

Interview with Ezra Seltzer by Irwin Yellowitz

A project of the Professional Staff Congress' Archives Committee

(Recorded on July 14, 2014)

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Irwin: Today is July 14, 2014, and this is Irwin Yellowitz. I am going to interview Ezra Seltzer. And this is the first of many interviews that will be done by the PSC through its Archives Committee. And, I want to begin my acknowledging Amanda Magalhaes of the PSC staff, who is here with me as an observer, and she's going to handle the recorder so I don't have to deal with the technical side of it, just talk to you, Ezra, about your life.

All right. Let's begin with something that I know you feel is very important. You had a health incident in 1999 that had some effect on your memory. Would you want to tell us about that, and how it may affect the interview that's going to come along?

Ezra: Yes. I think I will. I had a prenatal arterial venous malformation. It's an AVM. An artery and a vein behind my left ear were formed badly before I was born. And I was lucky enough to live through from 1935 to 1999 without anything, and then it broke. I was saved, but there are certain things that are affecting me. One is high anxiety, which is a balance problem, eye and ear. And if I turned rapidly, I'd probably fall down[;] -- things like that. Balance is terrible.

And the second is, amnesia. I have a slight case of amnesia. There are certain things I don't remember, and certain things I'll never remember that I don't remember. And, there are two others. Not important. One was nourishment; my diet has changed, and the other is, I can't stop talking.

Irwin: Okay. Well, I think you're going to remember a great deal, and one of my jobs is to keep you from talking too much, but you will get a chance to say a lot. So, let's begin with your life before you began in CUNY. You want to tell us, briefly, about your upbringing, and your education, and so on, before you came into CUNY?

Ezra: Yes. I was very fortunate to have a wonderful life. There was only one year that was distasteful to me. I was brought up in Brownsville, Brooklyn, and I led three lives. One of them was at home. I forgot to mention before that another one is I get so emotional that sometimes I start to cry. I have a sister, and my wonderful parents, and we had a great life together. That was one of three.

The second one was in the street with my friends, a tough neighborhood, but we were great. The four of us were wonderful together, and [unintelligible 00:03:09] knew the families, and I'm the only one left.

The third one was academe. I was good, interested, and happy with all of it, except high school, but that was a minor thing. I loved public school. I was in a special class for three years. I think it was a national experiment where every three years they gave you an IQ test every Friday to see how you were doing, and also to test the IQ systems that were in progress. [Unintelligible 00:03:49], Iowa was one of them. I don't remember the others.

And, high school was not that good because I was a shrimp. I still am. And the attention was, or it seemed to be, with the long fellows, the fellows over five foot eleven, who had those special jackets. In any event, high school was not my favorite time. And college was great, and everything after it was great.

Irwin: Which college did you go to?

Ezra: Brooklyn College, and I stayed. I did my Master's research at Brooklyn, and the chair said to me, "I'm giving you an offer you can't refuse. We have two assistant professors in our department; we have no Ph.D. And you'll be the third. You're not going to Case Western Reserve for you Ph.D. — I had an open scholarship.

Irwin: Which department?

Ezra: Biology. And, I would have liked to have said, "The rest is history," but it's not. So, I said, "That's funny." A year or two later, the papers were in already. A year or two later, the deputy chair ran for chair, and I was one of the two instrumental people who deprived him of that honor. Our man won. The president asked him to be the dean of faculty. He was. And then everything was changed, and the word came back — anybody but Seltzer. It's more amusing than it is too bad, because nothing changed. In my department, nothing changed. I taught a little bit. I did mostly administrative work. I was head of thirteen technicians.

Irwin: Was your title changed to college lab technician at this point?

Ezra: My title always was. It was being changed to assistant professor, and then the word came back — "He's out." And I stayed at Brooklyn College, and in 1995, I retired.

Irwin: Okay. Good. The Legislative Conference was the organization that represented faculty and staff at that time. Were there many CLTs in the Legislative Conference?

Ezra: As far as I know, all the CLTs were in the Legislative Conference. We made it our business to get them in. Our leader was one of the greatest men... Irwin

Polishook called him the George Washington... Irwin Polishook called him the Abraham Lincoln of the PSC. And I said, "Well, you left out Belle Zeller. But, it was Harold Wilson, and he made sure everybody was in the LC.

As a matter of fact, one day I was giving a talk to the CLTs at Brooklyn College, and one of our senior members came in with a fellow I never saw before. They sat in the back, and one of them pointed at me. And after the meeting, they came up to me and Hal said, "You're in. No arguments. You're on Belle Zeller's Exec." I said, "Huh?" He said, "That's it." They picked me. So, I was on Belle Zeller's Exec from then on, until the PSC was formed, and Harold was on it, of course.

Irwin: Okay. So, you knew Belle Zeller fairly well?

Ezra: I knew Belle Zeller. One of the best feelings of that time was when we went down the stairs, and she looked for me, and made sure she took me around the arm to go down the stairs with me. I was so honored by that.

Irwin: Okay. You want to give us some more information about Belle and about how her leadership worked out in the Legislative Conference, because it was unusual for a woman, at that time, to be leader of an organization of that type.

Ezra: That is correct.

Irwin: And she was, and had been the leader since 1944. So, do you want to tell us something more about Belle?

Ezra: Yes. Good. I will, or I'll try. I never saw anybody who was so influential as Belle Zeller. If she wanted something, she didn't let go, and she got it. Many members of the State Legislature, who came from here, including some of the leaders, said that she was the best, and she was. In my time, there were two people who wanted to be the leaders, two wonderful people; Joseph Copeland from City College, and Belle Zeller, and she always beat him. There was no contest [ever, then 00:08:56]. He knew it. No matter who you were, Belle Zeller would win.

And, not only that, but one of my favorite stories is, Harold Wilson pinned her up against the wall in Brooklyn College. And he said, "CLTs make a lousy living. We make this, we make that, we make that, and we deserve more." She said, "You'll get it." Very few people believe this, but if you look it up, you'll see. Over the next three years, we got a 50% raise, Five – O. That would be impossible. I said, "It's a typo. It can't be right." And it was. She could do anything. But then she got a little older, and she slowed down a little, but not much. She was something.

Irwin: What about other members of the leadership of the LC? Did CLTs feel that they were accepted as equals in this organization, which was dominated by full time faculty, and often, senior faculty?

Ezra: Well, I would say, in the main, no, that they were not considered equals, but there were some special people who did. And they're the ones who followed state law, because we're instructional staff. Many just didn't want to identify with us. On her Executive Committee and I only can name eleven- I don't know how many more there were, but I would say four or five — excuse me for saying this — had political beliefs of the nineteenth century.

And there were others, like, Hobart Bushey, Joe Copeland, Belle Zeller, and a few of what became cross campus people. A guy named Harold Iverson, Harold Wilson, Ezra Seltzer — That was a good committee. Some of them were friends of Belle, and they knew her, and they weren't going to argue with her, because you'll lose before you start. And I thought that that was, for the first time, a progressive committee. And, they knew what the state law was. The only thing I don't remember is whether they were an official union or not. I don't know. But she stuck to state law, city law. She...

Irwin: Well, they weren't a union until after the Taylor Law in 1967, which allowed...

Ezra: That was four years after I came.

Irwin: ...for collective bargaining for public employees.

Ezra: Yeah.

Irwin: And then, of course, there was the conflict with the UFCT. And, as a matter of fact, as you probably know, Ezra, I was in UFCT, and one of the things that we always wondered about is why the college lab technicians, who we thought of as being natural material for Iz Kugler's UFCT, we're so strongly bound to the LC. Can you explain that?

Ezra: I will try. The leadership of the CLTs knew Belle Zeller and loved her. She could do anything. And then when I met now, this is personal. When I met Iz, I thought he was the greatest. And he came over to me one day, and he said, "I wish you were with us." And I said to him, "Iz, I wish I were, but I met Belle Zeller first." He was wonderful.

Irwin: Okay. How did the Legislative Conference treat CLTs in terms of issues, not in terms of persons. You said that there was an increase in salary, but CLTs had many other issues, and we'll come back to them later in this interview. Did the LC make these issues an important part of its agenda, and did it work to accomplish them?

- Ezra: No, I have to guess. I would say, without Belle Zeller, we would have gotten nowhere. That's my guess. But I'm not sure. I don't remember those incidents. But I think without her, we would have been lost. It was for a long time. With Iz, it would have been another story. Iz was more of a lover of people, and he believed that... There's a saying in Yiddish called [Aleh Mentshn Zaynen Brider 00:13:39] All men are bothers. And I think that Iz was like that. And I think that more of his people were like that than ours. That's only my opinion.
- Irwin: Right.
- Ezra: But without Belle, we would have been lost.
- Irwin: But with her there, the LC was able to deal with CLT issues. Do you remember any specific things they did besides the salary increase, which probably affected a much broader group of people?
- Ezra: Good question. I need to think about that one. I think that she was aware of state law, and the things that we were entitled to under state law, and she brought that home. But that's all I can tell you. I just don't remember.
- Irwin: Okay. Now, the elections came after the Taylor Law. They were contested elections, and, as you remember, there were two units, and the LC represented one, which was the full-time faculty.
- Ezra: Mm-hmm.
- Irwin: And the UFCT represented the lecturers and adjuncts, and others. How did the CLTs respond to these elections? Did they support Belle very strongly? Did the divide? Do you have any sense of it?
- Ezra: There was a division. I think that, and I may be wrong, everybody has their prejudices, and I think that many CLTs were full-timers, and they were prejudiced against part-timers. There were some. And, I don't know where I stood. I would like to think that I was with everybody, but most of us were with Belle.
- Irwin: You mentioned Harold Wilson, and that he was a force in the LC from the very beginning. Of course, we can't interview Harold because he's gone many years. Could you tell us something about him, about his background? About how he came into the university, how he got into the LC, and how he had such an influence on the other CLTs, because, he seems to have had a reach that went through the whole university.

Ezra: Yeah. I don't think that the... and I may be wrong. There are a lot of things I don't remember, but when Harold opened his mouth to talk, the first word out, you knew there was the leader. He was not fancy, by any means. His speech was okay, but there was a dynamism in him. When you looked him, and you heard him talk, you say, "That's the boss. That's the guy I'm going to follow." And that pretty much sums it up. I don't think that... I don't remember how far he got, with respect to formal education, but that's really immaterial, because he was a man for all seasons.

Irwin: What College was he working at?

Ezra: There were two; Baruch and City. I think he came from City and then went to Baruch. And it's under the same thing, I believe, but I'm not sure. Baruch was the last one, I believe. But, he knew everybody, and when he spoke, you listened. Interesting fellow. In the immortal words of many of my friends, he was a pussycat. Such a nice man, a good man, an honest man. And we should all be like that.

Irwin: He was also a great advocate for the CLTs in the larger union, because I remember him from the early Executive Council, beginning when he went into PSC in 1972. And he was always an advocate, strong advocate. And then he was on the negotiating committees, and always a strong advocate for CLTs.

Ezra: I'll give you an example of a... I may be wrong, partly, but I doubt it. There was an election in California, junior colleges and senior colleges, for who would represent them. The AFT... Now I've forgotten who the adversary was, for a moment.

Irwin: The NEA.

Ezra: NEA.

Irwin: Yeah.

Ezra: It was a tough election, and two of our best people went to California, Belle Zeller, and, surprise, Harold Wilson. And they made it close. They won the junior colleges, and we lost the senior colleges, and it was close. See, and that's one method you have of answering the question of what Belle Zeller thought of Harold and his influence on people. And, if I had to choose two, it may have been three; Harold would be one of them, too, for he was the best after Belle.

Irwin: Now, he was not a strongly aggressive personality, because I remember him, also, quite well. What was it about him that gave him this leadership quality that you stress?

- Ezra: I think the main thing... Well, one of the main things was he never gave up. Never. And when he spoke, he made sense. He said it just the way he thought it was. You realized that that's the way Harold... what he believes. No fooling around, or, as we used to say when we were very young — no bullshit. And that was... I thought that was a very strong approach. Here was a fellow who didn't give you what a politician gives you, but Belle was part politician. She had to be. And it was wonderful just to listen him. And I think that most people realized that, and some of them just jumped and said, "That's my guy." That's what I believe.
- Irwin: All right. Did he have a stronger grasp of the issues of CLTs than anybody else?
- Ezra: I'm trying to think of anybody who was close, and I can't. He knew it.
- Irwin: Because I always felt in my contacts with him, that he knew more about the CLT issues, so much more, than anyone else, including other CLTs.
- Ezra: Almost all of us feel like that.
- Irwin: You had to listen to him because of his command of the issues. All right, Ezra, when Harold Wilson retired, did you succeed him as chair of CLTs?
- Ezra: I succeeded Harold, yes.
- Irwin: Okay. Was there a contest for leadership, or were you the next natural leader?
- Ezra: I don't think it was any of those. Nobody wanted to take Harold's place, including me. So, what happened was, I behaved in a cowardly way. I got my buddy George Crouch to take the job, and he couldn't do it. He says, "I need help." And then, I said, "Okay. I'll take it." And a few months after George became the chair, he stepped down, and I became the chair. And that was it.
- Irwin: Do you remember what year that was?
- Ezra: No.
- Irwin: Okay. And you held that position until you retired?
- Ezra: No. I don't know if it's a rule or not, but it was our rule that, if you were on the Executive [Committee] Council of the Union, you couldn't be the chair. That was our rule. I don't know if it was anybody else's, but it was fair. When Harold when up to the Exec, then I became the chair. When I went up to the Exec... I'm thinking, or trying to, [Bob unintelligible 00:22:24] became the chair.
- Irwin: Okay.

Ezra: But I was on the Exec at that time, the Executive [Committee] Council of the Union. And, that's it.

Irwin: Right. All right.

Ezra: I was a chair for nine, and an Exec for nine. And then, the last two of the nine were after I retired, because I had been elected. And, Steve Tromboli took my place.

Irwin: Now, I'd like to get to the major issues for CLTs. And I'm not thinking now, particularly, of whether it was in Belle Zeller's leadership period, or Irwin Polishook's, who became President in 1976. But, could you lay out some of the major issues that CLTs had over all of these years? I know that some of them were very persistent, and not easily solved.

Ezra: That's a tough question. The most important one, probably, was respect. As Rodney Dangerfield used to say, "I don't get no respect." That may have changed a little bit during Harold's administration. I hope it changed a tiny bit, in a positive way, during mine. I think that many people did not want to believe, or did not recognize that we were all instructional staff by state law. That was it. Some people never knew that titles, such as faculty, or professorship are local and not state. They are undecided, either in the college or at the university.

And, there was a point where many of us became faculty, because the college committee that we had members on, that I was on also. I forgot the name of it. They're the ones that made that decision, and it had to be over-ruled by anybody else. And [unintelligible 00:24:38] was the first one. I forgot the name of the fellow who did it, but he was one of us. And when he became management, he rescinded it. Same guy. I thought that was an interesting comment on...

Irwin: So, there was a promotional ladder within the CLT...

Ezra: There was a promotional...

Irwin: ...ranks, just the way there was...

Ezra: There was...

Irwin: ...[unintelligible 00:24:59]?

Ezra: ...and then came the chief. There was a CLT and senior CLT, and then came the chief.

Irwin: And when was...? The chief was added later, wasn't it?

Ezra: It was added later. I have an interesting story about that, if you might be interested. Okay. This leads to another interesting story. Everybody knew that I was going to get a chief, because the two qualifications for chief were high-tech and/or supervision and/or training of other technicians. In my department, there were 13 technicians; maybe the biggest at CUNY.

Irwin: At Brooklyn College.

Ezra: I supervised all of them, and I had trained about three or four of them. And that was it; I was going to get a chief. Well, I didn't get it. Anti-union sentiment. And I'm talking to a friend of mine, whose name was Irwin Polishook, and we're talking about that he brought me... At that moment, he had brought me a tape of Grieg's piano concerto. And I said, "Irwin. I'm [unintelligible 00:26:01]. But you know what happened with the chief, don't you?" He said, "No." "I didn't get it." He said, "You didn't get it."

And he had a, I believe, a fabulous memory, and he delineated all my qualifications. And he got up, went in to see Arnold Cantor — I followed him — and he said to him... It was the Executive Director Arnold Cantor. And he said to him... All of a sudden, I forgot his name. "You call Ira Bloom, and tell him that Seltzer gets a chief now." And Arnold said, "May I ask why?" And he said, "No. Just do it." A week later, I was a chief. Now, you may say — well, that's favoritism. But I was one of two or three people in the union, CLTs, who knew that they were going to get to chief. There was no doubt about it. And I didn't get it? That's because...

Irwin: Now, this was after 1982...

Ezra: Yeah. It's a...

Irwin: ...because that's when the chief title came in...

Ezra: That's correct.

Irwin: So, it was sometime in the 1980s.

Ezra: This is... Seltzer was a pain in the ass to management. One of the guys I knew very well was at Brooklyn, at the time, Larry Mucciola. He went over to management, later. And I used to go in to Larry and say, "Hey. You got this, this, this, and this coming." And he said, "You're right." He used to put his hand over his adding machine, and as I talked, he'd [unintelligible 00:27:31]. That's it. And we got along nicely. And then, when someone went to see him, some other time, and he said, "Hey. You remember Ezra Seltzer?" And he said, "That pain in the ass." But he said it in a different way. The management

was different, of either the college or the university, and I don't remember why. But that had to be it.

But I got it. And that was the forerunner, or one of the forerunners for a big favor that I did for Irwin, which came later, in 1998. That was to organize a group of people to defeat Steve London as leader of Brooklyn College PSC. And that was... I argued with him. He says, "You owe me." And he's right. I did owe him. I did favors for him, he did favors for me, but that was a big one. So, I did. And I organized a group I thought that was powerful, the biggest turnout ever, over 500. Steve won by about 25, and his two running mates won by five, a piece. It was so close.

And, at that point, when I came back after the incident, in the year 2000, I knew that he was not my friend, Steve London. He already was vice president of the PSC. And he said to me, "I hold no grudges." But it's not true. That's it.

Irwin: Okay. Other issues?

Ezra: About what?

Irwin: Aside from respect, and aside from the promotional ladder, which was there and which was enhanced by the chief title. What about things like working conditions? Salary?

Ezra: Working conditions were, I think, the province of the department, as long as it had muscle. If the department were run by a person with a — again, this is personal, or subjective — with a liberal attitude; then you're treated like anybody else. But certain things you can't do. For instance, if the chair said to the members of the sitting departmental faculty, "Do you want technicians to have the vote?" The chair and [unintelligible 00:30:25]. They'd say 'Yes' or 'No.' And, that was it. And it depended on the department, itself, for a lot of the respect they had for their subjects. You know, for their colleagues. And I think that that varied greatly.

One of my favorite expressions is, and I stole it from Joseph Mankowitz — "A strutting egoist; we have many of those." And, it's hard to talk to people like that. And I think that a lot depended on whether technicians got respect and whether they didn't get respect.

Irwin: And was it common for technicians to vote in department elections?

Ezra: In various places it was. We had the vote. I think that one time we lost the vote, and then we got it back. I think that's why... Well, I have another interesting one; how I made deep enemies, and it affected my... Oh, I told you about that, I think — anybody but Seltzer. That promotion to Assistant Professor...

- Irwin: Yeah.
- Ezra: Was made by the dean at the time, who, you know, I told you about that one. And I was very active, at that time in the... And so was my friend, Betty Hershinov, who was also a CLT. We were very close to a lot of the sitting faculty who supported us, and he lost. I had a great respect for him in every way, except that, as a human being he was...
- Irwin: Who was he?
- Ezra: Harry Elbalm, the fellow who became dean of faculty. And, when the official papers came over for the second time, or they were generated by the administration, it said, "Anybody but Seltzer."
- Irwin: Oh, okay. So, you're going back to that...
- Ezra: Yeah, well, that...
- Irwin: ...original issue.
- Ezra: That was one of the things.
- Irwin: Okay. What about salary for CLTs? Now, because it was part of the total package for the entire...
- Ezra: Yeah, but...
- Irwin: instructional staff, but...
- Ezra: The salary issue...
- Irwin: ...were CLTs satisfied with what they were paid?
- Ezra: Before we got that 50% raise, it was awful. When we got the 50% raise, it was fair. I don't mean fair as opposed to unfair. Fair as opposed to good, bad, indifferent, and that was it. It was all right, as long as you got promoted. And that was a departmental problem that some people had. They always have. On the other hand, so does everybody else.
- Irwin: Overall, how do you think the PSC did, during your years, in addressing CLT issues?
- Ezra: Again, I'm a little prejudice, because my friend, up until I saw him last, was the President for a great many years, and I thought he was the best. I thought he was wonderful. So, I thought he was good in all of those respects. The only

one I had a little problem with, because I had to prove it, was Health and Safety. He said, "If you prove to me that we need this and it can be done, I'll do it." So, I did, and he did.

Irwin: Okay. But putting aside Irwin Polishook, who was the President, taking the union as a body, as an organization, do you think they address CLT issues, over these years, in a satisfactory way?

Ezra: No and yes. That depended on who was elected. I think it was the individual that counted, not the group. There were many individuals who understood what CLTs were, who they were, what the state law said, and if they had any friends who were CLTs, they would make many issues. I would say it's about half and half, over the years, but that's just a guess.

Irwin: What about CLTs, themselves, your colleagues? How do they feel about the way the union handled their issues?

Ezra: I think that... It's just a guess on my part. Just as in any group, you have people who understand, people who don't understand, people who don't want to know and walk away, and others who say, "You're wrong," as a kneejerk. You've got to remember those people, especially at one college, which won't be named. But, I think that, in the main, they were positive toward the PSC. And now I don't remember what the original question was.

Irwin: Well, the issues that the PSC had to deal with. Did your colleagues feel that they had dealt with those issues well enough that they respected what the union was doing for them?

Ezra: I think up till the year 2000, they did. After the year 2000, I have no comment.

Irwin: Right. Well, I wouldn't want to ask you about that, because you weren't active then.

Ezra: No. I was prejudiced, too.

Irwin: Okay. Now let's go to Health and Safety. Within the PSC, and within CUNY, in general, the CLTs took the lead on Health and Safety.

Ezra: Yeah.

Irwin: And this is not something that you would naturally expect. It's not as if they were trained, academically, to take the lead in this.

Ezra: Well, some of us were.

Irwin: But, it happens. So, my first question is...

Ezra: There were a number of us that were...

Irwin: Why did the Health and Safety leadership come out of the CLT chapter?

Ezra: Okay. I don't think that you're totally correct. [Unintelligible 00:36:48] leadership at the Health and Safety, we had a man who knew as much about chemical dangers and things like that, than anybody else alive. That was a fellow named Randy Smith. And we had another fellow who knew quite a bit about disease, and bacteria, and viruses, etcetera — that's yours truly. And then, we had a fellow who knew so much, more than anybody I ever met; that was Harold Wilson. So, between the three of us, we were unbeatable. And Irwin realized that, and he just made us the team.

Now, what I had to do, because of the three of us, I was the only one, they thought, who wrote a good sentence, which, of course, was nonsense. I wrote a letter to Irwin explaining why we needed it, explaining how it should be done, explaining what the committee should be. And the committees were universal committees, with people...full professor, associate professors, etcetera, from various departments on the committees, and he said, "Fine." And that came into being.

And then, a little more difficult was getting a newsletter out to everybody, because, as you know, the credo of the UFT and the AFL-CIO, is the welfare of the members and their families. And you may argue, and it's a good argument, whether money or health and safety are more important to the family. But, certainly, health and safety is a big one.

And, what we did was, we put one out for the CLTs at Brooklyn College. That was Shelly Mendlinger and me. Shelly was wonderful at uniting things, and then as a web master. And, that was good. Then we put one out for all the CLTs at the university, and then Irwin was hooked. He said, "You're putting it out for everybody." And we did. We had two publications over the years. One was called Alert, and every member got it, I'm guessing twice a month, they got three times a month. I wrote much of it, and I got other people to help; Shelly put it together, and it was very successful. As soon as I came back in the year 2000. You want me to go into 2000, into the new administration? Okay.

Irwin: What?

Ezra: As soon as I came back, two of my friends, Steve Tromboli and Shelly Mendlinger came over to me, he said, "We're screwed. And you're screwed the most." "You're a friend of Irwin. You're screwed." Then, you're not going to be on the Safety Committee?" "You're not on the Safety Committee. You'll never be on the Safety Committee, and they'll never listen to you." And it

turned out to be true. Many times I approached them that the membership has to get these things, until today. But they want a few concessions. Last year, I think because of Albert Sherman, who was Chair of the CLTs, and a few others.

They finally got our Health and Safety website, which is a real good one, into the union website. In the CLT section, but it's there. And, among our contributors are some of the most famous names in America. And, one of our colleagues, who, when we went to conventions, as [unintelligible 00:40:33] said before, is the web master for the website Safety.

And, when I called him eight years ago, six years ago, when we started this website, I said... Ralph, Ralph Stewart, one of the biggest names in Health and Safety in the world. I said, "Ralph, I need this." He said, "Yeah. Well, count me in and I'll send you an article." "And I'll also send out an invitation for everybody to join." And he said, "How many people?" And he says, "And, two thousand, mostly in the United States, Canada, Australia, Mexico." I said, "Two thousand top science people?" He said, "Don't worry, only about 100 will apply." And they did. And Shelly and I picked out a bunch of them to be on a list. And if you go to our website, you'll see that they're contributors to our website.

But that website was not recognized by the new leadership. They considered it to be an anathema, and they wouldn't let us do anything with the membership with respect to it. We had to force the issue a few times, and I never got to know who the membership was, including the retirees. I said, "You're on the Exec of the retirees, so am I. You got a number of things from me." The number should come nothing, because nobody would tell me how to get to the membership. What our group did-- they compromised. They never talked to me about it.

Jack Judd is the editor of a... He was stuck. He's in the middle. He's the editor of our newsletter. And he said, "When the newsletter goes out, I'm going to ask you to put an article in." So, maybe five, six times a year, an article goes out, which, of course, is not enough. It's not enough for the membership [unintelligible 00:42:35] slips and falls [Fires 00:42:37], disease. Especially, during pandemic time, and things like that, you're not going to wait two months to get it in the newsletter. But nobody...

I asked the Safety Committee. I asked union management. Pardon the...

Irwin: Mixed metaphor.

Ezra: Well, yeah, that... So, it's almost like a chicken hero sandwich. And, no answer. Either we'll get back to you, or nothing. That's the leadership of the Safety people, and of the union. They don't communicate with me at all. I get

nothing. I understand that they don't like me because of my [unintelligible 00:43:28], but that's okay. I know what I did. I'd do it again. I'd be Irwin's friend. I thought he was the best. That was it.

Irwin: Okay. During the time that you were active, there were Safety investigations at campuses.

Ezra: Yes.

Irwin: And, again, the CLT people were in the leadership of this.

Ezra: We were in...

Irwin: Now, how did that happen, and how did that develop?

Ezra: Because the leadership on every campus knew, from our newsletters, who we were. And we got calls from them. The best team that ever went anywhere was Harold Wilson, Ezra Seltzer, and Randy Smith. And, I have... I save things, and I have letters from people who, at the time, thought we were the greatest, who are now our enemies, my enemy, anyway. Once in a while, one of them would come up to me, Joan Greenbaum is one, she said, "Don't be angry at me. I'm only an administrator. I administrate Safety and Health, I don't make the decisions about yes or no, and you, and things like that."

Irwin: What kind of conditions did you find when you went on these campus visits? And what did you do about correcting them?

Ezra: Well, most of these conditions were real. There was a real one. I think it was at Lehman, and City College, at the same time. At one, a fellow left, and left all of this radioactive materials and things, right out in the open. You don't do that. And the other one, it was caustic chemicals in a big, big... Somebody left, and left all these chemicals and things out. And they shouldn't have been left out. They should have been either disposed of or put away safely. Those were real.

And, up at Bronx, I think it was, but I'm not sure, they had pigeon droppings all over the place on canvas covers, outside canvas that covers the things. What we said to management is, "You do that. And we go to OSHA." We knew the people at OSHA. State OSHA, they were tough. We knew them. When Randy and I walked in, he said, "There they are. What do you want this time?" At OSHA. And, they fixed it.

But, once in a while, you got a person... I think this was at CUNY. [Unintelligible 00:46:10] at CUNY's central office. They had an annex. And at the annex, they were having construction. And people were working, during construction, in their own places of operation. You don't do that. You've got

all kinds of things floating around in the air, dangers of things falling on you. You're out.

So, I walk into this place, and I'm telling him these people have to go out. And he tells me, "They don't understand." Right in front of me, he says to one of them, "Who was the chair of the PSC at that chapter? Wait till I get you alone." I said, "One minute. Anything that you do to your people is done to every member of the PSC, and you'll have to answer for it." This is a vice president. Can you imagine that? So, we didn't take, as we used to say when we were kids —We didn't take crap from anybody. And, maybe that's why we were respected in some ways. What's happening now, I have no idea, and I have no comment.

Irwin: Okay. Okay, we're coming to the end of the questions that I have. Is there some topic you want to talk about that I haven't covered with you?

Ezra: One topic was Health and Safety. I think we covered that.

Irwin: I think so.

Ezra: Another one is, what is the state law about instructional staff? Is it followed? Make sure that you know where you are in state law. Have a copy of the legal papers. Every member should have a copy. Look who's talking? I can't find mine. I looked three or four times. I went through everything. And, find out what the University's position is on things, what it used to be. How do you influence it? How do you become political in some way?

Most of the answers come PSC, because I can go way back. And I remember a time when a lot of Jungians unions had no influence, at all, on their industry. Now, there were some powerful ones. There was John L. Lewis' people, and a bunch of others. Republican, by the way, [John L. Lewis 00:48:53], because everybody thinks "Communist! You're union leader."

But those people, it's the mindless approach. They don't use their head. And they should know what the college's rules are, who makes the decisions for the college? How do you change those decisions? Who makes the decisions for you and your department? Know what most things are; that's one. Because if you... You know, it's not only up to management to tell you. It's up to you to tell management. You can't just sit there and say, "Here I am." You can't do that. Say, "Here I am. These are the things that I have. This is what I need. How do I get them?" Etcetera. And then you're in business.

Irwin: There's one point that didn't come up, but I want to raise this, from before your time, actually. That's why I didn't bring it up.

Ezra: There was a time before me?

Irwin: There was. CLTs in CUNY, as you referred several times, as members of the instructional staff, but they have tenure. And this is rather remarkable, I think, in terms of what college lab technicians' status is around the country. I think you'd find...

Ezra: Oh, but that's a state law.

Irwin: ...relatively few...

Ezra: That's part of the state law.

Irwin: Yes. But the state law was 1938.

Ezra: Yeah.

Irwin: And, when the state law gave tenure to the faculty at city colleges, it included college lab technicians in that tenure. You had the same tenure provisions...

Ezra: The state law didn't give it to faculty. There was no such thing as faculty in the state law. They gave it to either what the colleges asked them to put down, or whatever it was, but faculty is not word.

Irwin: Well, actually, you're correct. In 1938 it allowed, the bylaws allowed for faculty to have tenure, which included CLTs. And then there were... The law was actually passed in 1940, I believe, which gave tenure to the faculties, including CLTs, at the city colleges. So, if you have any comment about...

Ezra: Yes, I do.

Irwin: ...about that, that would be interesting.

Ezra: Yeah. I do. We had a chair. He came in around, roughly speaking, about 1990. A bigoted, self-important, poorly educated; well, I shouldn't say that. He was not that bright. This is the chair. He was a Black guy, but one of the biggest bigots I ever saw, because bigotry comes in all colors. He came into my office one day, and he said, "How much money we got left?" because I had charge of the budget. In some ways, all the budgets of the science people, among many, many, many other things.

There were instructional staff... The word escapes me... Instructional staff business. And I taught for a little while. I taught in two other departments also. That's a story for another day, I believe. I taught the American Civil War in the History Department. I lectured in Physics, one lecture, against the Big Bang, and that it never happened. And I said to him, "We have such-and-such." He said, "That's all they got left?" I said, "Hey. Both semesters are

encumbered, and anyway,” here are the magic words, “the kids come first.” Well, he wanted money for his friends for their research. Let him get it from outside. They need the money.

And he said, “That’s it. I’m taking this job away from you. I’m taking that job away from you.” And I gave him the magic three words from when we were 13 years old — where to go. And, I said, “I’m retiring.” I couldn’t work for a guy like that. A chair, by definition, is not somebody who knows what he’s doing, who’s doing it well, and he’s doing it for the department. And neither is anybody else.

Irwin: Okay. Is there anything you want to add to any of the subjects that we have talked about? As you go through this interview, sometimes you think of something you might have wanted to add, and this is point where you get a chance to do it.

Ezra: Yeah. I think that the formation of a recognized union, and our successes in the past, speak volumes for what is needed in this industry, and around the world. The United States has it. Once in a while, you get opposition from certain right-wing groups. But I think that, as far as union, was the second word when I was growing up, the second word that I learned, over a period of time — Progressive, Union. Those were the two words that I was brought up on. And color; we’re all the same, everybody is the same. Those are the three things.

Irwin: Okay, Ezra. Thank you very much. I hope you enjoyed it. I certainly did.

Female Voice: We did.

Irwin: And I think we learned a good deal about you and about college lab technicians...

Ezra: Is that thing on?

Irwin: ...in CUNY.

[End of recorded material 00:54:44]