

Sterling Ball

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Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

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Sterling Ball (b. January 9, 1947, Parkersburg, WV) is a retired UFCW Local 347 president, labor organizer, songwriter and poet, a former Kroger worker, and veteran. In this interview he discusses the history of Local 347 (which has since merged with Local 400), his songs and poems, his experience in collective bargaining, labor actions, and strikes across West Virginia and Ohio, the future of the labor movement, and more. Ball is a lifelong resident of Parkersburg, WV.

This interview is part of a collection of interviews with UFCW member Kroger workers conducted remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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EH: Emily Hilliard

SB: Sterling Ball

00:00

EH: Okay. Looks like it is.

SB: You got it!

EH: Yeah, how are you doing?

SB: I'm doing good. How 'bout yourself?

EH: Pretty good. Yeah, so why don't you--oh first, before we start Alan [Hanson of Local 400] wanted me to remind you that the statute of limitations...he said, "It is long expired on deeds done in service of working people of West Virginia." (laughs)

SB: (laughs) Okay! Before we start I would like to make a couple comments. First of all and most importantly, what I'm doing today is to help preserve the history of Local 347 because after the merger, Local 347 no longer exists. I'm a big history buff and I really truly mean that and that's what I've been all my life in terms of when I first joined the union way back in 1965, so I believe in the preservation of the Local. With that said too, what I've got, you wanted maybe some copies of some of the stuff that I wrote as far as poems and things like that and also a copy of the journal that showed the Local 347 picnic. I'm going to give ya an original copy of the journal I'm gonna send to ya with the picnic pictures on it. It's totally dedicated just to that event and let me just tell you a little bit about it starting off I guess. I wanted to do something for the membership because we never, the Local had never, nothing to disgrace any past president of the Local, but we never really spent a lot of money on our membership in terms of things like this ever, and I wanted to something of that nature, so I decided to go ahead and rent or arrange to rent part of the Camden or the Camden Park in Huntington, West Virginia. And what it turned out to be, well first off we sent letters out--I sent a letter out to all our local stores and places we had under contract for our membership to sign that they were coming and after about 2 weeks out, we only had a handful of signatures. So I encouraged the reps to go out and really kind of push it because I wanted to have a little picnic and a nice gathering and I was hoping to have at least 300-500 people. We ended up having about 2,000 plus people. The event cost the Local over 40,000 dollars which I wasn't planning on that to happen but it did! Also after that event it went pretty much all through the UFCW International Union, Local Unions and I was getting beaucoup calls from other friends saying "What in God's name do you think you're doing down there? Now everybody wants to have a picnic!" (laughs) So I kinda got in trouble with the regional director and some other local union presidents but it was good, we paid for the picnic lunch for all the members and their families. We started out by having--I had 5 staff reps at 5 tables for lines, they were backed clear back into the parking lot in that park, trying to check names off and after about an hour that didn't work. It was Sunday, it was hot, so I just went back to the Camden Park people and I said, "We're having a lot more people here than I thought." So they closed the park down to the public and put up a big sign out there, "Welcome UFCW Local 347" and we had the park all to ourselves. Completely paid for with the rides, the picnic. Like I said, the total cost on it was like over 40,000 dollars. So that's what that...and plus besides all that, I bought and gave away door prizes (laughs). You know, we gave away 3 TVs, we have away 2 boom boxes, and some cash prizes and stuff like that so it got to be extremely expensive.

The other thing, on the poems, I honestly don't know how many I've written. I gathered some, the earlier ones that I wrote. One of 'em is "Profits" because my analogy starting out with the union early on was that

corporations were beating up on workers. I didn't like it, I got involved in politics, and to the very lengthy extent of that, more than what I should have. But I pretty much ate and slept politics because that's where it was at. And this. And I wrote this poem. I'll read it to you very quickly. But it says,

Profits are what the companies cry
 They're not making enough of
 So they raise their prices
 And lower our wages,
 And couldn't care less whether we survive.
 And as an end result, we skimp and scrape
 So this inflation we can beat
 To pay our bills and clothe our kids
 And just plain have enough to eat.
 The companies reach for more profits
 To be competitive and stay alive,
 To build more plants and create more jobs
 So we could all survive.
 But how can we work in a plant
 That's built thousands of miles away
 In some foreign land that couldn't give a damn
 About America anyway?
 And as for all that immense competition
 That they lead us to believe with all their twisted up jive,
 90% of it they own, 8% of it they're buying,
 And the other 2% is just barely alive.
 So I say to hell with all these inflationary profits
 That were brought on by company greed,
 Let's curtail this marketplace monopoly by passing some laws that we need.
 Like making these corporations expand here and create all these jobs at home
 Because I think it's about time the American worker has some profits of his own.

That's one I wrote early on--I'm not gonna read all these for time, but there's one I wrote called "What If?" That poem was published in the Flint Glass Magazine, which is a renowned magazine, it goes out worldwide actually and at the very top of it, it says, "This poem was written by Sterling Ball, his dad works in Dept. 10, Local 570." That's very lengthy but it's about where members don't get involved in their union and the politics tied in with it, how they could pass laws that first thing you know, you don't even have a union. It's a very lengthy poem and I think you might enjoy it. Another one I wrote is called "Bar Maid," and that was--we were out with the staff having lunch at a bar one time. It was a bar/restaurant, and a girl, a waiter named Jenny was being hit on by another guy in there and I got tired of it and I went up and I put a stop to it. So I wrote a poem about people like that that are working in low-paying, low-earning paying jobs and the end of this poem says, "The next time don't take them for granted by being some easy mark, because you might end up disappointed with a broken hand along with your heart. Because you see, they too are ladies and expect to be treated as such, they're here to wait on and serve you, not to touch." And that was dedicated to her because of the way this guy was acting. And a lot of my stuff, particularly the strike stuff, like I wrote a song on a strike that we had called "The Organizer's Lament" and a lot of 'em I wrote to tunes that were familiar, like this one I wrote to the tune of "Johnny Come Marching Home," and it's about a new organized group who had a real tough strike. I wrote that to kinda give 'em uplifting along with a couple other poems, and we sang that one on the picket line continuously. Another one I'll send you is called "The History of the Worker," it's to the tune of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," and it's very lengthy and it talks about how the unions came into existence. Another one I wrote also to the tune of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" that we sang on the picket line was "Ode to the Union," and that has to do with what unions do for wages and benefits. I'm

gonna send you also one, "Ode to Sherwood Spencer." He's the one that founded our Local back in 1944. I got to know him fairly well before he passed away and he was one that very much impressed me as a strong labor leader and I wrote that one about him. There's another one I wrote about a man named Dick Tussey who was an international organizer, when I became an organizer for the Local, I went to Columbus and got to participate in an international union organizing training, very lengthy, and I met this man and he liked me and I liked him real well. We both had the same thought. He was probably, well he was, he was a very radical person, some labeled him as a socialist because he believed in the Socialist Worker's Party, wanted to get away from the Democrat and Republican party and that kind of thing, so he was kind of an outlier you know, from the other people that worked for the International and he had an organizing campaign up there that I helped participate with, not a lot but a little bit up there, and the poem is written about that one, how the local, or the company took him for granted being one stupid guy because he looked like an old professor. [He] wore an old long coat, smoked a pipe, had grey hair, kinda chunky, and real slow talking. But he was a rabble rouser! And that kinda fit--I looked at him and was thinking, that's what I'm gonna end up looking like down the road when I get older (laughs). So if you want these, I will send you--they're old copies, but they...I'm gonna send those to ya and that will give you a little bit of history on the background of them if you have any questions, of course, obviously give me a call.

EH: Great, yeah thank you.

SB: So I'll send that to you. I didn't know if you wanted to, by the way and secondly I want to apologize for all the grammar mistakes and different punctuations and misspellings of the words. I put that together in a real hurry. That's why you have secretaries to type stuff and that's why you have computers to correct your spelling. And mine does that, but I don't know how to do it, so (laughs)

EH: No, that was great.

SB: That length paper I sent to you has a lot of that in it.

EH: Yeah, that was really great. You have done so much!

SB: I didn't know how you wanted to do this. I thought it might be easy to just submit in what I could remember, and I did have files and stuff of different things that I was involved in so I went through those and researched it and then I had some of the newsletters from our Local to research dates and places and times and different things that we had 'cause we had a lot of activity in our local. With that said, you probably could see that our local was strongly organizing.

EH: Yes.

SB: The president at that time, Jack Brooks, who hired me, was a very strong believer in organizing and we organized anything that would eat. So that's how come you see all those organizing campaigns and leaflet lines and stuff like that. And when I got on--and that's why I also liked to organize while I was still in the store and we'll get to that as we go through this, but at any rate, he was very strong in organizing and we had a lot of campaigns, some of 'em started just legitimately going in and trying to organize an employer that was competitive of one of our union locations. And then some of 'em like the restaurant, I was in there eating with a couple staff people and that's when I was an organizer and this guy come over and was giving this waitress down the river in front of us, it was embarrassing. And I stood up and dressed him down. He told me I needed to shut up and if I didn't like what was going on here I could leave and "I don't want you causing me, quote, any trouble!" And we got out to the car and I told the other organizer and staff rap, I said "That's exactly what we're gonna do. We're gonna come back and we're gonna 'cause him some trouble. If nothing else I'll put an informational picket line on him." So I started a

campaign, next thing I know I had 95% of the people signed on cards and we won the election, went to try to get a contract, didn't work, we ended up on strike. And when we went to the election part of it he said, "Don't I know you from somewhere?" I said, "Yeah, about probably 2 months ago I was eating in your restaurant and you told me if I didn't like things, to quit causing you trouble, to leave, well that's why I'm here friend." (laughs)

EH: (laughs) Nice.

SB: So that's how that one happened. But anyway, I'll quit running off at the mouth so you can do your interview however you want to do it. But that's why I did that, to give you some kind of a chronological order on how that would do. And by the way, this is not about me, it's about the history of our Local--how I see it through my eyes and whatever, however you want to put it. So, with that I'll shut up and you tell me how you want to do this! (laughs)

EH: (laughs) Okay, well I have a bunch of questions. But why don't we start. Why don't you introduce yourself and tell me who are, when you were born, and where you're from?

SB: Okay, my name is Sterling Ball. I was born on January 9, 1947, and I've lived in Parkersburg, West Virginia all my life and that's where I'm from, West Virginia.

EH: And tell me a little bit about your family background--what your parents did.

SB: Well my dad was a union man and worked at Corning Glass. He had got cancer, not cancer, but he got tuberculosis early in his life when I was about 2 years old. Went to Pinecrest Sanitarium for 2 years. When he came out, we were pretty poor growing up, and he worked actually 3 jobs. He worked at Corning Glass, he worked at a bakery as what do you call it--he called it an auditor. It wasn't exactly that but it was a Certified Public Accountant, that's basically what he was. And he drove a cab at night. So he worked 3 jobs and he ended up retiring from Corning Glass. He died early. He retired at age 55 and he died at age 60.

EH: Wow.

SB: So he didn't have a long life.

13:37

EH: Mmhm. How did you get your first job at Kroger and tell me a little bit about what it was like?

SB: Well, I was still working, I was still in school in high school. I wanted a part-time job to earn some extra money. I had worked at that time, was working at that time as a short order cook at a restaurant. I worked 54 hours a week there in the summer when school was out and my paycheck was 26 dollars and 51 cents. I'll never forget it. For 54 hours. And I started out working there as a dishwasher, worked my way up to short order cook. I was talking to a friend of mine who got on at Kroger and he was talking about how good a job it was. I put in an application and got hired while I was still in high school, so I worked there for several months in the winter. And then when I graduated in September, it was 1965, I pretty much immediately went into the service.

EH: Mmm, mmhm.

SB: And that was my first job with the union was with Kroger.

EH: Okay. And you said you wanted, when you got out of the service, you wanted to move to California and grow your hair long (laughs) and get a motorcycle?

SB: Yeah, yeah. During the Vietnam era, it was a lot of dissension going on. Most of us that first believed in the war to a certain extent and you know we took orders and that kind of thing, but at the same time we felt that you know it was a losing battle, wondering why we had the war. Many were demonstrating. I never actually demonstrated, but I still have original peace signs that people wore around their neck and things like this. Fact I got quite a collection, paraphernalia collection from Vietnam era and stuff. But any rate, when I came back, I went back to working at the store. I decided that I wasn't gonna work in the grocery store. I was gonna grow my hair as long as I could grow it, I was gonna buy me a Harley, and I was gonna go to California and I was gonna live as a hippie! A lot of people that I knew in the days did that. I decided to do it--didn't have no money. I spent pretty much all the money I had on the way back to Parkersburg. But at any rate, a guy told me about KIMBA, that's the credit union through Kroger and I borrowed what at that time was a lot of money for me, but wasn't very much money now. It was like 600 dollars. And I bought a used motorcycle and then I decided that I liked it and wanted to grade up, so I ended up having 2 or 3 loans through KIMBA, so I was stuck with Kroger and had to end up spending my time with Kroger, which I didn't want to. So I decided if I'm gonna do that, I'm not gonna be a clerk just running the register--there's nothing wrong with that--but I wanted to always wanted to work back in the meat department, so I got them to put me back there, ended up becoming a journeyman meat cutter. So that's how I started with Kroger.

EH: Yeah. Do you ever think about what your life would have been like if you had gone to California?

SB: (laughs) I don't know! In that day I was very radical kinda. I mean I was. Outspoken. I still am outspoken. I had certain beliefs that I believed in strongly and I defended those beliefs, really whether they were right or wrong. And that was reflected in my career as a union person too. And that's when I told you in the notes that I sent, how I ended up becoming involved in the union. But when I got back to Kroger, I found out 2 things. One was with the credit union, bought a motorcycle, but the other thing was that I got a \$2.45-hour raise and I was full-time, so it was hard to walk away from that so I stayed and got involved with what was going on there. I always thought too maybe to answer your question there, maybe I'd go out live the life a little bit easy as a hippie and then eventually go to college and become a lawyer and so forth. 'Cause I always liked law and stuff. But that didn't happen. Because of that thought in the back of my mind, after talking with some people there, I realized that we had something called a contract. And I knew what a contract was so I knew that, you know it's a legal binding between somebody and the company--us. So I started looking into it and find out if you got a contract there are certain things that you have to abide by. I didn't know what the contract was. Tried to get a copy of it from my local union, they would not give it to me. So I wrote the international union and they sent me a copy, which I started memorizing, particularly the article on working conditions and grievance processes. And I started studying things like got a copy of the National Labor Relations Act, got--I started getting copies of the BNA court, the Bureau of National Affairs reports on collective bargaining and organizing and grievance handling, things like that. So once I started learning that, I went....Well, first of all I went to a union meeting, the first one that I attended and I stood up and raised a ruckus about certain store manager doing things that I thought was in violation of at least federal law. And the man told me to shut up and sit down, I didn't know what I was talking about. And I realized he's right, and that's when I asked for all those contracts and started learning that. So the next meeting I went to, I quoted him articles in the contract. So as a result of that and going back, I rubbed union leadership feathers the wrong way. Our union representative at that time--I won't name him but he was, him and I didn't get along too good because he hardly ever visited the store but like 3 times a year and I didn't like that. So I started filing grievances on my own that I thought was in violation of National Labor Relations Act and I started quoting the act and right to join a union and pursuit of activity for protection and that was the key word. I started filing grievances. And all of a sudden I started seeing our representative pretty frequently and I was pretty much

told I needed to back off, that you're a rabble rouser, you're stirring trouble for the union and for the company and it's not good. And then the president of the local decided for me to be legal, he was gonna make me a steward. So next thing I know, I was called a union steward and had to study up on that to find out exactly what it is and what he does, and found out that I was doing the things that a union steward does. So when I started writing legitimate grievances, I guess is what they called them, then I quoted case law, different arbitrations, similar to the grievance I had were a union went and arbitrated a case and won it. And then that cause more problems because then I was quoting things they had no clue, and they thought I was trying to be a big shot. I said, "No, I'm trying to win a grievance and get back pay for this individual." And at the interim I was also doing organizing, 'cause when I started getting involved in on what a union was and could do, at that time I was president of the Parkersburg Area Labor Council and I had a key to the union building on 13th Street so I started holding meetings of workers there before the Local even knew it. And next thing I knew I had well, Dill's Ford for one, I organized and had almost 100% signed on cards. Sent the cards in myself to the National Labor Relations Board on behalf of Local 347. Next thing I know, the organizer from the union came to the store. And he wasn't mad or anything like that, but he came to go ahead and follow through with that election, and that's when I really went crazy and started organizing stuff. And then Jack Brooks, president of the Local decided rather before Kroger ended up firing me and me saying something to a company person, let alone getting physical, which I probably would have at that day, decided to hire me as an organizer, so I went to work for the union as an organizer.

EH: Wow

21:20

SB: But before that, I ran for the union executive board and won my seat there. When I found out how the structure of the local was, and then as a result of that, I started learning more about the local through the board meetings, which encouraged me even more to do work outside the store that I worked in for the local. And that's where organizing for me picked up at that time. And by the way, the Dill's Ford location, they were a little nervous about the auto workers filing some kind of complaint with the local. I told them, "I don't give a rat's rear end about the autoworkers, if they want to organize they should have been here to do it!" (laughs)

21:58

So it ended up being the first and I don't know if it's the only--it was definitely the first for our local and for our international auto dealership ever organized. And we had them under contract for probably 25 years and they finally closed down when the owner retired and the son took it over and he just ran it into the ground. And as a result of that, there's (laughs) went to a meeting when I was an organizer in Montgomery, West Virginia, a college down there. There was a professor that taught labor history--he and I became friends. I went down there and he wanted me to speak about organizing campaigns--the pro-labor perspective of it. And then Fred Holroyd who's an attorney out of Charleston gave the pro-company part of it and I went first and these two guys in the back of the room were laughing and giggling through the whole time period of it, and this one guy kept raising his pants leg up, rolling it up to about his knee like, you know, the crap's getting pretty deep in here? And the instructor was trying to quiet him down in a very calm way so it wouldn't interrupt me. But he didn't know me. So I went from the podium all the way back to where that guy was at and I said, "I don't blame you, you need to roll that other leg up 'cause your shits getting pretty deep." (laughs) and the guy just looked at me and then I asked the professor who he was and he told me that his dad owned a Subaru dealership in Parkersburg. I said "That's interesting!" So, I put a campaign on the Subaru dealership in Parkersburg and won an election! And when the dad came and said "Why in God's name--I know you guys had Dill's Ford under contract. Why are you bothering me?" I said, "Why don't you ask your boy back there." He said, "What's he got to do with it?" And I told him the story about me talking and speaking down in Montgomery and I said, "You gotta find

out something about me real quick. I don't take no crap from nobody and you do that, I'm gonna be on ya like white on rice. So that's why you're organized. That's why we're gonna be negotiating a contract because your son's sitting back there harassing me. I didn't like that."

EH: Wow.

SB: (laughs) So some of my campaigns were like that. The Food Land in Parkersburg? If I rattle too much, you just stop me.

EH: Oh okay, this is good.

24:15

SB: The Food Land in Parkersburg was the result of, I used to lift weights a lot and the guy I was lifting weights with came in one day on Saturday morning, said he got fired. And I said, "From Food Land?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "I thought that was going good out there." He said, "Well it was but she fired me because I was late one time." And I said, "Well she can't do that." So I started a campaign there and won the election, I negotiated the contract, got the contract there and we had that contract for about 12-15 years before they closed the business down and went south. And the Dill's Ford contract by the way happened similar to that. The friend of mine that was, well he's a friend of a guy I worked with at the store--came to him and he got fired. And I went ahead and said "Here are some cards, see if you can get 'em signed." And he did and we had everybody that worked in the service department, the big truck area, and the service rider, come to the meeting and I signed 'em all on cards. That's how we got the dealership, the Ford dealership in Parkersburg.

EH: Wow. Did your dad talk about being a union man and were there other union members in your family? Did you grow up with an awareness of that?

SB: No I did not. My dad talk about being in the union to the respect that he was glad because some of the people that we knew, those around us at the time and some family members had lost jobs unfairly, you know, not by seniority and other different reasons, and would have been protected if they had a union. And I remember him talking about that at the dinner table--how glad he was that we had quote a union contract. That stuck in my mind too when I found out that we had a union at Kroger, then there's got to be some kind of a contract. Because I remember dad talking about that too. But he was thankful that he had that protection that they couldn't fire him unless he did something wrong, not because he happened to get sick which one of our, I think one of my uncles got fired because of the sickness. Now I don't know how long he was off sick. I don't know that. But that was the underlining reasoning and I remember dad talking about that. So yeah, there was some talk of union in our family but not a lot other than that.

EH: Why don't you tell me about the Fas Chek unfair labor practice strike?

26:32

SB: Okay. At that time there were several of 'em that I listed there. Fas Chek was one of 'em. There was oh my goodness, there was a whole bunch of 'em, but basically on that one we had set up an organizing campaign there. They had done something--I can't remember--made threats. We ended up with, well we started up with an informational picket line. We did a lot of informational picket lines, that this place is non-union. We did that to protect our union stores, but in the process of doing that, the company had challenged us in court to remove us, but also they had fired some employees that they thought was involved with the union, of the campaign, which we had really not at that point. So we decided to really

hammer that particular location and a couple others with informational lines and then start an organizing campaign as well. But we did--go ahead.

EH: No, no, no--you go ahead.

SB: Well, what I was getting ready to say was, we had different picket lines all the way through West Virginia, not just with Fas Chek, but we had 'em with Food Lion and oh my goodness, a lot of stores in terms of informational picket lines. And to be honest, the Fas Chek I think you're talking about was in the mid-late-70s. Like I said the ULP charge went after we started the organizing campaign and they were firing people. And that's another thing too, there were unions in that day that would start a campaign and people would get fired and they'd walk away from 'em and we did not do that. We did not do that. We didn't ever do that, even if we knew we were not gonna get a contract, the president of the local at that time and we followed suit with whoever the president was, including myself, that if we started a campaign, we told you we'd protect you, we would. And we had campaigns with just handfuls of members, you know less than 10, that we wasn't able to get a contract, but if the company violated our right we filed a charge and we carried it to the very end. But that ULP charge on that Fas Chek was due to starting out with an informational picket, then organizing campaign, and then because of the ULP charge, we ended up with an Unfair Labor Practice strike for a while. We never got a contract, but we did protect the people and let 'em know that we're sitting behind 'em.

EH: In your experience what conditions need to be in place for a strike to be successful?

SB: Well it goes back, it actually goes back to the very start of your campaign. When I organize as an organizer or even when I was organizing when I was still working at Kroger as a meat cutter, what I did was, I got a calendar--an actual calendar. And I Xed out what I thought the election day should be. And then I Xed it all the way back, Xed the calendar back all the way back to the beginning of the campaign. And what I did, I planned on for example in one group, Heck's in Marietta, Ohio, I met with two employees for lunch in Williamstown, West Virginia. And we started there and gave 'em cards, got everybody signed on cards, had our first meeting and this and told 'em basically what we were looking at. And if they decided they wanted to go forward with it, then we did. If they decided they didn't then it ended there, and that way the company didn't know that the union was sniffing around. To prepare for a strike, you have to start there with the solidarity of the people and that's very important. So the campaign for the election, you try to get people signed up in every department--to have representation from every department throughout the store. That's your grocery people, your meat department, your deli, produce, all those, night crews, all those to have a good team of people as an organizing committee. And your strength starts there. Now that strength for that particular issue is to win the election obviously. And to find out information--what's going on with the company, going throughout that location that you're trying to organize. Then once you do that, then you go to the election, if you win the election, then of course you start bargaining. Now bargaining you also have, now in my opinion you have to plan the same strategy like you're gonna end up on strike. So what you do again, I don't want to say you're pumping the people up, but you keep with the people, have meetings with them, keep them abreast of what's going on on a regular basis, have an organizing committee for organizing, but have a committee--a collective bargaining committee even before you start collective bargaining. So you pick quickly who you want on that committee and you have an election. So I did both. I had an election, who the people wanted to run for the committee and negotiate the contract and now I reserved the right to fill in a spot if I needed to. So for example if I had 5 people that was gonna be elected and of those 5 nobody would represent the meat department, I'd appoint somebody. So that kept the whole store unified in the bargaining process all the way through. During the bargaining, usually the first contract is going to be tough. They're gonna work hard, it's a hard contract, you're putting in language for the first time to build on that, so you have to again work hard to keep the people together in case you do end up on strike. You keep 'em abreast of what's going on all the way through the negotiation process in case you end up on strike. You don't tell 'em

verbatim exactly day-to-day negotiations but you do let them know how things are going. And you say, "You know, we've been talking about this. We think we might be able to get this and so forth and so on." If things start to go south, you do the same thing there. And you start really preparing the membership, you know "You have to stay strong, you have to stay unified. You know the first step we won, that's the organizing campaign." The organizing and win and election is useless if you don't get a contract. So the people really band together stronger during the bargaining process than they really did during the organizing effort. And once I had a good strong unit, a good example of that is Montgomery Elderly Care in Montgomery, WV, it's a nursing home. Of course it is in the heart of the United Mine Worker area, but that's one that I really worked hard on because it's a nursing home and I knew how that would go. I knew that you just can't up and strike a nursing home--there are certain things you have to go through before that would happen and the attorney that they had was Fred Holroyd out of Charleston. Him and I actually became pretty good friends through that bargaining process 'cause he also represented Heck's, with I bargained with him against on some Heck's contracts. But at any rate, he played hardball. So I wanted--he didn't know us and I was having regular meetings with the membership. In fact, I would have not just my members there, but I'd have their fathers and their dads and their brothers and their mothers who worked in the mines (laughs). So we kept strong. Well we ended up right down to the wire to get a first contract and I went through the process of notification like I had to. Threatened to strike, took the strike vote and we had 100%. Fred met in my office in Charleston and said, "I can't believe you boys," he always calls people boys, "You boys will actually strike this nursing home." I said, "No, we're not striking it. You are leading your employer the wrong way and they're gonna end up on strike. We don't want to do it, but we're gonna end up." When I did the vote, the employer--director of the nursing home called me and said "Sterling, what do you need out of this to avoid this." And I told her. I said, "It's not a big deal. Fred's playing games with you and I said we will strike on that date that I gave you." Went through all the legal process. "We don't want to, but we will." And the issue was basically healthcare and the sad thing about it was that our healthcare was cheaper than what they had already. And it had more benefits with it. So they succumbed to that. I think about an hour later I got a call from Fred, said "Well we got an agreement." And that's how that went and the only reason was because the membership was strong--they were ready to walk out. And they reflected that to the company. And that's another thing that when I was involved not only in the organizing but most of those collective bargaining agreements I negotiated those myself. Sometimes when I had a staff rep with me, and the bigger ones the president of the local like Kroger, A&P he negotiated, but I negotiated a lot of the independents. And that's what I did. I kept the people abreast of what's going on, they stayed strong, and they were speaking in the workplace of what was needed or there was gonna be a problem. And that's how come we got a lot of the contracts that we did get. So to answer your question, to be strong for a strike, we prep 'em that way. Then if you have to take a strike vote, then you usually get your 2/3 majority needed. Now, with that said, I learned that from Local union leadership that preceded me. They did not do that. And we had a couple contracts with Kroger that got turned down because they waited 'til the very last minute of presenting the proposal to the membership and you got to understand, West Virginia is strong, worker strong, unlike they are in some of the other states of the union, and the president of the local got caught with his drawers down and almost ended up in a bad, bad, bad situation. Fact there was an issue in Montgomery where the workers walked out of a Kroger store because a person got fired. So they didn't, you know, we didn't have that. And I'm not bragging on Sterling Ball, I'm just saying that that's one area that I learned that if you, you gotta negotiate a contract like you're gonna end up on strike and prepare the people for that if you have a group of people that's strong, keep 'em strong all the way through the process. Don't just drop 'em once the organizing campaign has happened and they won, then what would happen sometimes I've seen no contact with that membership for maybe a month and a half until you really start negotiations. And that's not good because the people are wondering where you're at. They're looking for a contract the next day. That's what happens. So a lot of your organizing campaign--they're looking for that contract tomorrow and they don't understand that it takes longer than that to get it.

EH: Mmhm. Was this the strike in Montgomery with the Montgomery Kroger that created the reason there's riot language in the Kroger contract? Alan asked me to ask you that.

37:03

SB: No, no, the Montgomery walkout happened...of course Montgomery, West Virginia is heavily mine worker. That happened during my tenure as leadership and as vice president of the local and president of the local. 'Cause I did a lot. I helped the president doing things that he would normally do when I was vice president. And I got a call in the office from Kroger, said that you need to get down to Montgomery and send a rep down there because the people are out with picket signs. And we didn't have any idea what was going on. So Clyde Foster, our representative at the time, I sent him down there. He called back on the pay phone and told me what was going on--that they'd fired a person for some really dumb, and it was a dumb thing, and they were not going to go back to work. So I called Al Kohler back who was the personnel director at Kroger in Roanoke and I told him I said, "Look," I said, "We can resolve this if you want to." I said "one of two ways." I said "I realize that we don't have a right to strike in the contract. I know that. But I also know that I can leave this picket lines on there for 48 hours before you get an injunction to get 'em off. I don't think you want me to do that but I will." I said, "Here's what happened" and I told him how come the person got fired and he said, "Are you serious. Is it that idiot co-manager?" And I said, "It's your idiot co-manage for!" He said, "Sterling, I'll have him back to work in about 10 minutes." I said, "Okay!" (laughs) So they put him back to work in 10 minutes and paid him for what all that time he was off work, for firing him until they got him back. I think it was like 2 or 3 hours, and that was a strike that was not legal (laughs) in Montgomery. But that did set the ground for a new assistant personnel director that was new to West Virginia and new to me and our local when that happened and when he took over as the position that Al Kohler had, I reminded him that our workers will strike at a heartbeat, you know that, in these negotiations, so I think that carried a little weight--that one store what they did--to being able to get a contract with Kroger. And we did have a strike with Kroger. The Teamsters Union struck for about 7 or 8 days and we were told by Kroger, "You better work or else," and all this stuff, and I got the same threats that any company would give. And what they didn't know was, I said, "Well I'm gonna research this," and I did and from our own legal attorneys and I found out that you gotta do under the contract, which is language that I put in there some time before that, that, and I think it's federal law--I think it was law 2 under National Relations--Labor Relations Act--well anyway, that we had the right if we feared for our safety. So on that situation I told the people to just write me a letter, let me know if you fear for your safety, you're not gonna cross. So we had about 90% of our people that did not cross the picket line as a result of that Kroger put up signs in their window that said "Do not apply. No work offered" or something like that. So we had 'em take pictures of the signs that Kroger put up and then I sent members to Kentucky, Ohio, and West Virginia to apply for work! You know, we had like 15, 20 people at each location wanting to go to work. Of course the managers were in there, but they didn't have no idea what to do, so they told them no, there's no work here. So when they locked 'em out like that, then we filed unemployment and Kentucky is one of the hardest states to get unemployment in--it was the first state to give us unemployment! Ohio came next and West Virginia, believe it or not was third. So our members got unemployment for at least a week of unemployment during that lockout that we had supporting the Teamsters, who they were the ones that drove the trucks to send groceries to the Kroger stores.

EH: Mmhm, mmhm. You say in the document in the few times that a strike got bad. What do you mean by that, when a strike got bad?

41:03

SB: Uh....okay. You got one in particular here? There's a couple actually.

EH: Um...

SB: The one at the B&L Furniture strike is one that I can remember. That B&L Furniture strike, that was in Logan and Madison, West Virginia. We never did a contract--wait we did get a contract there. I take that back, I think we did. But what happened there was the company got really really nasty and dug their heels in and I mean just argued about dumb things. I wasn't involved in the negotiations on that but I was involved in some of the things that we did and the tenure of that is run out where of course you can't do anything about it so (laughs)...So we followed the trucks, we followed the trucks and we had 2 teams of people, I was in one and the other two staff was in the other. And Jack Brooks who was president of the local, I was with him. And we followed this one truck up to this location for delivery and Jack said I'm gonna go ahead and talk to the guy and you make sure this vehicle stays safe. So me and this other guy went around to cut the bow stems (?) on the truck--flattened all 4 tires! So when they came back out, Jack was talking to this guy, he was an older man. He got kind of arrogant with Jack and Jack said, well you know what you need to do, you don't want to take these union jobs. There are jobs out there available for truck drivers that pay better than this and this is a non-union job, and getting sense into the guy. After he talked to him, this was standing by his truck. After he talked to him and the guy started to come around a little bit, and Jack said, "Besides that, you can't make any more deliveries today anyway!" He said, "Why can't I?" He said, "You got 4 flat tires!" (laughs)

EH: (laughs)

42:44

SB: So the guy looked at Jack and he said, "You know what Mr. Brooks, you're right! I think I need to find me a better job! Besides, I can't drive this truck anyway!" He said, "You're right, brother!" (laughs) So he told him of the other place that we had under contract and he said "I'll put in a good word for you." And he did, and he got him a job. So those are kinda the things. That was a bad strike that we finally, finally got settled. But I do remember that one (laughs) sticks out quite a bit. So we...

EH: Yeah. How have you seen the labor movement change over the years?

SB: Oh my God. Oh Lord. Well (sighs and laughs) a lot of ways, I hate to say. But before I tell you that and answer that question, let me just say this. The labor movement can still be--can be and is to a certain way as strong as we always were. The problem is that there's an element out there--let me go back to this part. We have lifted workers up, clear back, and I love the United Mine Worker history. I'm a history nut with what happened in West Virginia. John L. Lewis is one of my favorite people. I wished I could have met him personally. When we had the organizing campaign at Montgomery Nursing Home and the contract, I had meetings organizing meetings and then contract meetings at the United Mine Worker hall in Cannelton, West Virginia, which is now since burned down. But in that meeting they had a huge, huge picture of John L. Lewis behind the podium. And that first meeting I got there--I wanted, I mean I couldn't believe that picture of him. It was like a 20x something. It was gigantic. And after that meeting I went on about how John Lewis was a hero of mine, so forth and so on. At that meeting we had husbands and fathers there--those ladies that we organized and one man come up after the meeting and I thought he was gonna hit me or do something because during the meeting a couple of 'em in the back said, "Well let's just go ahead and strike, we'll get a better contract." And I had to remind them that they were welcome to stay but this was not your meeting. This is your wife's meeting or your daughter's meeting. And finally they calmed down, but anyway, one of 'em came up, one of the ones that made that comment and he said, "I need to talk to you!" And I said, "Okay, you wanna talk here or you wanna go outside?" cause I didn't know if we wanted to bounce it down, dance or what! (laughs) It turned out it was friendly! And he said, "No, we can talk here." He said, "I liked what you said about John L. Lewis. He's also a hero of mine." And he said, "Do you have an office? And I said, "Yeah, In Charleston." He said, well you wait right here

and I'll be right back. And I said, wait here? And he said "Yeah." I said, "Well I'll be here for probably another half hour." 'Cause you know we never get out of a meeting once it's over with for about a half hour and 40 minutes later, you know talking to people. He came back and he had an 8x10 signed copy by John L. Lewis of that same picture. And he said, "I'm gonna give you this picture if you'll promise me you'll put it in your office." I said, "It'll be right behind my desk." And it was.

EH: Oh cool.

SB: But that, the solidarity, going back to the question, the solidarity that was there during the 70s and 80s and even the 90s, I don't think is there now. And I think what happened is that the labor movement by the grace of God and doing what we need to do, has brought workers up from being 3rd class to middle class and higher, and the companies have been very effective also in weakening laws that really go against workers, and West Virginia used to be, used to be a democratic state. I'll give you a good example. Beckley and down around Fayetteville, Hinton, down that way toward the lower part of the state, you could not run and win an election unless you was a Democrat.

EH: Mmhm.

SB: You couldn't do it. You couldn't run as a Republican. West Virginia primarily was a Democratic state it's just reversed that now. We have seen and like I told you, I love politics and I lobbied for 20 some plus years. And when the Republicans took over in West Virginia, you probably know what's happened there, they totally went after labor unions. And that's what happened. We have lost our clout and ability to protect our members in the political process. And the other part of that coin is to be honest, our membership doesn't look toward the union like they used to because they look more toward an employer, wealthy versus a laborer who is somewhat weak in terms of needing a union. My own son who graduated from Virginia Tech 3rd in his class as an engineer, lived the life, grew up as a union per--grew up in a union household. He was involved with that lockout in Ravenswood, West Virginia--he was there on assignment down there and called me and wanted to know what can I do? That's how I got word that they were walking out and I called the president of the steel worker at that time and told him there was an issue going on down here. And he was very very pro-Democrat, pro-labor, pro-everything. Now I heard him, the last conversation I had with him was about 3 months ago and he said, "You know what dad, I don't think labor unions are needed as much as they used to be." That about killed me.

EH: Yeah.

48:27

SB: That's what it is. We, and when I say we I'm talking about labor leaders, we have got[tten] too slack. We have not stayed with our membership. Like my philosophy was that the journal, when I took over the leadership of the president of the local, I completely changed our newsletter. I put scripture from the Bible in each section of the newsletter. Like the health and welfare page where all of our health and welfare now I quote scripture. And I put in all our area meetings that we had so people couldn't forget. I started a page on recognizing members, called Members Faces, and I just had the staff take pictures of the members in the stores and we'd gather up a bunch of those and we'd put a collage of about 8-10 pictures in every newsletter. The other thing was, we recognized our stewards. Did a brief background on each one of them in the newsletter. Our executive board, we did the same thing--picture and a background of them. In other words what I wanted to do was make the newsletter member-oriented and bring them into the fold. When I did that, our membership meetings picked up. Now we're back the other way. You'll be lucky in Charleston--in Charleston we used to have 220 people come to a meeting. In Charleston we're lucky if we have 8 or 10.

EH: Wow.

SB: And that's what's happening not just with our local but with all of the locals. And the reason for it is because the leadership has went back to the saying that you know, "I'm here, I don't want nobody taking my job." And the only thing they really look at and I hate to say it, not all are like that but a lot of them are, if you get in trouble, we'll file a grievance, take care of ya, otherwise, you're probably not gonna see me. Now our local does do visitation regularly. Our local is not like that thank God--that's the Local 400 that I merged with in the year 2000. And I did that because the president at that time was member-oriented. And he did visitations. They were required to do so many a visits a week in stores and that kind of thing and I liked that because a lot of unions didn't do that. But to answer your question, we have lost really good contact with the membership and the membership, we have good contracts and that's a good thing, but I think we've done ourselves harm when we...no, I don't want to say it that way either, but when we've done such a good job organizing and brought the working class up to the middle class, the working class, like Eugene V. Debs said, that the working class has nothing in common with the employer class, or the rich or wealthy. And whether or not you believe it or don't there's some good and plus on that statement, some I really agree with and some I don't, but the bottom line is that because of the energy the company has put forth in union busting starting back to early campaigns back in the 80s and 90s, that's expanded on and now the companies have more control through the political process and they're willing to fight ya and to be honest sometimes the union are too weak to fight 'em.

EH: Right. Mmhm.

SB: So with that said, our local, thank God, is not one that will stand by and allow things like that to happen and like I said that's why I want to organize with Local 400. And that came out of my last contract in '96 I think it was '98 with the Kroger Company. We ended up on about a 4-hour strike 'cause the company thought that I didn't mean business and we didn't have cell phones and things like that in that day, but I knew we were having tough negotiations after about 25 meetings so I had strike signs made, I gave 'em to all 5 staff reps, in all the areas, in Parkersburg clear down to Kentucky and Ohio, Beckley, Charleston, Parkersburg, all of 'em. Each store had signs. Each store had 'em. And at midnight on October, I think it was the 21st, I can't remember the exact date--on that Saturday at midnight if we didn't have a contract we were on strike. We were at the Holiday Inn in Charleston, West Virginia, we had about 12 Kroger members down there on the committee, on the negotiating committee and I had the full staff down there, we were fighting for our health and welfare and our pension especially, and we needed about another 25 cents in the pension or we was gonna have a problem. Kroger wouldn't give it so the last meeting that we had was around 11:30. The Kroger was up on the top floor, we were down on the bottom floor of the meeting room, and about a quarter til 12, I told the people to pack up, we're leaving at 12. I called the newspaper, Charleston Gazette, told 'em that the negotiations had broke down and will be on strike at midnight. One of the zone managers, Benny Rennick came downstairs--he's a zone manager for Kroger in Charleston area and said Mr. Kohler wants you to come up, he needs to talk to you now. And I said you tell Mr. Kohler if he wants to Sterling Ball, he can come down here. So he said "Okay." So he went up, Kohler came down about 5 minutes later and he said "What's going on?" I said, "What do you mean what's going on?" He said, "We're up there quote watching TV..." Well right off that bat, that pissed me off. He said, "We're up there watching TV and a little ribbon came across the bottom of the station and said, "Sterling Ball, president of the Local 347 says Kroger will be on strike at midnight." I said, "Well first off, why are you up there watching TV when you're supposed to be negotiating this contract and giving me a second proposal here for what I just gave you." Or a counter proposal. And I said, "That upsets me." And I said, "What part of that didn't you understand, Al?" He said, "You can't go on strike." I said, "Oh yeah" and I looked at my watch and about 5 minutes, I said, "It's 5 of 12 and in 5 minutes we'll be on strike." "You can't do that." And I said, "Well why can I not do that?" I said, "What part of that that I told you do you not understand." "Well we never have done that." I said, "Well, maybe never, but there's always time a first time for everything my friend!" I said, "We'll be on strike at 12." And he said "You

can't possibly do it. You have to have time to get strike signs out." I said, "No, we've already done that." I said, "I tell you what. It's already around midnight, you call any store you want, I don't care which one you call, Charleston, Parkersburg, Beckley, Gallipolis, Ohio, Kentucky, I don't care. Any of 'em. And ask them what's going on in that store." So he sent zone managers up to call a store in their area and every one of them came back down and said, "Oh my God, they're out on the street." And I said, "What part of that didn't you understand?" And then after, he said, "Well what's it gonna take to settle it?" I said, "Protect the pension fund, put another quarter on the wage rate, and put 20 cents in health and welfare, we got an agreement! Exactly what I told you the last, probably the last 6 hours." And he went back up, talked to his people, come back downstairs and said, "We got an agreement." I said, "Okay!" And he said, "Now we got another problem." I said, "What's that?" He said, "The lady, a head checker in Gallipolis walked out with money in the office." I said well she probably shouldn't have done that, was there a co-manager there?" He said, "Yeah." "Was he in the office?" "Well yeah, but he don't have no clue what to do." He said, "What do you think I should do there?" I said, "Well you know what, I think you probably better start training your co-managers to work the office." (laughs) "Because you get in a situation like that, that's what's gonna happen!"

EH: Right.

55:31

SB: That is the contract that I changed too because used to be that, well no I take that back--the first contract I negotiated was Kroger, which was a couple contracts before that. Kroger always had the first meeting where they told the doom and gloom, how the stores were losing money. They compared us to Virginia, what they called the other side of the mountain, and they, we have the 40-some stores at that point, almost 50 and about half of 'em were in the red and probably could close--all this kind of stuff. So when they got done he said, "Well I guess what we need to do then is come back in the morning. What time do you want to start Sterling, about 8 or 9, and we'll change the proposal." I said, "No, we're not done." He said, "Well that's the way we've always done it." I said, "No, we're not done. I want to give you my little proposal and my little spiel." And he said, "What are you talking about?" I said, "Just sit back down, I'll tell ya." I bought 2 shares of stock in the Kroger company. 3 years earlier. And got a complete breakdown of all what Kroger was doing quarterly, in their statements--what they filed and all that stuff. I gave that to the Institute for Labor Studies which I served on for many, many, many years, knew all the people up there, Institute for Labor Studies and Research--they changed it later. And I had one of the professors up there that I knew real well to do a study on that. And I said, "I want you to put together a program on Kroger's net profits that I could present and deficits, whatever the case may be, so that I can present a slideshow to Kroger the first day of negotiations. And they did that, and I had a slideshow.

EH: Wow.

SB: So I went through about a 35-minute slideshow with Kroger, went through the whole thing. I had the most beautiful speech you have ever heard to talk about, and I wanna brag on me--I studied this and I practiced it, oh my God, I don't know how many times! Said I was gonna tell the divisional vice president at that time that was there about how now we're gonna do things differently. So when I finished, I said, "Okay, guys, what do you think?" Ed Civiking (sp?) who was a marketing vice president for that region--he was the one I was going to go after. He stood up and said, "Well, Mr. Ball, what can I say? Those are exactly our numbers." And he totally deflated me like any labor leader could ever possibly be deflated. He cut my legs out from underneath of me, all that little 35-40-minute speech I had was totally gone for nothing.

EH: Wow.

SB: So I'm trying to think on my feet and I'm saying, "Well I guess then there shouldn't be any problem you giving us a decent raise and taking care of some of the benefits and some of the things I'm going to present to ya, and I'm gonna go ahead and give 'em to you today!" (laughs)

EH: (laughs)

SB: But that one ended up close to a strike but we did get an agreement before the deadline on that. But the other one with the different VP, he took things a little differently and the negotiator for Kroger was real nasty at that time. They used to have a different negotiator. Now I think they have [unintelligible], but they played hardball, and that's why we ended up on strike. We was on strike about 3 hours. I think it was about from 3 o'clock when we signed the agreement. The other thing I did differently with that other contract and did with this one was when we got an agreement with the Kroger Company, usually the president and the VP signed off on the agreement. What I did was something different. They didn't like it--I think some of the regional locals followed through with it. I said, "We're going to sign off on each article of the contract." He said, "What are you talking about?" I said, "I'm talking about we had a wage arbitration we should have never had that cost us money and you money and we won it because you tried to interpret the wage brackets differently than what you knew what they were. We're not gonna do that anymore. We're gonna cut out our arbitration. 'Cause here's what's gonna happen. We started with Article 1 Intent and Purpose," the intent and purpose disagreements for mutual arming and so forth, okay? So I said, "We're gonna start with Article 1 all the way back and we're gonna sign off on each article. You're gonna sign it, and I'm gonna sign it." And that's what we did--every article. You know if we didn't have a proposal on it, we signed off on that article. Then he said, "Well what's the purpose?" I said, "The purpose is that if we have an arbitration on any interpretation of this article, I will submit that as an exhibit during the arbitration, that you're agreeing that that's what the language is and that's what it means." So we did that and guess what? We never had an arbitration the 8 years of those 2 contracts. We never had 1. Got grievances, but we always got 'em settled. And then the last thing that I did was, because I had a little member in Kentucky, stood up in the meeting down there, cut me to pieces because he did not agree to this, 'cause the members got real rowdy down there. And they were after him too. "You ain't into that kind of stuff, or you went down to represent us and you didn't do it." And I had each one of that--after that I had each of the committee people also sign off on the contract when we got done. So we had two copies of the contract proposals signed off on by myself and the leadership of the company. Then we passed it around to all 5 zone reps for them to sign it and for all my committee, all 12 of my committee signed it, and our staff signed it. I said that way nobody's gonna come out and say they didn't understand what negotiations were all about, and that's what we did!

EH: Wow.

SB: Okay, I'm rattling on! You're gonna have to control me 'cause I'm... (laughs)

EH:(laughs) well you mentioned John Henry in the document and then you know, John Lewis and Eugene Debs. Are there other stories or what are the historical examples of labor and worker rights that you look to for inspiration?

SB: I'm sorry again, not what was the question

1:01:14

EH: Yeah, so you mentioned John Henry and Eugene Debs and John Lewis and I was curious about the stories or historical examples that you look to for inspiration?

SB: Well, definitely the Mine Wars as far as inspiration to organize and kinda unite our members together. I think probably they were one of the best examples that the labor movement ever had in terms of solidarity. The Ravenswood walkout, it wasn't a strike--the walkout [lockout] was another that I was deeply involved in in terms of helping the Steelworker Local 5668 up there. We did some things that we probably can't talk about, (laughs) but the solidarity of that group and that solidarity to be honest was brought on by the women and most of those women were mothers and wives of the workers that were locked out. And they started the movement that solidified the workers, actually. The workers after about a year were starting to get, you know, really or about 6 months, were really starting to get weak. And that proved to me beyond any doubt that even when families are struggling to put food on their table, pay their bills because they've been out of work so long on a lockout where a company is trying to break your back to starve you to death and starve you back to work on a really horrible contract, these workers' wives kept them strong, therefore they stayed strong and they won the battle that most would, including myself, most would have probably believed you couldn't win. And that was inspiration big time to know what I already, or to learn what I already knew, that if you keep your union strong and the solidarity of the membership strong, you'll end up with a decent contract.

And if you don't do that in terms like I was talking about having regular meetings and visits and take care of your grievances--that's another thing that really irritated me because leadership in our past, that's one of the reasons I ran against the president at that time because there was trading of grievances I did not agree with, and different things that was going on that was harming our local. Not only it wasn't right for that particular member, in fact if the grievance has merit it should go forth. You don't trade it for something else. And at that time, during that period of time, the company, some of the company zone reps basically even said that. "Well if I give you this one, what will you give me?" That's trading grievances. And you might have a weak grievance that you wouldn't take to arbitration, but yet you felt it was strong enough to take it on through the steps of the grievance process--you don't trade that one off because that's not what you do. And that's one thing that I changed big time.

So I think that keeping members strong, protecting them, the 40,000 dollars that I spent on that picnic, to this day I don't regret that at all. I had like I told you in that printout that I don't know how many people and I'm not bragging about this, I mean it showed glory to what we did for our members that called me, and the one that really, really stuck out in my mind was a little lady from Kentucky, poor, the rep said this family has nothing and they had 4 kids and they bought--oh my God, I get chills just thinking about it--they brought those 4 kids to Camden Park, they got to ride the ride, have a picnic lunch, all 6 of 'em--they ate. And she said they always wanted to go to Disneyland, that was the closest to Disneyland but it was even better 'cause it was in West Virginia. And it had been an hour drive to get there 'cause they lived in Kentucky, and that was in Huntington. And said they really had a great, great time and really thanked me. So that's what makes it, that's what makes a union a union is taking care of your members, taking care of those that have nothing, through contract negotiations, through arbitration to protect their jobs--those kinds of thing where local unions, at least at that time--I don't even know if any of 'em still do it or do it today even--they have events where they give discounts off on tickets--I know certain locals do that. But to have a local to do what we did, I know that's expensive, but I thought it was worthwhile and I didn't do it to win an election or anything like that. In fact, I had just won the election. But something to do nice for the membership and I think that's important. The organizing activity that we did and the handbills, where some of it was basically punishment because like they did at the bonanza, that's true there, but most of those, about all those handbills and organizing campaigns were because members needed it. Their members were suffering and struggling in there.

The nursing home in Parkersburg, West Virginia, we only had 12 people that I organized up there, because the company was beating them up, they were working triple shifts which is illegal. They were doing things that they shouldn't be doing, so we organized, started organizing nursing homes. The Local International, or the International Union told me to stay away from nursing homes--you spend too much

money and you get nothing back in return. And I didn't look at it that way. There was a nursing home called Scenic Hills in Gallipolis, Ohio. We never got a contract down there but we organized it, had an election, won overwhelmingly the election, went to negotiations. This guy flew a plane in from California where the parent company was. They had a conglomerate nursing home I found out later that he flew into Charleston, had a private plane--he was a pilot--that he rented and flew to Gallipolis Airport there in Gallipolis, Ohio, started a negotiation, Jack Brooks was president at the time. He started him, then let he let me take over 'cause he got too angry with the guy. This was negotiations where the CNAs and the laundry and housekeeping and the kitchen people were all part of the bargaining unit. I had a CNA, a guy that was probably 6 foot 6", weighed close to 300 lbs. to sit on that committee. And I'll never forget it, after about 4 meetings after that I had, had 'em after about 12 or 14, we weren't getting anywhere and the guy says, "Mr. Ball, can I talk to you outside?" and I said "Yeah." So we started walking around the building at the Holiday Inn there in Gallipolis, Ohio and I said, "You're not gonna give us a contract are you?" He said, "No I'm not and you can't get it." And he said, "You know why you can't get it? Because these people are too dedicated to their clients and won't do that to harm 'em." I said, "Did you hear what you just said?" I said, "They're dedicated to the client. That makes them a really good employee and you don't want to reward that for God's sake? You could trade that good employee for a bad employee that would be just the opposite of that. These people are dedicated to these people they serve, just like a mother or a dad or a grandma, or a grandpa to them. And you don't want to take care of them?" I said, "And you know what?" And I called him an asshole. I said, "You're an asshole. That's what you are." And he said, "Well do what you want but you can't strike 'cause they won't strike we already know that." So I didn't say anything, went back into this bargaining table and I said, "Well we had a lengthy discussion outside." And I said and I called him by his name, "Why don't you go ahead and tell us what your feelings are and then I'll share after that." And he started out by saying this. I'll never forget it. He said, "Well Mr. Ball, it's like this. you guys will not strike, I know that. You can't win a strike, I know that. So we're not gonna give you a contract. You can file the Unfair Labor Practices Charge you want to but you know what, the bottom line is, I can get any dumbass, illiterate individual to wipe someone's A-double S for minimum wage." He said that across the bargaining table and the girls got mad. This guy that's 6'6" stood up, he was on the end of another table, there was no tablecloth on it, when he stood up, I don't know what he intentionally did with his hands or his knees caught the table 'cause he was so big. He hit that table and that table turned OVER. And Jody Ward our organizer was on way on the other end of the table, run down there and grab the man and said, "No you don't want to do this." He was ready to knock somebody out. (laughs) So bottom line is, I took it back to, they gave us a final offer, and I took it back and I told the people we don't recommend it, but I can tell you right now, I know you're not gonna strike, and there was crying in that meeting that day, 'cause they didn't want to strike because it would harm the people that they serve. And that's where we left that one. So those are the kinds of things you learn as a representative. That's the kind of thing that breaks your heart because when you got a butthole, and that's what I was talking about earlier--the companies have come to that kind of a thing--that was back in the 70s or whatever, 80s, but that's a lot worse than what it was even back then.

EH: Yeah.

SB: It just got horrible.

EH: Wow. Well what would you say is your proudest accomplishment?

1:10:27

SB: Well, two things on that. One is, I don't want to look at it as pride.

EH: Mmhm.

SB: And two, as far as accomplishments, it's things that we did together. First by our membership supporting us and secondly by the staff that I had being as dedicated as I am to serving members and doing what they needed to do. As far as I won't use the word accomplishments, but as far as changes in the way the local--the direction of the Local went, there's things that I wanted to do and did. For example, I wanted to have a new district. We have an executive board and an executive board has member representatives from different districts like Beckley, Charleston, Huntington, Parkersburg, and Morgantown. And I wanted to add other districts to that because the membership down in Rainelle and Lewisburg and White Sulfur Springs, way far away didn't have any representation. So and then also in Kentucky. Kentucky always felt like a step child to this local. And another reason too for that was, the rep at that time hardly ever visited in Kentucky until I took over and then I made him go down there and visit regularly like he did Charleston, which is the main area. But anyway, we created--I say we together--we created 3 new district seats on our executive board, gave representation to those areas, they elected their own member to serve on that committee and did so therefore and that really helped build a solidarity with parts of our local that weren't there before, particularly Kentucky. That was one of 'em. The other thing is changing the newsletter to make it about the members, not about us. The newspaper is something that Jack Brooks wanted to start and I'm glad that he did it. He did a good job on it but it was more about telling you what was going on within the local when he first started that I really thought it was gonna be more about other things as well. And I made it that. In other words, that's when we give the tip of the hat--they were doing that--but outside that there wasn't very much anything else going on with the membership. And it's okay because it gives you information. Information about the contracts we settled, information about what was going on with new organizing campaigns and the awards that Local 347 won and we won a BUNCH of 'em because we was organizing out the ying-yang compared to other locals in our region. So we did win a lot of trophies, which they had within a trophy case within the local. You know, the pride thing there, that was not my doing--I took that thing out after I became president. But at any rate, that was something I changed. We did, not only continued to do a tip of the hat, but like I said we'd have a collage of just members' faces. And members, they told me and told the staff reps, said they couldn't wait to get a copy of their newsletter in the mail to see if their face happened to be in that last page. (laughs) Because we mixed it up every newsletter. And we tried to put out 4, or 2 a month is what we tried 2-4 a month, but we did that and of course we recognized our executive board with their picture, background, who they were, how long they'd been on the executive board, what their hobbies were, these kinds of things. And also the same thing with the stewards and then we had interest stories that we did in there. For example, there was a story done by Chuck Miller who I eventually hired as a rep. We had a meeting in Fairmont, West Virginia. A lady was in the meeting, no we left the meeting and was outside on the concrete and she was choking to death and Chuck knew how to handle that and him and another rep took care of that, helped that woman and saved her life from what the paramedics said. And that we put in the newsletter. Just different things like this that we changed. Like I said there was scripture put in there. The meeting dates, times and places was in there on pretty much every newsletter we sent out. We put that in there. We kind of made it member-oriented is I guess what I'm saying and that's the way the newsletter was. But before that, I hate to say it but that wasn't the way it was. It was good for information, there's no question about that. But that is not the intent, total intent of the newsletter to begin with.

1:15:04

EH: Mmhm.

SB: One other thing I will tell you about--going back to strikes, when we negotiated or when we organized the Chelyan Food Land in Chelyan, West Virginia, we won that election almost 100%. The owner by the name of Paul Gilmore was an ex-Kroger employee that owned that store--Whitesville store--we ended up organizing it too and got a contract. But the Chelyan store, we ended up on strike after several weeks of negotiations and we went out on strike I think it was a Monday. No, a Sunday. On Monday he ran an ad that was gonna run--On Wednesday he ran an ad that was gonna run through Friday

or through Saturday. And he called me in the office, he said, "Well, I'm gonna tell you right now, them miners are gonna walk over top of your pickets starting Wednesday." He called me on Monday. I said, "What are you talking about?" He ran an ad that was unbelievable. Eggs were like 19 cents a dozen, milk was like 49 cents a gallon. It was unbelievable. So I sent the organizer and the staff rep down to talk to the people on the picket line. I told them this was coming. I said, "So we're gonna contact the UMWA representative for this area and let him know what's going on." So we did! Come Wednesday morning, that ad broke and nobody crossed the picket line. I think one lady crossed the picket line. Paul Gilmore called me back on Thursday and said, "We need to settle the contract. That didn't work." And we did, we signed the contract Thursday afternoon at his location. The problem was the ad ran through Saturday. The employees went back to work on Thursday, the ad was still valid on Saturday and he called me back] saying], "Oh my God I lost." And he told me how much money he lost and I said "Well Paul, next time try to settle a contract and at least learn from this. You better not run anymore ads like that because them mine workers down in that area a starving to death and you know that. That's why you did it." 'Cause at that time that area was on strike too.

EH: Mmm. Mmhm.

SB: So that's a little something (laughs) I thought I'd share with ya.

EH: Yeah, Wow. Yeah, Alan asked me to ask you about riding your motorcycle through the store?

1:17:16

SB: (laughs) That was alleged. That was alleged! First off, you gotta understand, but in the 70s. I might have done that actually in '65 maybe, before I went into the service. Well, alleged that I did it! In that day it was a whole different ball game. The management--like I said, when I came back, nobody filed grievances hardly 'cause nobody even knew what a grievance was. There was a lot of activity within the management and the employees. We worked pretty much good together and the only reason I started filing grievances is 'cause we had a co-manager down there that was not like that. He was a real butthole. But at any rate, we would work night crew. It was '65 'cause I was working night crew. Yeah, it was 1965 'cause I was a meat cutter when I came back. In 1965, '65-'66, we was working night crew and we'd work and get all the stock up. Wouldn't take no breaks or anything. At that time we'd clock out and then go back to work, then clock back in, go back to work. And we got all the stuff done because the management was coming back to play poker with us. We gambled a lot. We'd gamble on how long it took a roach across to walk across the back room. Or we'd gamble about how many pop bottles was stacked in the back. And some of the gambling got pretty interesting. But anyway, that one day, one evening, we was gambling and a guy bet me that "I bet you can't take that full dressed bike in so many minutes around the perimeter of the store." I said, "I bet I can!" So that was on! So the alleging was that Sterling Ball did that and old Gene Horner who as a new employee at the time, to make sure your foot's on that door because I'm gonna be bookin' it. And when I went through the door and pulled up, the store manager had just pulled up in his car and got out. Coming back to play poker with us! It was about 2 in the morning or something like that. And he had this real high voice and he always said and I'll just spell it, not say it. But it was always G-D son, you know?

EH: Mmhm. Yeah.

SB: And I pulled up that bike, kicked the kickstand down, turned the bike off, got off real slow. And he had his hands on his hip, which he always did that when he had something important he wanted to tell ya. He said, (mimics high voice) "G-D son, what do you think you're a-doin'?" (laughs)

EH: (laughs)

SB: And I said, "Well Bill, I was winning us some money for the poker game!" He said, (mimics high voice) "You did?" I said, "Yeah." He said, (mimics high voice) "Well how much did we win?" And that's the way he talked! And I said, "We won 5 dollars!" (mimics high voice) "Well let's go in there and get it!" (laughs)

EH: (laughs)

SB: So we did! And they gave me the 5 dollars and I gave it to him because I was a little bit nervous to be honest--even though nobody ever got suspended or fired that day. We walked down the front aisle and before you got to the back room, there's the meat aisle. And at the end of the meat aisle is the produce department and at the end of that aisle there was Big K cola that some of the night crew guys was rollin' pumpkins down to bowl! And sometimes they'd miss and the pumpkins would be all over the floor, and Bill stopped, put his hands on his hips again and he said, (mimics high voice) "Alright guys, if you think I'm cleaning that up, you're nuts! Sure someone is gonna clean up that mess!" (laughs) So one of the guys went down, cleaned the mess up, restacked the Big K, went back, and we played poker!

But the guy was really, really nice. He got really angered quick but he got over it. He was the type of guy that, in fact, we played, we bowled together and played poker together and those kind of things, but when he was in the store, to give you another example, he came back to my meat department one day and he said, "Is anybody back here a-workin'?" And I said "Well we was until you came back and interrupted us!" And he said, "Well I'm gonna leave so you'll work and do something, even if it's wrong!" And I said, "Okay Bill, we'll do it, even if it's wrong. But don't go back there and write us up 'cause it's wrong!" And we said stuff like that to him and he'd let it go. So one day he was back there and me and the other meat guy that was back there was weighing hams and turkeys. Bill came back there and the window was open from going back to the meat shop--you could see through it? And the next thing we looked up and there's Bill standing there with his hand on his hip trying to intimidate us. And I didn't like that. So I said, I told the guy I said, "Okay, at the count of 3, just scream like you're scared to death." So he threw his hands up in the air and I threw that turkey up in the air, honest to God, threw that turkey up in the air like "Oh my God!" like this and we said that, that turkey fell on the scale and BROKE it!

EH: Oh no.

1:21:51

SB: And BROKE it. Bill come back there and said, "What are you boys doin'? You're gonna end up breaking something back there!" And I said "Well you better call the scale man, I think I broke the scale." "I seen what you did!" And I said, "Well if it hadn't been for you sitting there scaring us, that scale would still be working and we could still work and weigh turkeys!" (laughs) So he called the scale guy to come in and they bought us a new scale and took that one back and repaired it. (laughs)

EH: Wow.

SB: But those thing, you couldn't do things like that today. There's no way.

EH: Right, yeah.

SB: We cooked--the old man would come back and actually cook breakfast with vendor stuff in the meat shop on a hot plate and sometimes we'd do it, and sometimes--he said I like my eggs cooked a certain way and he come in there at 7 o'clock in the morning and if that thing wasn't plugged up, he'd give ya down

the river. Can you imagine that? And we would eat and we had a good working relationship with the company at that time pretty much. Except for that one management person.

EH: Right. This might be another alleged instance, but Alan also mentioned shooting ball bearings at a store window or at a storefront?

SB: Oh my God.

1:22:56

Yeah. Well. That was when I first went on staff as an organizer. We had that strike at Super Value where a bunch of ladies--that's another interesting story too. But anyway, I took it upon myself about 4 in the morning to go down there and do 2 things. 1-At that time, I was going to try to break that window! And I went and bought a really nice hunting slingshot and got some ball bearings, pretty good size. I got out of the parking lot and I shot one at the window and this was honest to God's truth. I told Jody who was our organizer at the time. I got him out of bed to come back and do some other things. Anyway, I hit that window. That window, kind of looked like it went in, and it bowed that sucker back at me, and it missed my head about 8 inches.

EH: Whoa!

SB: If it hit me in the head it would have killed me. It would have killed me. And I tried that 2 more times and I couldn't do anything with it, so I got upset, so I had some roofing tacks in the truck. In a bucket. So I decided that I'm gonna spread them over there where the scabs part. So I was parked along the side of the road. And when I went to the store to visit the strikers, I always backed up right there. In a spot where it was vacant and I could do that. So at any rate, I threw a bunch of those down and got in my car--by that time it was about 4:30 and I backed into the very area that I salted with those tacks.

EH: Oh no!

SB: Pulled out on the road, got about 20 feet down the road and both rear tires went flat.

EH: Oh no.

SB: (laughs) So I walked down to the pay phone which was probably about a quarter of a mile away down where--there wasn't enough by the store, it was right along the road where you call from your car. And luckily I had some money to get--I had some change and I hardly ever carried change, and I called the hotel and asked for them to ring Jody's room. He finally answered it, and he said, "What are you calling me this early in the morning?" I said, "I need a favor." He said, "It better be a matter of life or death." I said, "Well it could be!" (laughs). Said, "Where you at?" And I told him. "I'm up here at Super Value." And I said, "I tried to break a window and almost got killed and I threw some carpet tacks out--roofing tacks out--and now I got 2 flat tires." He started laughing and he would never ever let me live that down. So he had, we both drove the same kind of cars--it was a Taurus at that time, so I had one spare, he had one spare, so we changed both those tires and got me back on the road.

The other thing that we did that was alleged, some guy from the International Union made what's called skunk juice. And during strikes, what we would do--and this stuff was really potent. We'd take a little small bottle of that, and we ourselves or someone on the striking workers would go in the store and you'd pour a little bit of that in the vents.

EH: Whoa.

SB: And after about a half hour, it would literally--and this is the truth--it would literally run everybody out of the store. And of course the company didn't know what was causing it. They didn't know if it was an electrical fire or something and they had a couple people in there searching everywhere to find out what was causing that odor. And then the Heck's stores, we did that with Heck's, but the problem with Heck's, the vents are in the ceiling at those locations. So when we had a strike at Heck's at one in Point Pleasant particularly, what we did there is Jody and I went around in the store shelves and we'd pull product out and we'd pour a little bit in each shelf, one one end of one, and then the middle, and then the other end in ever shelf that we could until they seen us in there and then they run us out. But we'd pretend like we're buying stuff. And we do that and would do the same thing. Customer would come down through there and they couldn't stand (laughs). We never did. That's a secret formula, by the way, that I never did--Jody learned how to do it, but I never did learn how to make that stuff. I'd love to be able to do that. But that's something you definitely don't want to spill in your car.

EH: (laughs) Yeah! I bet not.

SB: (laughs)

1:26:52

EH: Did you ever use jack rocks?

SB: Jack rocks?

EH: Yeah.

SB: Uh, yeah! Yeah, we did that at the Ravenswood Strike and we had a team of people that actually made jack rocks. I've got a couple of them actually still. But the ones that they made was big enough to stop a truck. And we learned that from the United Mine Workers because we had the ones that was about the size of--you ever played jacks with the ball and jacks?

EH: Yeah, uh-huh.

SB: They were just a little bit bigger than those. Those were good for cars but not for pick-ups or anything like that. So we had a guy in Ravenswood, or lived in Ravenswood, that actually took nails, cut the ends of 'em off, and would bend 'em and then weld 'em, weld together. And we made hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of those and we'd string them along the parking lot where those scabs would park during that Ravenswood Lockout. So, yeah that was another interesting thing that we got involved in (laughs).

EH: (laughs) Um...

SB: So it's...

EH: Yeah. Go ahead.

SB: Well, you mentioned things that I'm not necessarily proud of, but one of the things that I did, when I got appointed, it wasn't an elected job, but appointed to the advisory committee for the UFCW pension plan in Chicago and D.C., at that time, the first thing, one of the very first things I did, I went back to, 'cause we got a printout of all the retirees paychecks and I was staggered about the A&P, Thorofare and Penny Fare. And those companies went out of business early. I mentioned in my letter that we had at one

time almost 100 A&P stores in Local 347. When I got involved it was down to about 30-35. Eventually, they all went out of business, but when they left, we had people that were vested and people that were not yet, had vested pensions but not enough time to actually draw. They weren't of the age, and they started drawing pensions later on and we had pensions that was 100 dollars or less. And we had at that time a 1.5-billion-dollar pension fund. When we merged our plan with the international plan. So one of the things we did, we created--a few things--one is we created a reserve of 5 million dollars to put in there to pay out a 13th check to all our pensioners. So in December, they got 2 checks. A regular monthly check and then another equal check, what's called the 13 check. We paid that out of that fund there.

The other thing that I wanted to do and was able to do was you know, as an advisory committee, you can't make motions or vote. You just sit there and listen. So when they caucused, the union caucus--I brought this up and I said, "it's really embarrassing and should be embarrassing to us as trustees that we have people out there that their pension is only 75 dollars or 100." And even in that day that was a pittance. And we knew why--cause the multiplier was very little at the time that they went out and vested. They couldn't draw anything at that point. So they said, "What do you got in mind, Sterling?" And I said, "I'd like to lift everybody's pension up to a minimum of \$500. I know the company probably won't do it, but let's start there and if we can get at least \$300 or \$250 that would be great." He said, "Okay, it's your show, you present it." And I did. We had a Kroger, it was the chairmen of the pension fund, our president of the International Union was the secretary-treasurer, and this was the national plan, the big plan. And I was nervous. I'll be honest with ya, I was really nervous, even though I'd been around for 25, about 30 years. But I stood up and I said, and I brought this up, I said, "Right here in front of me is a list of Local 347 people that are drawing pensions. And I've looked at this and looked at it and studied it and studied it and I told 'em we have people in there drawing as little as \$75-\$100." And I said, "I think it's an embarrassment for this fund. We are a billion-dollar fund right now, the biggest probably in the nation. And I think that, and you guys," And I pumped 'em up, I said, "Both sides of the trustees should be proud of themselves for being able to build that up and protect it as you have an I'm thankful for that and our members are thankful for that. But if that would come out, I think it's embarrassing for A&P or Thorofare or Penny Fare member to mention to somebody else that I'm only getting \$75 from this pension fund." And the guy from Kroger who is really nasty said, "Well Mr. Ball what do you got in mind?" Kind of sarcastically, and I said, "Well, I would propose that we make a minimum of anybody to look at and make it starting right now, a minimum for most people that have that pension, of \$500." And he said, "Well, we'll think about it." And then some other order of business, he stood back up and he said, "I wanna go back to--told the secretary--I want to go back to Mr. Ball's remarks about the pension plan." And he said, "Sterling, would you stand back up again?" And I said, "Yeah." He said, "You know, I've been thinking about it," and he said, "You're right! You're absolutely right." He said, "We will increase those that are drawing pensions right now, but not take it forward, but those pensions that are drawn right now that are under 500, we will move every one of 'em up to 500." And you could have knocked me over with a feather!

EH: Wow!

1:32:04

SB: And secretary-treasurer said, "Well when can we start that." He said, "We'll start it last month and make it retro." We went back to our caucus and I was trying to think who the--it wasn't Bill Winn who was president of the International at the time. But anyway, he said, you know what? That's the first time I've ever seen that man have any compassion at all for anybody that worked for the company. And he did! He made good on his word. I got phone calls after phone calls after phone calls in the office and I said "Listen, I didn't do it." I said, "The trustees of the fund, both company and union got together and decided to raise everybody's pension up to that level." You think about somebody getting \$75 and the next check they get is \$500?

EH: Yeah!

SB: I mean can you imagine--and that's not a lot of money. It still wasn't a lot of money even back then, 'cause most of those people I'm sure were probably working or you know, obviously some of that income was Social Security, but to go from 75 or 100, of course some of 'em 200 and 250, 300. Anybody that was under 500 got that automatic increase to \$500. I don't want to say I'm proud of it, but it is something that we were able to accomplish to help our members. And again it goes back to the concept of what I believe the union is all about and that's taking care of our people. And that's what it is.

One other thing I want to mention before I forget it, I talked about a SPUR program that we started. That represents a Special Projects Union Representative is what that abbreviation represents. And a quick little story on that--I put several people from our local on staff temporarily. They went to that training put on by the International Union, and a team went out organizing. One of those team members was Brian Bond, another one was a man that ended up becoming, worked for our Local 400, Mick Hutchinson. They did a good job, they organized about 5 or 6 places. We got contracts with I think 3 out of the 5. And one of 'em was in Parkersburg, by the way, where I live. But at any rate, Chuck Miller, who I hired during that period of time as the business representative, and Brian Bond who served out on that program as a SPUR, Brian Bond went to work for Local 23 out of Pittsburgh, 'cause we didn't have any room for him on our local, couldn't afford to put him on, and he's a good man. And I recommended him for Local 23. He hired up there as an organizer. He is now the director of--the regional director for West Virginia in our local. And Chuck Miller that I hired, who was a steward, ended up becoming a director before he retired. I went back to work temporarily to help the local out and guess what? Chuck Miller became my boss and then went back and then came back a little bit to work politics and stuff like that, and Brian Bond became my boss. So I tease both of 'em, I said, "Pretty interesting, I said here it just shows that you better be careful who you crap on when you climb up the ladder, because that person might be your boss in the end!" (laughs)

EH: (laughs) Right!

1:35:14

SB: So that's kind of a funny thing. But anyway. I don't know what else you want to talk about, but those are some of the things that I--and I did, I have a very lengthy thing for you to look at, but we had some good times. There were some bad times with our local in terms of going through different things with the membership and stuff. The concession package was a bad time. Kroger wanted to close 5 stores out in Parkersburg. They wanted horrible, horrible concessions, including a buck and a quarter on the hour from everybody in our membership. And I will say that the member as a strong, strong majority stood behind helping those people and those stores. And we ended up getting a contract that Kroger agreed to with some concessions, but nothing like what they wanted. As a result of that, a couple things came out for me. One was that we had seniority, we had 5 seniority zones at that time, so those 5 stores, those members had no right to transfer anywhere. They could work for Kroger for 40 years and they lost their job! So I immediately negotiated the next contract, the breaking of seniority lines, and we still do not have seniority lines now. It's one seniority throughout our whole contract, whether you live in Kentucky, Ohio, West Virginia--wherever you happen to live, if you're willing to move, the bumping process by seniority goes through the whole seniority list, not just that area. And so that's one thing that, actually I am proud about that because that's the biggest protection of all is seniority to protect a job.

The other thing that I did that I am still glad we did, was in the last contract we had with Kroger, it was a horrible contract. It looked like we was going to be on strike. I threatened them again. They knew I would do it because I already did it, and they, Al Kohler, same guy, he told me after negotiations was over--oh

no, he told me this at a fund meeting, because I wouldn't change some things at a fund meeting. He wanted us to give back part of the reserve that we had, and I said, "No, we're making benefit changes, we're not giving it back to ya." He made a strong comment, "That's not your money, that's our money." I said, "First off, it's not your money, it's the members' money that they would have had had we not put it into the fund so it belongs to the fund. It doesn't belong to you. And he told me right after, he said, "I'm gonna tell you something. This contract--you are lucky." He said, "You're a small local, you have no clout now like you did have at one time and the next contract we're gonna walk all over you. Get ready."

EH: Wow.

SB: And I had a meeting with the staff, said we need to merge this local to protect our members because I said, "I'm willing to give up the president's job and I'll just go ahead and retire. I'm old enough." I said, "I don't know about you guys but we can, we can merge with the local, we can negotiate a contract that will protect your jobs for 5 years unless you something that's dishonest where you would be fired anyway, you will be protected for 5 years." So I started looking at different locals--Local 23, Local 17 and 76 out of Pennsylvania, and Local 400. Al Landover and I had dinner meetings with leadership and Jim Lothers was the president at the time of Local 400. I liked his philosophy of protecting members, so I met with the union executive board next, they agreed to it, we started the process, the membership had to vote on it from both locals. We did that, and right before that happened by the way, Jimmy got a little arrogant with me to be honest. He came into my meeting hall there, in their office building in Charleston, went back in my office, closed the door and he said, "Well," He said, "I know why you want to organize, or merge with us. Why should I merge with you?" And again, I'm the type of person, still am, you know membership comes first and arrogance don't get it with me. And I liked Jim and still do. But I said, "Oh let me think about it Jimmy, why would I want to organize with you. Okay, let's see. I got a building worth \$750,000 completely paid off that you could use as collateral to fund a strike. Let's see, I have 1.3 million cash flow every year through this local. Let's see, I have 4 CDs of about \$20,000 or better, almost \$30,000 in the bank. I have a cash flow that runs positive to the tune of about \$3,000 every week," and then went down through some other things. I said, "No what, I don't know either, why in the heck would you want to merge with me?" He started laughing, he said, "Yeah, I think you're right, Mr. Ball. I think Sterling, we will do that!" (laughs)

EH: (laughs)

1:39:58

SB: So that's when the merger happened and I think it was around the year 2000.

EH: I see. And is that Local 400 now?

SB: It is Local 400. That's why I'm doing this and really probably the only reason I'm doing it because I don't want, and again, let me reiterate, it's not about Sterling Ball, it's about Local 347. I want the history of our local to be--in any possible way--to be saved. The newsletter from Amalgamated Meat Cutter Butcher Workman newspaper is hanging in the office down there that I got. It's at the bottom of the box of stuff that president Brooks gave me before he died because he knew I was a history nut. Like I said, there's several 8-9 boxes down there, and that was in the last box I looked at in the bottom, lining the box of all things. And I had that framed professionally and it's hung in my office and it's down in Charleston now if you want to go down and look at it. A picture of Sherwood Spencer when he organized Local 347 in the '40s. Local 347 was a local but it was a very small local in Fairmont, West Virginia. And he became the organizer, he became the first leader of the local at that time, the secretary-treasurer had all the power, strength, and he was the leader of the local. And that newsletter is there. I also have somewhere the original documents that was saved of the organizing campaign for Kroger--the ballot and

also the one for A&P when they organized. I tried to find 'em--I was gonna make a copy and send it to you but I can't find it. It's somewhere in my files. But I had that and that's what I want to save. The newsletters that our local had--I've got most all of those that we had. I think probably those are gone now. I doubt if anybody's got any of those. And I've got extra copies of different ones. And I've got I think most all of 'em except for maybe 2 or 3. And by the way, with that I'll send ya an original of the picnic that we had at Camden Park too.

EH: Thanks so much.

1:42:02

SB: What exactly are you doing? Kinda late now to ask you, but...is this a paper for you while you're in school or something or just something you're...

EH: No, no, so I'm the state folklorist and I work for the Humanities Council, so I do interviews like this with traditional artists and cultural communities around the state. And I did a lot with--I mean I'm interested in labor generally and I did a lot of interviews around the Teachers' Strike and now I'm gonna do some more interview with current Kroger workers about the recent negotiation and working during the pandemic. But this...

SB: That'd be a good idea there.

EH: Yeah, so this will go in our archive at WVU Libraries, and I'll send you a release so we can use that interview in the, you know, put it in the archive in the collection.

SB: Oh absolutely. I feel good about this, I feel proud about this then! I'm glad I could be a part of it.

EH: Yeah me too! Yeah, I'm really glad. I just have 2 more questions. I was curious if you still consider yourself a radical?

1:43:09

SB: (laughs) Absolutely! Absolutely! When I retired, the president at that time, Jimmy Lothers said, had a board meeting, he gave me a nice going off, you know that kind of thing and talked about organizing and you know, different things. He had a lot of nice things to say--I won't get into that--but he said, "I know this man pretty well. Not as well as a lot of people do. But I know one thing, he's too ornery and he's too radical to go away. He'll always be there, and so he's probably always gonna be a spur in somebody's butt of a company. And I wouldn't be surprised if this idiot right here, even though he's getting older, I wouldn't get a call from somebody saying 'Who in the heck is Sterling Ball? He just sent--I just got a letter from the NORB, he's organizing us!'" (laughs) He said, "That's how this man started his career and I don't think he's changed any." Well, Sterling Ball hasn't changed any. He won't be doing that kind of radical stuff but at the legislature, I love politics and I don't mind standing toe to toe with any politician down there that I disagree with. I had, I'll tell you a really really quick story there that we had a gentleman down there that was a Christian, a Sunday school teacher, very anti-union! And I had a meeting set up with him in his office. He knew I was labor. He knew why I was in there, talking about the Right to Work bill! And I asked him, I said, "I understand that you go to church." He said, "I teach an adult Sunday School class." I said, "Really?" He said, "I know a lot about the Bible." I said, "Really? Well that's good." I said, "If you know so much about the Bible and you're a God-sent person to teach a class, what you're telling me then, why are you beating up on the workers like you are?" He said, "We're not beating..." I said, "Yes you are! That's what that does." I said, "Have you actually really studied the Old Testament?" He said, "Are you calling me a liar?" I said, "No, I'm not calling you anything, I'm just asking questions!"

He said, "Oh so you know everything about the Bible." I said, "No, I don't know everything about the Bible, but I do know if you look at the middle of Proverbs and Psalms, all the way through Proverbs it talks about, and this is God speaking talking about people in leadership positions to protecting workers. Christ himself said to pay a man what he's worth and not to underpay. It's all through the Bible!" I said, "I guess you never read that." He said, "No. I never read that." And then he started quoting Scripture, which was really Ephesians 2:8-9, but he said it was Philippians, I said, "That's not Philippians, that's Ephesians 2:8-9." Okay? And then I quoted, "For grace are you saved, through faith— not from yourselves," And I was quoting that to him. And he actually told me leave the office, which I did. That was the negative...another republican that I went to talk to he, I had a Christian pin on my lapel. I had a 5-minute meeting set up with him. I was in there about 40 minutes all total. First thing he asked me, he said, "I know that you're with labor and I know you don't agree with me on the Right to Work bill." And I said, "No I don't, but that's why I'm here to see if I can explain to you what Right to Work really is, 'cause I don't know if a lot of Republicans do know." He said, "Well I'm still learning, Sterling, but you're right I'd be happy to hear." He said, "Before we do, I got a question for you." He took his chair and he pulled it over to the chair I was sitting in. He said, "Turn your chair around." And we're face to face. He said "That lapel pin you got on your collar. Would you mind telling me how a person gets saved?" I said, "Are you serious?" And he said, "Yeah I'm serious. Very serious." I said, "Okay, well it's a Roman [unintelligible] you go to Romans 8 and I started quoting scripture, and he said, "Okay, good enough." I said, "Why did you ask me that questions?" He said, "Because, I've had people in here wearing pins that didn't have any idea what they're talking about." I said "I assume you're a Christian." He said, "I am." And we had a really friendly talk. I got him to sway on some votes, but not all of 'em. But every time I see him he'd say, "Hey Sterling, how you doing?" And I said, "I'm doing pretty good, but many my hair hurts." And he said "What do you mean your hair hurts?" I said, "I've been praying so hard for you to make the right decision and you still ain't done it!" I said, "God, you're not in good relationship with our God our Father!" And he just laughed, and he said, "Well maybe it's you!" I said, "No because God tells me I'm on the right side of the bill and you evidently aren't, brother!" (laughs)

EH: (laughs)

SB: But he was one when he lost re-election out of Charleston, the governor appointed him to a position, state position. And he's a nice guy, decent guy, but he followed the leadership of the republican party and he voted for Right to Work.

EH: Mm.

SB: But that's the political side. I know, I rambled on longer than what you probably wanted to. I apologize for that.

EH: No, that's okay. No problem. I just have one more question. What's your hope for the future of labor and what do you think needs to be in place to achieve that?

1:48:06

SB: The future of labor. Well, if we don't change from the top down, I hate to think that Eugene V. Debs is not gonna be right. I think the labor movement still is the strongest movement out there. First off, we need to change the image to the worker. And if we don't do that then we're gonna die in the sand. The other thing I really strongly believe in that the labor movement as a labor movement isn't organizing like they should. You've got to go out and reach out to those that are non-union. They need help. They need our help. We've got GOT to quit turning our back on these non-union workers. We gotta quit setting in in a soft seat because we're doing good and maybe our local's doing good and we feel that protection, that hedge of protection around us that we don't need to be doing these other kinds of things. We need to

spend money organizing, we need to spend money on our members. We need to spend money on education. I'm a strong believer in education. We need to do that. Our membership out there wants to hear from us. They don't want to hear the negative all the time. They don't want to hear from us just during a contract negotiation meeting or a ratification meeting or worse yet arbitration for a member that just got fired. They want to hear from us. They want to hear from the leadership. The leadership has to recognize that the membership is the only reason that we have a union to begin with. And the old cliché, the members are the union is just as true today as it ever, ever, ever was. And until the leadership and am I putting down leadership? Not all leadership but the concept of what a leadership should be about, I am, because I think we're turning away from that and we need to turn back to that because a union is as strong as the weakest member and I've always believed that and when you have members out there that are criticizing ya, we don't need to be cussin' 'em back. Always told our staff that when you get into a meeting, I said, one thing you want to do, 'cause I had staff hold area meetings. And some of the area meetings in that day was over 100 people. I said if a member gets up in the middle of a meeting and he cusses at you, hear him out. You'll never win an argument from a member on the floor. You never will win it. And you don't want to try it. That's what those people in that meeting are going to be looking to you as a leader and you need to lead by example. So when the person gets done, just ask them politely, "is that it?" And, "Well let me answer your questions, your concerns." Be polite, be professional, especially be professional, and thirdly, know what the heck you're talking about. So that means that you gotta be prepared, whatever your agenda was, somebody's gonna challenge some of it. It's just like contract negotiations, you better be prepared when you go into it. And I always told the staff the same thing, when you go into a meeting with a company on a grievance meeting, we train the shop stewards to know before they go into that meeting, what they're going to say and what they're going to talk about and I challenge the rep if they didn't do it, then they had to speak to me behind closed doors [unintelligible]. You need to be prepared. And if you wasn't prepared in a meeting, then you're gonna hear from me. And I have to say that the people that worked for our local when I was president or vice president were all good reps, and they were always prepared for that meeting. They didn't wing it. And you get, the problem is, if you get involved so long in these jobs, you don't think you need to look at the notes. You don't think you have to have notes. You don't think you have to go back and do grievance investigation. And all that hasn't changed. And that's part of it. When a person gets a grievance filed, if you don't take care of that grievance or they don't see you and you handle the meeting without 'em, the only thing they know, they've filed a grievance in September and December the 2nd you call 'em up and say "Well here's how your grievance went." That's not the way you do business as a local rep.

So we need to change a lot of things in there because if we don't we're gonna die on the vine. We still are strong by numbers. That also enters into the political process. We need to have the people more oriented in what the politics of the local is and what the politics, both national, state, and local level because contracts are won and lost a lot of times in the political arena. So you have to do that.

EH: Right.

SB: So that's, that comes from the heart. I really strongly believe that. I don't remember the second part of your question, but we've got to change. We have really got to change. Otherwise the direction of the local, the direction of the labor movement is getting weaker and weaker and weaker if we don't change. And the companies are getting stronger. Used to be all we worried about was the company guns, the company's guns that they hired as labor busters to come in and during the organizing drive and try to beat up on the worker, the union to lose the election so the company would win. It's not like that now. The company themselves are the union busters. The political arena IS the union busters. Our fight is not with these firms that we called union busters. Our fight now is with strong employers with good attorneys and politics and laws that work well in their favor. That poem that I wrote to you, or that I'll send to ya on, the one called "What If?" that was published in the magazine, I'm not gonna read it, but I want you to really pay close attention to that. That deals with exactly what I'm talking about.

EH: Okay, great.

1:53:45

SB: And if you have any questions on any of that or concerns, where those songs were sung, some of 'em were sung on the picket line. Some of 'em I just wrote because something might have been going on like that one with that girl Jenny, the waitress. It's just things that bother me. And hit hard. And my heart went out to that young lady because of the way she was being treated and I got to thinking about it, you know, women in the workplace have fought and struggled. Because, let's be honest, and even today--they're second class people! Let's just be honest about it. People would probably disagree with me, and my own local union would disagree with me. But I stand firm on that, that, and I'm not just saying this 'cause you're a woman. I really truly believe that when I negotiated contracts for the nursing home people, I seen people that were nurses that were male, and people that were female nurses--the male nurses made more at the hospital. Now I didn't have to deal with that 'cause we had the CNAs. But you see that throughout, that women in the labor movement are taking a backseat when it comes to jobs AND it comes to protection. Thank God a lot of that's not happening now like it was back in the 70s and 60s. But still, it's still out there. That discrimination is still there. We need, and that's another role that the labor movement plays! Let's face it. You know, we stand behind the workers, well we need to stand behind that kind of discrepancy as well. Discrimination. So we need to be--as a labor movement we need to be on the board with that being one of our top agendas that we try to work and take care of as we can.

EH: Right, yeah I mean when you were talking about that song it reminded me of a Hazel Dickens song. She writes about that a lot--he extra plight of women workers in particular.

1:55:42

SB: Yes. Well, we had a strike at Rich Equipment. I took that on because there was a woman down there that took on a job that a man had, and her pay got cut \$3 an hour!

EH: Wow.

SB: And I said, and I was the organizer at the time. I said, "You're kidding." Said, "No." And we had Rich Equipment in Parkersburg and in Charleston at that time and Clarksburg. Three locations. She worked at the Parkersburg location. So I decided that I'm gonna organize all 3 locations. All total, there was 8 women involved in all 3 of those locations. The biggest one I think was Parkersburg, which had 4 of the 8. And I think 2 in the other 2 locations. Anyway, we ended up winning the election, ended up on strike. What happened was that the guys that drove those heavy equipment were union men. I think they--I think they were Teamsters, but I'm not sure. I think I remember Local 175. And the ladies, they wouldn't take the ladies on any contract unit, so I did! Yeah, they were Teamsters, 'cause I got a call from the president of the Teamster local thanking me for doing that and I said, "Why didn't you do it when you first organized?" Well "There wasn't enough in the group." I said, "Don't you think they deserve equal pay as much as the others?" He said, "Well, to be honest Sterling, we would lose money on them from what the dues are paid." And that was a lot of the attitude of locals! They didn't organize small groups because they would lose money. But at any rate, we went on strike and those ladies, carrying picket lines, we never got a contract, but what we did do, we got a lot of great press about the discrepancy between equal pay for equal work. It was in the Charleston Gazette, it was in the Parkersburg paper, and I can't remember if it was in Clarksburg or not. But we got a little sympathy for them women. We never got a contract, but the company did change and give them, not comparable pay, or not equal pay, but somewhat comparable pay to what they were getting when they moved into the same job that the man had. And I don't know if it ever changed or not to this day. But it was horrible. You know, somebody takes a \$3 an hour cut to move

into, because you're a back-up in some particular job that a man doesn't. And you know what? A couple of those jobs are driving trucks! Them women actually drove them big trucks. (laughs) So...

EH: For sure. Well thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me. I'm really excited about this and very glad to have the interview. I'll email you the release form and you can mail it back to me or if you can....

SB: Yeah, I'll print it off and sign it and then mail it back.

EH: That sounds perfect.

SB: And I see you sent me your address so I will send these journals out to ya.

EH: Great.

SB: As soon as, probably mail them out this evening actually.

EH: Great. Well thanks, Sterling.

SB: Just let me know you got 'em. And again if you have any questions on anything, give me a call back and I'll try to answer them.

EH: Yeah, will do. Alright, well have a good day and I will send this your way.

SB: Okay Emily. Thank a lot! Appreciate it. I appreciate what you're doing too.

EH: Yeah, yeah. Bye!

1:58:54

END OF TAPE
END OF INTERVIEW