the stereotypes. Well, in those days, many of the unions were committed one way or another. They were either pro-Soviet or pro-democracy and the United States and the West -- either East or West. So the ICFTU had one group of friends, and the WFTU had another group of friends. The cold war was very much in evidence throughout the union movement, like the labor movements of Africa.

Then the question comes up, to what extent was our mission just to fight the cold war versus building Trade unions? I think that was probably one of the key questions. And I've been thinking about that, and I guess one can argue and discuss it at length and you change your opinion over time. I think different people here have different feelings about it. I'll get to the period when I start working for the ALC and people like Irving Brown, who, really, number one on the agenda was "We've got to beat the Commies before they take over," and others were saying the role of trade unions were very important in these emerging societies, and, yes, we've got to keep the Communists out, but we've got to build the unions at the same time. What is the balance in that equation? I don't think in the Department of Labor that we really got into it. It was an open issue. We certainly followed the lead of the State Department, and we did what we could to help build trade unions. There was no dichotomy there. In my five years with the Labor Department, one of the other memorable things was being seconded to USIA for the African section and I made two trips to Africa, which I was very enthusiastic about. They were enthusiastic about me because they invited me back for a second trip. And basically it was to visit a number of USIA posts, seeing how it was treating trade union subjects: to what extent were they reaching these people, what kind of a message should they be sending, what type of media should be emphasized? I think I visited about five countries up and down

the east coast, and I came back and I met with all the media people in USIA. Because they weren't devoting much attention to labor, I was given very good treatment. I had an opportunity to make my views felt, which was that trade unions were very important. And they used the expression "target group"--what should the target group be? -- whenever they were developing programs. And I was always plugging the trade unions as critical target groups and could justify it. Your office produced an excellent book on the American labor movement. I don't remember if it was called *A Brief History of American Labor*. It was a good collection of articles about how American labor had grown and what its mission was. And I took that book -- I was told I could do anything I wanted to with the material -- and we added little bit to it. We made Veda Springer the editor and sent it over to Africa as a book that was designed for the African audience. I think we changed some of the illustrations inside, and it was very effective. In other words, getting out the story of American labor, publicizing American labor in its most favorable aspects -- of course, why would we do otherwise? -- was so important to our mission. And another aspect was helping build relationships between American unions and foreign unions. So the various delegations -- dock workers from the states would go to meet dock workers, let's say, from Kenya or other countries. We'd bring them; we'd send our people over, and there was this exchange which we were always developing. Gestures of friendship any way we could do it: we'd give scholarships to their people to attend schools. Some went to Cornell. Certainly the Harvard Trade Union Program comes back to mind. And American labor leaders as well foreign trade union leaders attended that program.

Q: Was there any kind of a structure or system in Washington to coordinate and discuss programs among the various involvees that you mentioned -- The US information agency, obviously, the Department of Labor, the Department of State?

TRACHTMAN: I don't know to what extent it was institutionalized, but I know that in short order I saw the need for that in the work that I was doing in African affairs. We established a group that met on a weekly basis--this was early on--and weekly luncheons with the State labor man, Ollie Peterson, and the AID labor man for Africa, Ed Wiesinger, and I'm trying to remember whether there was a USIA labor person at that point, or not. In the early days, there weren't, but before long Gausman was over there. I can't remember his first name. Joe Glazer had been a labor man at USIA; I'm sure he would have a lot of interesting things to say. But we had these weekly coordinating meetings, and it was clear that the only one who really had money was AID. So we leaned on Ed to get money for this and money for that.

Q: That was Ed . . .

TRACHTMAN: ...Wiesinger. I took the minutes of these meetings and I remember having to write the subject down and writing "ACTION": everybody had an agenda to do something, though usually it was something involving "AID should get some money for this" or some money for that, but for window dressing we all promised to do different things. I think that was fairly within a bureaucracy that had some value. Had to keep stirring the pot. We continued to stir that pot, and after Ollie Peterson left, Al Rucker

came in. It was all Rucker and Bill Steen and myself going over there. Gee, I guess really two of us went over from the Department of Labor. I remember going over with John Condon in the early years.

Q: One central figure in all of this, obviously, was Irving Brown, and I gather you knew him fairly well.

TRACHTMAN: Yes, but if you want to follow a chronological sequence, I would leave Irving till we got to 1965.

Q: With the ALC, Okay.

TRACHTMAN: After we get to the African-American Labor Center. My guess is that up until just about that same time he was primarily involved with Europe and the labor movements in Europe, with fighting the communist labor unions in France and Germany and Italy, where he had tremendous impact.

Irving had no trouble speaking extemporaneously. There are pictures of his addressing the thousands of German trade unionists in the Berlin square -- I forget what it was called -- being very effective speaking in German to them. Irving was a linguist. He could do very well in German and French, maybe other languages too. And if ever he wanted a letter out and he'd tell you what he wanted in the letter, you'd better be ready to take dictation. He could really express himself very well when he wanted to, choose his words carefully, but when it came to putting things on tape, afraid of how history might look at different words and nuances, realizing what history had done to other people's words, he just was not ready to go that route.

There was an actual Labor History Center, of which I was the manager, thanks to Irving. The African-American Labor Center invested enough money to form an organization, a non-profit, what they call a 501c3, with a charter, with a board of directors, to collect African labor history through oral interviews with African trade union leaders. And we had many hours of tape, I think 25 hours or more of tape. I would be curious to know where those tapes are today. Some of them we transcribed. I know after I left the ALC, I tried to keep the organization alive for several years afterwards. I know George Martens was interested in it. Perhaps when he left the ALC (he went to the ICFTU), he did something with them, but I think they'd be very valuable.

Q: Have you talked to the ALC about them? Whether they still have them?

TRACHTMAN: No, because the people who worked at the ALC never thought they were very important. One of my colleagues over there used to refer to it as my "oral sex project." With that attitude that's the end of oral labor history.

*Q: Did you ever meet some of the characters that were important after _____.
Did you meet Tom Mboya, for example?*

TRACHTMAN: Mboya I met only briefly, but for example, in Ethiopia I met Beyene Solomon, who was the head of the labor movement. “Beyene and his four horsemen,” we called him. There were four young university-trained leaders who were at the heart of the central _____ of the Ethiopian labor movement, which was called CELU, Confederation of Ethiopian Labor Unions. The four horsemen were Fisa Hateki. . . . Last I heard, he had become part of the ALC, which should have happened many, many years ago, but after the revolution, I think he had to walk out of Ethiopia through Sudan. And then he got picked up by the ILGWU, so he worked for the Ladies’ Garment Workers in New York for a number of years, worked for the ICFTU, too, I think, for a short time. He was the nominal secretary-general I guess. Then there was Gabriel Miriam Selassie. He’s worked for the ALC for many, many years. I remember when he came out of Ethiopia, we were getting called he was at the airport, was there any reason he had to stay, he would like to stop off in New York and talk to the ALC? His ticket showed him to go on to someplace else in the United States. And we said, “No, stay in New York.” It was called Idlewild Airport at that time before it became JFK. We decided we could use him, work with him at the ALC, and he settled there. He became part of our staff and was and is today still very effective, very scholarly. He was the second of the four horsemen. There was Tesfa, who I think was more optimistic than the others. He changed sides at the time of the revolution and tried to help the military government, which had overthrown Selassie. Well, I think they didn’t trust him, and he was in jail for a while. I remember he was vague on that. And then there was Mesfin, who joined the ILO.

So here were four guys who used to work very closely together and helped organize the trade unions throughout Ethiopia and after the revolution who dispersed to the four corners.

Q: What year was the revolution?

TRACHTMAN: Oooh.

Q: We can establish that. I was just curious. I keep coming back to Tom Mboya because as a non-Africanist, he’s the name I’d heard so often, and he, of course, eventually was assassinated, wasn’t he?

TRACHTMAN: Right.

Q: From your perspective, how did that whole political picture evolve?

TRACHTMAN: Well, it was tribal. As I said at the beginning, Mboya was a Luo, and also had major following and probably was considered a threat. Tom was also very close to Veda, and Veda’s role in the early days was very critical.

Q: Veda Springer.

TRACHTMAN: Veda Springer, exactly. Veda and her mother lived in Brooklyn, and they played host. They opened their home to many African trade union leaders, including

Mboya, Nyerere, Ellender -- those are three names that come to mind, and I remember Veda saying how --

Q: Julius Nyerere.

TRACHTMAN: Julius Nyerere. And I'm sure there were others. When we talk about the ALC, I'll tell you about a trip that Veda and I made to South Africa together. An older black woman and a younger white guy traveling around South Africa caused a lot of eyebrows to go up, but that's a story in and of itself.

Let's see what else we can say about Kenya and Mboya, Veda. I think probably the Kenya story is Benasekul, because at that time he was a rising star. He married an American schoolteacher, as I recall. I don't know what finally became of Edward.

Q: What about some of the other characters, like Sekou Toure?

TRACHTMAN: Sekou Toure I think claimed a union background. He may be one of the first heads of UGTAN, the Union Générale de Travailleurs d'Afrique Noire, General Workers' Union of Black Africa, a French West-African federation. I guess it was the CGT that helped develop the unions of French-speaking West Africa. But then he was the _____ that didn't play, and then the CGTFO tried to set up groups in opposition. I think the Communists pretty well had control of a number of those unions.

The Labor Department was involved in international labor beyond just ILAB. It wouldn't be fair to leave out the work of the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Division of Foreign Labor Conditions under Will Shelton and Bill Gerber and Judy Kidman. They prepared excellent monographs. They were really authorities on labor in these developing countries.

Q: They worked in the old Division of Foreign Labor Conditions.

TRACHTMAN: Right.

Q: Who was that headed by in your time?

TRACHTMAN: Bill Shelton. His deputy was Bill Gerber, and they had a great group of people.

Q: You haven't mentioned anything about North African Labor. I was wondering if there was something you could say about Tunisia and Algeria in this troubled time?

TRACHTMAN: Irving Brown was very close to Moroccan trade union leader -- his name starts with an M -- Hassan is coming into play, the current leader -- Mahjoub Ben Seddik. Irving and Ben Seddik were old friends and also Irving was very close to Ahmed Tlili, who was the head of the Tunisian labor movement, UGTT (Union Générale Tunisienne du travail), it was a rough time, so Bourguiba one time was his friend and another time

his enemy. Well, we certainly tried to work with those unions, even the unions in Algeria. I remember visiting the labor attaché, John Condon, in Algeria and when he was also labor attaché in Tunisia. We tried to be helpful to do things with them. I guess they had a strong French orientation, but I don't remember too much about the specific projects.

Q: Did you spend much time on South Africa?

TRACHTMAN: South Africa was always the pariah. What could we do to reverse the terrible treatment of the black citizens. What could be done with the black trade unions of South Africa? The name I remember there was Lusi Mbeteburo, who was the head of the black garment workers' union. He seemed to be too ready to compromise, in the view of some people with the black establishment.

The south African government was always looking over our shoulder . . . [inaudible] . . . do very much. Looking at what he did, I think it should be borne in mind that we tried to exercise influence on the policy of the State Department. The State Department was developing policy papers that should be American policy towards X, Y, or Z. When we had the chance to review some of these statements, I would always push for stronger statements about the role of trade unions. So part of our role as labor specialists was to influence the role, the position that the State Department took on labor matters throughout the world.

Q: Did you have an insight into some of the bureaucratic wars that were going on? I'm thinking further up, with your bosses, first George Lodge and then Weaver. With the State Department and with other . . .

TRACHTMAN: It was always a constant fight for ILAB to have some recognition, to have a sense of purpose. When people were divvying up the budget money, people would question, "Well, why should ILAB have money when there are things that are more important?" Who's to say what's most important? The international work of the Department of Labor was never really a number one priority of many secretaries. Some were more sympathetic than others. But the assistant secretary of labor had to fight hard for his budget, and fight hard to keep labor attaches in the program. The State Department people were not particularly sympathetic towards labor attaches, and before long, in my time, it was basically trade union people who became labor attaches. But I could see the handwriting on the wall as more and more State Department types became labor attaches. They lacked trade union background, which was why they had to be trained in what American trade unionism was all about. It was a bit of a deal.

Q: Well, do you want to go on to talk a little bit about the ALC? And perhaps as you go, you'll reflect on some of the experiences and the grounding you had at the labor department.

TRACHTMAN: I made a few notes about my days at the Labor Department, and I could quickly run through those.

Q: Okay.

TRACHTMAN: One of the things we did was to give talks to new State Department labor attaches about the importance of labor. So I remember going to the Foreign Service Institute on several occasions to talk about the importance of labor in international affairs. I think that was important of OLC. I remember working with the people at the Bureau of Foreign Labor Conditions to develop a bibliography on Black African labor trade unions. At that time not much had been written. I had done my thesis on the labor movement in Ghana and had an idea of what the books were and what the articles were. And so we developed a good African labor bibliography. There was an African luncheon group, which I was one of the leaders of at one time, where we got people from all the agencies that had African specialists. For example, there was Commerce or Army, even the army medical museum, or CIA or obviously State, USIA, but people you wouldn't expect: Census Bureau. There must have been 23 different agencies in the US Government in the 1960's who had specialists in African affairs. And we got together once a month with an African luncheon meeting. And brought over famous speakers, or speakers who were in the country, ambassadors and all, and had them address the group. And there was a good sense of camaraderie, finding out what was happening in other agencies.

Let's talk about the African-American Labor Center. You asked me, as I recall, about its origins.

Q: Yes. Before we go on to that, why don't you finish up with your notes. You were talking about Delaney.

TRACHTMAN: Ah, yes, Phil Delaney, yes, wonderful character. You asked about anecdotal stories, and when he went to Africa comes to mind. I'll never forget his going to Africa with Soapy Williams. Williams was the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs. He was called "Soapy" Williams because he was an heir of the G. Mennen Williams family, shaving creams and other soap products. Soapy was a wonderful character, and he and Delaney got along very well. But Phil said, "You know, Les, I'm going off to Africa. That's your part of the world, and I'd like you to do some index cards for me, because I can never remember all of the capitals and the leaders and all the statistics. Just write it all out on index cards for me and I'll flip them. That's the way I do best." And I remember squeezing as much information as I could on various cards and making it very clear for Phil to follow, and couldn't wait till he came back to debrief him, see how it all went. And then I remember his saying, "Les, those index cards were terrific. Many a time I was sitting next to Soapy on the plane and he said, 'I don't want to go through all those briefing books again, Phil. Let me see your cards, let me see your cards.' So they came in very handy. And you know, Les, we had a real good time when we got to the Sammy republic. There's where your stuff came helpful. Made contact with the union leaders, which we never thought we would." I stopped to think, "Sammy Republic?" "Yes, yes, you remember the Sammy Republic, Les." I said, "Sure, Phil." I wasn't there to contradict him, but I couldn't think of what the Sammy Republic was. And it was only about an hour later that it finally took to my mind as I reviewed his itinerary that Phil was really talking about the Republic of Somalia, which had a very

difficult labor movement. They were always in trouble one way or other. But apparently he did have a good meeting over there, and contacts resumed. It was rich people like Phil Delaney who were able to establish a rapport -- of course, with their own union background -- with union leaders abroad which was so valuable in developing the contact between American labor and labor in the developing world. You can see where people are coming from regardless of the words they use and the way they carry themselves: the workers have one background and the sophisticated bureaucrat would have another way of looking at the world. And we were very successful in the early days in bringing people from the American labor movement into this international diplomacy, although now my understanding is that it's primarily State Department Foreign Service officers who are your labor attaches. The program of bringing labor leaders has all been long since discontinued. But in the interest of time I think we ought to move over to the African-American Labor Center. I worked there from about 1965 to '81. That's a long period of time.

Q: Sixteen years.

TRACHTMAN: At least sixteen, and if we consider part of '65 and '81 it was almost 17 years. The organization probably started around the year '65, the end of '64. Irving Brown was its leader. And this was a period where it was decided in the highest channels of American government that if you were going to develop a successful foreign policy you had to include labor and the labor element in the developing world. An alliance was formed to promote that, first in Latin America--and the Latin Americans were particularly strong -- the AIFLD, American Institute for Free Labor Development. I know that Phil Doherty wasn't its first head, but he was the head of it from when I joined the ALC till today. And Irving Brown, a year or two later, became head of the African-American Labor Center when this was formed. Irving worked with Naomi Sprats, who had been a good friend of his for many years. She was part of my peer group, perhaps a year or two younger, went to Cornell shortly after I did and was his right hand as the ALC developed. And Irving at that time was European labor representative for the American labor movement.

Q: With the ICFTU? I mean, he was representative to the ICFTU?

TRACHTMAN: I guess yes, he was representative to the ICFTU and the official representative for the ILO. And then they decided, when they wanted to set up the African-American Labor Center, that he should move his base of operations to the States. So for a while he ended up in the New York office of the ICFTU, and the African-American Labor Center, which was established in space that originally was part of an organization which was -- something about the American labor movement and the United Nations, some liaison office which was sponsored by Harry Van Arsdale, my old union local 3, IBW. I think for a while they were paying the rent on that space, or part of it. And Irving and Harry were old friends.

Q: So this was probably the only institute to settle in New York as opposed to Washington. Why was that? Was that because of Irving?

TRACHTMAN: Because of Irving, exactly, you're right.

Q: Irving's role with the . . .

TRACHTMAN: ICFTU and with the UN. He wanted to be posted on what was happening at the UN. And as an old New Yorker, it gave me an opportunity to stay in touch with the New York City Central Labor Council, where I had a number of friends.

Q: Now I don't want to interrupt your train of thought on forming the ALC, but there's another character we haven't talked about and I don't know whether he impacted on the African labor program or not, but Serafino Romualdi, who played a major role in the evolution of the AFIL, working with Rockefeller during world War II in Latin America, and I don't know whether he ever got into African affairs.

TRACHTMAN: As far as I know, he was never involved with African affairs, and I never met Serafino. I have a vague recollection of his writing a book, *Presidents and Peons I Have Known*, or vice versa, and as I recall he was Jesse Friedman's stepfather. Jesse went to Cornell, as I did, and worked at the Labor Department, as you and I did, in international labor affairs. He's a very rich personality as well. But I don't think Serafino got involved with African affairs.

Q: Well, okay, go ahead. You had, I think, mentioned outside this taping about Serafino having worked closely with Lovestone in Europe --

TRACHTMAN: Irving.

Q: Irving, yes.

TRACHTMAN: Right. Well, I have to scratch my head and remember, and I bet Murray would remember more of this than I would. Irving was part of the American labor movement's drive to keep make the Marshall Plan successful and to counter the effects of Communists in the labor movements around the world. He organized the workers of France against the Communist-run trade unions so that CGTFO came into existence. And he was even more successful with the DGB in Germany and -- I forget the letters of the Italian labor movement. Irving was very much an international trade unionist, and that's why he was given the responsibility of heading the ALC. And he was a strong leader. If you knew Irving, he was certainly a strong personality. He was dogmatic. He was very knowledgeable. And he wouldn't take no for an answer if he wanted something done. It should get done, and find a way to do it. He wasn't very well organized. Everyone knows he used to pull little pieces of paper out of his pocket to try and _____ notes that he wrote down one place or another. And he would dictate while in motion on the phone, off the phone -- very strong . . . What's the word I want? . . . body?. He would get off the plane from these long trips back and forth Europe or Africa and put in a whole day's work. For somebody who had been riding 12 16 hours on a plane to come back and start sitting at a desk and running the show again is quite a feat. He did that many a time.

He didn't care much for clothes. He was poorly dressed. What mattered to him was the cause. People respected him for his abilities. He reached up very high to get things done, and he was able to. He had the contacts, he had the knowledge, and he had the track record, that he could accomplish things. So he got good funding for the ALC. We had to go through the bureaucracy so that they could dot the I's and cross the T's, and liaison work was mine. I used to go down to Africa soon after I got there, to Washington, fairly often. I guess in the early days it was Irving and Naomi, and David Brumbach came on board. David came out of the youth movement in Belgium. I think he was the leader, or one of the leaders of one of the youth movements. He had a strong position. While his English was good it wasn't perfect English that you could use for writing, so since I came on right after David, I got the job of going down to Washington and negotiating some of what they called "task orders" that financed a number of our individual projects and then developing these projects with the individual desk officers. We knew what we wanted to do. We had to make sure they were happy. And Ed Wiesinger, whom I knew from my Labor Department days, was helpful and sent me to the right officers. So my recollection is that my first few years there I got down to Washington very frequently to move these things along.

Q: So you were the marketer.

TRACHTMAN: I was the marketer, yes.

Q: In Washington, in getting the funds and the grants to run the programs that the ALC was undertaking.

TRACHTMAN: These were in the early years, '65-'67 through '67-'68. I can't remember how many, but I would say that was the first five years of the ALC. Because after a while we got a large block grant, and that was negotiated only once.

Q: For the whole region.

TRACHTMAN: For the whole region.

Q: Before it was country by country.

TRACHTMAN: Exactly. And it was rewarding to do that. Of course, I believed in each of these projects, and I knew what they were made up of. Besides that, I was responsible for all the projects in English-speaking Africa, and I corresponded with the representatives we were hiring to do these projects, and there were a number of fascinating projects. There was the vocational training school in Lagos, Nigeria, which trained drivers in how to drive and how to maintain vehicles. We build the whole school, including the driving track outside of Lagos. And there was John Corcoran, the guy we sent over who came out of, I think, the New York City Fire Fighters' Union. The story was that while he was running the school when the fire alarms went off in Lagos he would abandon anything he was doing and he would dash off to the fire. I don't think he was quite that extreme, but I'm sure he was very much in tune to the –

Q: Once a fireman always a fireman, right?

TRACHTMAN: Exactly, exactly. Very nice guy. After that he became legislative rep for one of the groups from New York. That's who was quite successful in helping the Motor Drivers' Union of Lagos, which was headed, I think, by Odeyemi. And Odeyemi eventually became head of the Nigerian trade union movement, so our influence and ability to work with various labor movements helped them rise to power as well.

There were a number of projects. I remember going up to Kano in northern Nigeria and meeting with the trade union leaders up there and trying to establish a branch of that project.

Q: You did a number of conferences.

TRACHTMAN: Yes, as I look back, I think that probably the most rewarding part of my career with the ALC was running six pan-African conferences. I guess the reason I look back on them with fondness is that I had complete independence in running them. Since I was able to find the money for them I was able to organize them and direct them, and they were my babies from start to finish, including writing the final reports. The first conference was on labor and family health, which was really a phrase for labor and population planning. We were very interested in doing population work in Africa, and we wanted the labor movement to get involved. And there was some resistance. There were cultural questions of whether we should be involved with population planning. We had to make the case, and some people got convinced and I guess some didn't. And certainly it was male-dominated societies, and we had to convince the men that we had to bring women into these programs. We worked in conjunction with the IFPO, the International Family . . . something. There was an International Family Planning Organization, and there was the UN organization, the United Nations Family Planning Program. We put all of these groups into the conference, plus trade union delegations from the different countries. We put trade unionists, government people, local population people in. I can remember that a number of times we were told that the union people and the population people in the same country, in the same city, didn't know each other. And the conference was the first time they had the opportunity to meet and compare notes, and we must have been successful in setting the stage for one group to help the other and to understand where the other one was coming from, so that I think these friendships fostered cooperative programs later on. They understood the barriers to be overcome. It was open discussion, and at the conclusion of these programs we had all sorts of recommendations ready. And I have the full reports that we generated on these programs, which included recommendations on what the governments could do, recommendations as to what the trade unions could do, recommendations for what the family planning groups should be doing. Every group was given a responsibility. And now comes the part that the employer associations were also invited. If we were to be successful, they could play a role. So it was encouraging dialogue among countries. And we also encouraged country reports, so we might have five or six countries participating in the conference, and we forced them to sit together as a committee and generate committee reports. What

was Kenya going to do after they left this conference? What was Tanzania going to do? And the group of the trade union people, the employers' people, the employees' federation people, the government people had to sit down together and knock out a report. And our complete reports on these conferences are available. Let's go over the conferences, since I sort of feel they're my baby. We did labor and family health in the Gambia, labor and family health in Kenya. Did I mention that we had ILO and WHO participation in most of these conferences, which was a feat.

Q: You were really doing some network building.

TRACHTMAN: Yes, and I was proud of that. My trips to Geneva paid off, and the head of occupational health and safety for WHO in those days became a friend, Mustafa El-Mutawi. He was educated in occupational health at the University of Pittsburgh. I remember that he came to several conferences with me, and I met him again in the United States. So we did two on labor and family health, one in the Gambia and one in Kenya, East Africa and West Africa. Then we did occupational health and safety for agricultural workers in Ethiopia. These workers were terribly exploited, from the symptoms of bad pesticides and polluted water supplies. They were obviously very poorly paid and had all sorts of diseases, and by bringing together government people and union people and experts in various areas I think we were able to develop a plan of action about what was to be done to improve their lot in the world. I felt good about that.

Q: Did you come across the problem that I did in Asia where unions said that they often, rather than seeking safe conditions, preferred to give premium pay and really hadn't thought about the safety issue. I don't know whether that issue came up with you. It did with me.

TRACHTMAN: It probably did. I don't remember it specifically. I remember we made so much noise about the hazards of what was happening that they may have been almost afraid to say, well, we had to worry about pay. But obviously getting a job was often one of the most important questions. We had rivalries. For example, I can remember the WHO man disagreeing with one of my ALC colleagues who liked to be very argumentative. The question of who was to blame for various ills: _____ capitalism or the lack of just caring. We talked about the mine workers conference in Kitwe, to which a number of mine unions sent representatives.

Q: Was Kitwe where?

TRACHTMAN: Kitwe was on the "Copper Belt" in Zambia. We went down into the mines and met in the Mine Workers' Hall, which was a great building for Africa, for African trade unions and mine workers, in such a fine institution, facility.

Q: Do you have all those reports?

TRACHTMAN: I have those reports.

Q: So you're a repository if people can't find them elsewhere.

TRACHTMAN: As a repository of that, did I mention the African Labor History Center? I should mention that because--did I mention the difficulty of getting Irving Brown on tape?

Q: Yes, you mentioned that.

TRACHTMAN: But he did recognize the importance of history, and he got the ALC to sponsor the African Labor History Center, where we formed a 501c3. I became the director. I was the only one who was really a paid employee in the African history labor field working at it. We hired people to go out and interview African trade union leaders. This was in the time when Haile Selassie was still alive, so I can't remember exactly what date, but that should help to point to it. I remember we interviewed the trade union leaders of Ethiopia.

There was a friend of Irving Brown whom we hired to go out and do some interviews, Don Robertson, who wrote the "100 Most Important Leaders of the World," a *Reader's Digest*-type of summary of people, and he had Irving as one of them. I guess he had been a war correspondent at one time. A very warm and friendly personality, he could tell stories with the best of them and did some very good interviews.

I guess I had more of an interest in history than my colleagues.

Q: There are always philistines

TRACHTMAN: I've mentioned four conferences. I left out two which were very important. That was the role of trade union women. Women never had that big a role in Africa, and yet there were some who were outstanding leaders who came to the fore of the trade unions of Africa, and we certainly wanted to develop that. So I got money, and we put on conferences on African women. We did one in English-speaking Africa and one in French-speaking Africa. The one in French-speaking Africa stands out in my memory because my French wasn't that great, but it was enough to see what was happening and carry on a simple dialogue with the various delegates. I hired trade union women, one from Canada and one from Maine, to come out and help me with this conference.

One night at the hotel during the conference one of the women came up with several of her women friends saying, "We're going on strike. There'll be a *grand grève*" -- a large strike -- because they were unhappy with the conditions. And I asked what was wrong with the conditions? "You don't give us time off to go shopping, there's not enough *per diem* to buy things, and we're not going to continue with this type." And she was serious. And I told her how much trouble we had gone to to arrange the conference. We had agreed on the *per diem* when the conference was started. The schedule had been sent to everybody in advance and we had tried to dot our I's and cross our T's, but some of these women came from rural areas, and coming to the capital of Togo, where there were

stores, was for them a wonderful shopping opportunity. They had money in their hands, and they didn't want to go home with money they couldn't use to buy anything in their own countries. And this woman was adamant. She was a firebrand.

Unfortunately, around that time my local contact from the Togolese labor movement appeared, and I explained to him in my fractured French--maybe we spoke a little English after that--that we had a problem on our hands with the women. He and I had worked out all the arrangements as well and we thought that the *per diem* was adequate and so forth. He quickly saw what the situation was, and he asked the woman who was the leader -- she was a woman from Upper Volta, now called Burkina Faso -- he would like to have a word with her, would she mind coming out and he would talk to her. And so the two of them stepped out, and I talked to the women, and I don't remember how the conversation went but we killed time for God knows how long. It must have been an hour or two hours. He and she had just disappeared. They came back a couple of hours later. She came back with a smile on her face and everything was happy and settled and we were not to worry any more, the conference would go on. And I don't know what transpired between the two of them, but I know that magic African communication took place and everything was beautiful from then on.

Running a women's conference was quite an experience. The English-speaking women's conference in Kenya -- Veda Springer, the famous Veda Springer, came with me, as did Joan Gooden who used to work with BRAC. She was very much a feminist in favor of female organizing and getting the women to have a stronger role. Between Veda and Joan Gooden, I know I had two powerhouses running things. I remember making a tour of several factories where predominantly the workers were women. We got permission to go into these factories to see what conditions were, and then as we walked out it was either Joan or Veda who turned the women and said, "We will support you." And then all of the women in our group gave them the cheer, raised an arm and said, "We will support you." And they, the women workers, cheered back, "We will support you." And the poor employer thought he had a revolution on his hands. It caught me by surprise, but it accomplished its purpose, conveying an understanding of unions.

Q: Solidarity?

TRACHTMAN: And solidarity. Whether the United States or Africa, we went through the same trials and tribulations, and we had to support each other. And indeed many trade union women were brought to the United States for programs. It was an important part and should be an important part of trade union development.

Q: What do you have to say, Les, about the seeming eclipses of some of the democratic movements that showed so much promise during those early years? How do you explain it? How does it make you feel?

TRACHTMAN: The last part first: it makes me feel a bit sad. We certainly try to encourage pluralistic societies; we want the trade unions to be strong. But in the final analysis, when the belly is empty and people are hungry, they want something that is

going to produce some food for their families and some measure of security. Thus the eternal conflict between democratic principles and the reality of subsistence. And Africa has been going downhill economically for a while. Some of the labor leaders got into politics, and as political leaders the realities were different than as trade union leaders. And it's interesting how many African trade union leaders became political leaders. But the unions were not the number one priority, and there were understandings reached between union leaders and political leaders often to promote the total economy versus the needs of labor. So it went back and forth.

Q: How do you test this? In some of countries, in Asia for example, the wage - and salary-earner segment of the workforce was pretty small, and--

TRACHTMAN: Small, but significant. Now here it has always been very hard to organize government workers, but in Africa some of the strongest unions grew off of the organization of government workers because they were the literate ones. And when those unions went on strike, they could close down the whole government. Or the transport workers., dock workers -- in other words, they were key unions that were organized. So the economy, or the cash economy, could come to a standstill -- maybe not the agricultural economy or the subsistence economy. But because they had power even though they lacked numbers, they were very significant. So there weren't that many of them, but they were in key positions. They were in the urban areas, so you found a lot of trade union leaders that became very powerful political leaders. You mentioned earlier Tom Mboya -- do you have that, Tom Mboya in Kenya? Did I mention the fact that Veda Springer entertained people like -- not entertained -- she *housed* them as people fighting colonialism -- she housed people like Tom Mboya, Nyerere, Kenneth Kauda from Zambia, John Tedegar of Ghana. I think they all stayed with her and her mother at their home in Brooklyn. She was a one-woman "Mrs. African Labor," who helped them get their point across here in the States, gave them a sounding board, gave them a place from which they could work. And then they of course visited them in Africa and hosted them whenever they came here.

Q: Did you get a sense of divisions in the American labor movement on who to work with? I mean there was this spectrum in all these former colonial countries of unions affiliated with various political parties, everything from the right wing to the far left, from Trotskyites and Bolsheviks. I was wondering if that was reflecting the American labor movement, if you saw any of that fight as you tried to develop programs that would be good for the country and acceptable to the American trade union leadership. Was that ever an issue?

TRACHTMAN: I think it was -- I have to scratch my head and try to remember specifics--I remember Victor Reuther and, obviously, Reuther and Brown were seeing things very differently, trying to establish some contacts with their point of view. I remember Bill Lucy, who asked me I think a question of policy toward South Africa. I think that was most apparent, probably, in the development of how policies were debated about South African trade unions: who do you support in South Africa? And American labor came down on the side of Buthelezi for the longest time before they supported

Mandela. I think there were some people in American labor who strongly supported Mandela, who was much more identified with the Communist Party of the ANC than with the opposition.

Q: SACTU.

TRACHTMAN: What was it? SACTU? The South African Congress of Trade Unions, which was as I recall a Communist group. There was FFTUSA, Federation of Free Trade Unions of South Africa, something like that. We have to talk about it one by one, talk about names, and then it will come back to mind, but there certainly was a _____ of who should be supported and who shouldn't, who was more interested in promoting Communism and who was just a left-ideological trade unionist. But I think the ALC was more interested in promoting specific projects. It's a question of who would be the vehicle for the project, and I guess that way you were helping particular friends. You were identifying your friends and strengthening their position. We have to talk country by country to see how that played out. I guess it was most visible, in terms of different groups, in South Africa, though I guess to some extent there were questions going on in Northern Rhodesia before it became Zambia and then in Zambia. I remember names like Reuben Jumela, who was a friend of Veda's, as I recall.

Q: How about French-speaking North Africa, where obviously you had all the parties of France having their counterparts in Algeria and then Tunisia -- Communists, Democratic, Democratic Socialist -- that was the whole spectrum?

TRACHTMAN: I never worked closely with those unions. But I do remember that Irving had a good relationship with Mahjoub Ben Seddik -- Ben Seddik was leader of the strong UTM, Union des Travailleurs Marocains, the largest trade union in Morocco--with Ahmed Tlili, the largest trade union group in Tunisia. I don't remember the trade union leader in Algeria, but I do remember visiting with John Hildeman, who was labor attaché in Algiers, Algeria. I didn't travel around to those countries as much as I did to countries in English-speaking Africa.

Q: Do you remember any instances where you either were warmly invited by the embassy or by the foreign policy establishment to do as much as you could with the trade union movement in the country and any instances of the opposite where you felt that there was a great deal the resistance from the foreign affairs establishment to ALC programs?

TRACHTMAN: Did I mention the experience in Guinea, where we were invited to come in and try and talk to the trade union movement in Guinea and I started to give my remarks in English so they would be translated into French and then my translator froze? And then I had to speak in English, translate my own remarks into French, till she caught up and--

Q: Kicked in, eh?

TRACHTMAN: She kicked in and decided she could do it, but that was a funny

experience. The trade union leaders in the guinea were very difficult in the beginning, but I think we made some impact.

Q: I was thinking of the Americans, though, the embassies and the foreign policy establishment.

TRACTMAN: My guess is they were little resistant, that some of them some of them weren't sure where we were coming from. But because we often had a good relationship with the labor attaché, the labor attaché tried to make things easier for us. I don't recall any open friction on that.

Q: We just have a few minutes left in this interview, and you spent a lot of time working on issues of African labor and programs to develop the strength of democratic trade unions in Africa. I was wondering if you could deal briefly with the flow and ebb of these programs and what you see as the result in a world that seems to be paying less attention to trade unions now even in developing countries.

TRACTMAN: Well, you know it's a very good basic question. I've spent many years looking at the trees, as opposed to the forest, working with individual programs and then to see a revolution come up and a lot of the leadership that you helped bring along is wiped out, thrown in jail, thrown into exile. But I like to think that we planted seeds, that the message of what unionism and working together and the common cause can accomplish, the fact that we stayed with these people – almost to say the collective consciousness – so when the time was right they could come back and again form unions and again start building from grassroots. I think trade unionism is almost instinctive as large factories, large groups of workers of the same occupation, developed, and that no matter how many times you'll stamp it out it will come back in some form. We've shown them what Democratic trade unionism is about and how to form these unions and what they can accomplish, that we have left an important legacy. But one has to be realistic, and many of these countries which don't have enough to survive on, the leaders would not brook any opposition, and the most important thing will be what they interpret as best for the economy.

Q: One of the disappointing things, I guess, in Africa, as seen most recently in Burundi and Rwanda, is the reassertion of parochial jealousies, tribal jealousy or ethnic jealousies or whatever, and do you think some people had some experiences as they came together in inter-ethnic union in places like Kenya and so forth.? Do they have some today get some practice?

TRACTMAN: Well, that's a good question. We've always said from the beginning that one of the advantages, one of the strengths of trade unions, was they get help bridge tribal diversity.

End of interview